

**The Pennsylvania State University**

**The Graduate School**

**College of Education**

**WHY ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS  
CHOOSING CHARTER SCHOOLS?  
NEW EVIDENCE FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

**A Thesis in**

**Educational Leadership**

**by**

**Foy Matthews Crary**

**© 2007 Foy Matthews Crary**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**May 2007**

The thesis of Foy Matthews Crary was reviewed and approved \* by the following:

William Lowe Boyd  
Batschelet Chair  
Professor of Education  
Thesis Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Nona Prestine  
Professor of Education  
In Charge of Graduate Programs in Educational Leadership

Jacqueline Stefkovich  
Professor of Education

George Farkas  
Professor of Sociology, Demographics and Education

\* Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the choices that African American (AA) parents of students in two charter schools in Durham, North Carolina are making with regard to their children's education. Its purpose was to explore how and why they arrived at the decision to remove their children from integrated traditional public schools (TPS) and enroll them in relatively new and unproven charter schools that are almost totally segregated. It sought to analyze the dynamics of AA parent decision-making in an attempt to determine the factors affecting their choices.

Specifically the questions the study asked were: 1) Why are AA parents choosing to leave traditional, integrated public schools to attend largely segregated charters? 2) How did they arrive at their decision? Four propositions were examined during the course of the study in order to answer the how/why questions. They were based on Carol Weiss' "4 I's" framework for public policy decision-making and included the effect of interests, ideologies, information, and institutions on decision makers. Weiss' "4 I's" provided a substantive focus for understanding parents' decision-making.

Primary sources were interviews with 33 AA parents and 3 administrators in 2 charter schools in Durham, North Carolina and pertinent records from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The principal findings include:

- Parents chose charters because they were smaller; they perceived that their children received more individual attention and thus had a greater chance of succeeding; that the teachers were more caring; and that the school climate was more accepting, positive, safe, and nurturing.
- Parents thought that their children's charter schools were achieving higher End of Grade Test scores than they actually were.
- 100% of the parents were accepting of the lack of diversity in their charter schools; some viewed it as positive; 81% said it was insignificant as long as their children were successful academically.
- Parents perceived that traditional public schools are too big and violent; that many TPS students were unruly; and that TPS teachers had given up, did not care and/or did not love their students. Parents reported that, in their opinion, AA children and parents did not receive equal treatment in TSP and that they did not feel welcome. Parents believed that AA children were not seen as children with potential in TPS.
- Parents saw themselves as citizen consumers of education empowered by choice, loyal to their children, and on a quest for educational opportunities for them.
- Parents felt that they shared the responsibility with the school of their choice to ensure that their children were successful; that neither they nor the school could

successfully educate their children unless parents, teachers, and students cooperated; 24% said that schools could not succeed without their support.

- Administrators understood why parents had chosen their charter schools; they recognized that charters were “businesses” and that the students, along with their parents were “customers” who had options; they were focused on parent expectations and on what they needed to do in order to attract and keep students enrolled.

Major implications for policy and practice:

- School board members, county commissioners, and voters need to understand that parents want smaller, more inclusive, more personal schools where their children are recognized and known as children of potential.
- Schools of education and teacher development programs within school systems need to provide teachers with new information and strategies to enable them to communicate with parents effectively; to reach more children; and to create more inclusive, compassionate classroom environments sensitive to cultural differences.
- Educational Leadership/Administration preparation programs need to attend to diversity/sensitivity training and cultural awareness to enable superintendents and principals to communicate and constructively deal with multiracial populations.
- School leaders at all levels need to take responsibility for the equal treatment of all of the students in their schools.
- School leaders need to acknowledge that parents are an invaluable resource; that they are essential to the education process; that they should be respected and welcomed; and that their skills and knowledge should be effectively utilized.

Suggestions for future research:

- A longitudinal study of African American parents who chose charter schools instead of TPS and their satisfaction as compared to AA parents who chose to remain in TPS.
- AA parent choice of charter schools in a different area of the country.
- AA parent perception of mistreatment of their children in TPS.
- A longitudinal study comparing the success of students following graduation from charter schools and TPS.
- Interview AA parents who could have chosen charters but chose to remain in TPS.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>List of Tables</b> .....	vii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	viii
<b>Chapter I. PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY</b> .....	1
Statement of the Problem and Research Questions .....	5
Conceptual Framework .....	8
Significance of the Study .....	10
<b>Chapter II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE</b> .....	12
History of Education in the United States.....	12
Eighteenth Century .....	12
Nineteenth Century .....	14
Twentieth Century .....	17
Twenty-first Century.....	23
Early Examples of Dissatisfaction with Traditional Public Schools .....	26
Choice in American Education .....	28
Choice in North Carolina .....	30
Should Parents Decide? .....	32
Decision Making Strategies .....	34
Ideologies and American Education .....	37
Parents' Ideologies as a Factor in Decision Making.....	40
Parents' Interests as a Factor in Decision Making.....	41
Parents' Information as a Factor in Decision Making .....	43
The Institution as a Factor Influencing Parents' Decision-Making .....	45
<b>Chapter III: DESIGN AND METHOD OF THE STUDY</b> .....	46
Rationale for a Qualitative Approach .....	47
Justification for Case Study Design.....	49
Site Selection and Sampling Logic .....	50
Access and Entry.....	52
Data Collection Techniques .....	55
Documents .....	56
Direct and Participant Observation.....	56
Interviews.....	59
Data Analysis .....	61
Trustworthiness of the Study .....	63

Credibility .....	64
Transferability .....	67
Dependability .....	68
Confirmability .....	69
Delimitations and Limitations of the Study .....	70
Ethical Concerns .....	71
<b>Chapter IV: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA .....</b>	<b>73</b>
Vignettes from Parent Interviews .....	74
Methodology .....	79
Local Educational Context.....	79
Results/Findings.....	81
Description of the Two Charter Schools.....	81
Parent/Guardian Participants .....	98
Top Five Perceived Values of Charter Schools .....	98
Parents’ Views of Traditional Public Schools .....	104
Parents’ Views of Choice/Vouchers .....	107
Parents’ Views of the Lack of Diversity in Their Charter School.....	109
Parents’ Role as They See It .....	110
Analysis Using Weiss’ Framework .....	112
Parent’s Interests.....	112
Parents’ Ideologies.....	114
Information .....	117
The Institutions—Charters and Traditional Public Schools .....	120
Conclusions.....	130
<b>Chapter V: SUMMARY OF DISSERTATION:     FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS.....</b>	<b>132</b>
Summary .....	132
Design and Method of the Study .....	134
Summary of Findings.....	137
Conclusion .....	148
Implications for Policy and Practice.....	157
Limitations of the Study.....	162
Implications for Future Research.....	163
<b>References .....</b>	<b>165</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>182</b>
Appendix A: Interview Questions for Parents .....	182
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Administrators.....	185

## List of Tables

Table 4.1. Average Enrollment—2004-2005—Typical K-8 Classrooms in Durham County, the State of NC, and the Two Charters in this Study: Montana Charter and Haven Charter .....	122
Table 4.2. State of North Carolina and Durham Public School District Performance on ABC, End of Grade Tests—2004-2005 .....	124
Table 4.3. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Results for the State of North Carolina.....	124
Table 4.4. Comparison of Montana Charter and Haven Charter with Seven Traditional Public Elementary Schools in the Durham Public School District—Performance on North Carolina’s ABC, End of Grade Tests for 2004-2005 .....	125
Table 4.5. School Safety—“Safe, Orderly & Caring Schools” Report for the State of North Carolina, the Durham Public School District, Montana Charter, and Haven Charter 2004-2005 .....	126
Table 4.6. Percentage of Fully Licensed Teachers 2004-2005 .....	128
Table 4.7. Percentage of Highly Qualified Teachers 2004-2005.....	129

## Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to this dissertation by providing information, constructive criticism, suggestions, ideas, and/or encouragement. Dr. William Boyd's counsel as chair provided the guidance needed to make the inevitable choices required to bring the project to completion.

Because the study relied heavily upon empirical field research, I am especially grateful to the administrators and parents at the two-charter schools in Durham, North Carolina who graciously agreed to participate in the study and who welcomed me warmly with open hearts. They took time from their busy work schedules to candidly report their experiences, views, hopes and fears. Without their co-operation this study would not have been possible.

Two generations of family members also deserve special thanks. Thanks to my only brother, Bubbie, who called me frequently to ask, "Are you working on your paper?" Thanks to my oldest grandsons, Kevin, Austin and Brennen, who wore Penn State T-shirts and unabashedly told their friends that their grandmother was a college student. Special thanks to them for making me aware that they knew that I could complete my study by periodically asking me, "Are you finished yet?" Thanks to my third grandson, Brennen, who listened to me complain and who asked, early on, "Have you done any of it?" and then advised me to, "Just do it, Moo."

Thanks to my youngest son, Guy, whose technological support saved me hours of drudgery on the computer, who advised me, and whose obvious confidence in my ability to finish the task provided me with courage and confidence. Thanks to my oldest son, Kevin, whose "I know you can do this" attitude inspired me each time he called to find out, "Are you working on it?" and to offer encouragement. Thanks to my oldest daughter, Robin, who, when confronted with my doubts about why I had even started this project, calmly offered positive advice, sage wisdom, and encouragement right to the end.

Extra special thanks to my husband, Dr. Ely Jay Crary, who happily joined me in my new adventure at Penn State and whose constant support and encouragement, good



humor, and indefatigable patience throughout the entire undertaking enabled me to stay positive and focused and to achieve a goal I had set for myself many years earlier.

To all of the people I have mentioned, and the many students and teachers at the two charter schools in the study, to whom I am grateful, I extend my thanks.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Beatrice Vivian Daigle, who died in 1993, but whose unconditional love, high expectations, and vision has always encouraged and empowered me. My memory of her sustains my spirit, inspires me, and gives me hope as I approach each new day.

## Chapter I

### Purpose and Significance of the Study

“Choice is the best thing that has come around for my people since I’ve been born. It allows poor people to have those choices that all those other people who are fearing it already have.”

Polly Williams

Wisconsin State Representative

Washington Times, April 2, 1990

Fifty years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ensuring the rights of minority students to attend schools with white students, an anomalous phenomenon has occurred. Many charter schools in North Carolina (NC) are filled predominately with minority students because of their parents’ own choosing. The question is why? Why have parents chosen to leave traditional, integrated, public schools in surprising numbers to enroll their children in largely segregated charter schools that generally have less than adequate facilities; sometimes do not provide transportation; have fewer instructional materials; and, frequently, less experienced and less qualified teachers (Fuller, 2000; Nobilet & Archie, 1998)? This unexpected response by minority parents has politicians, educators and researchers scrambling for answers (“Charter Flight,” 1997; “Charter School,” 1998; Dent, 1998; Reale, 1998; Silberman, 2000; Simmons, 1998). Kirkpatrick (1998) describes it as “a twist away from the idea that...racially exclusive schools financed with public money would shut out minorities” (p. B1).

The charter schools in NC that are being chosen by African American parents, like all charter schools in the United States, are public schools of choice that are free to the students who attend them. Charter schools nationwide are part of an effort launched over two decades ago by the landmark report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for*

*Educational Reform* (1983) to reform America's public school system. In 1996, with the passage of House Bill 955, NC became the 27<sup>th</sup> state to enact legislation permitting charter schools. Presently, there are nearly 3,400 charter schools serving nearly a million children in 40 states and the District of Columbia (Center for Education Reform, 2005).

In the fall of 1997, Healthy Start Charter Academy was the first charter school to open its doors in NC. Eight years later, in the fall of 2005, the state reached the current cap of 100 set by the legislature (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2005). Until the legislature decides to remove the cap, no additional charters will be awarded. The 100 charter schools presently operating in the state represent a little less than 4.5% of the 2,251 total number of public schools. Of the 1.3 million students enrolled in public schools in NC, 31% are African American (AA). There are nearly 22,000 students enrolled in charters schools – 38% of whom are AA. Thirty-three of the 100 charter schools in the state have populations that are more than 55% AA; 21 charters (about 20% of the total) have populations that are more than 90% African American. Fourteen charters have student populations that are over 95% AA (NCDPI, 2004).

All charter schools function based on a “charter” or contract between the school and the state and are held accountable to the guidelines written in their charters. In NC any person, group of people, or non-profit corporation may apply to a chartering entity for preliminary approval. The chartering entities in NC are the local board of education of the local school administrative unit in which the charter will be located, the board of trustees of a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina, and the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education has final approval of all charter schools regardless of which chartering entity receives the preliminary application and grants initial approval. If a chartering entity other than the State Board of Education disapproves an application, the applicant may appeal to the State Board of Education. Charters are granted for a period not to exceed five years and are renewable in five-year increments. After the first year of operation, charters are allowed to increase their enrollment by 10% of the school's previous year's enrollment (North Carolina Charter School Act [NCCSA], 1996).

Funding for each NC charter school comes from the taxpayer dollars allocated for public education and is based on the particular school's student enrollment. The taxpayer dollars provided to charter schools are the same, per child, that traditional public schools receive. Charter schools in NC do not, however, receive any tax money for building space or equipment. Charters must raise working capital as well as find and pay for buildings without the support of federal, state or local tax dollars.

Both opponents and proponents of charters may be surprised to discover that the concept of charter schools is not new in North Carolina. The state actually has a history of firsts in the area of charter schools for select populations. When The North Carolina School for the Arts (NCSA), established by the NC General Assembly in 1963, opened its doors in 1965, it was recognized as the first state-supported, residential school of the arts in the nation. It was established as a charter school for students of exceptional talent in five areas: Dance, Design & Production, Drama, Filmmaking, and Music. Secondary and college level students from all 50 states and foreign countries may apply, but only high school students who are residents of the state attend free of charge. Admission is based on artistic and academic achievement and potential. Students audition or interview for admission to NCSA and must provide letters of recommendation from one arts teacher and one academic teacher. NCSA proudly reports that alumni have won or been nominated for all of the major awards in the entertainment industry (NCSA, 2005).

The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (NCSSM) in Durham, chartered by the legislature in 1980, identifies itself as the "nation's first state-supported, residential high school of its kind". According to its web page, NCSSM aspires to "prepare tomorrow's leaders in the application of science, mathematics, and technology" (NCSSM, 2003). NCSSM accepts eleventh and twelfth grade students based on SAT test scores taken during the applicant's sophomore year plus four evaluation forms completed by one (each) Science, Math, and English teacher and one guidance counselor. A letter of recommendation is also needed from someone outside of the academic arena. The school's charter mandates that the NCSSM student body include students from every congressional district in the state and limits enrollment to students who are residents of the state. All students who are accepted attend free of charge. Thanks to a bill passed in

2003, sponsored by Senator Kay Hagan, any graduate of NCSSM starting with the class of 2004 who enrolls in any one of the sixteen University of North Carolina system schools will receive a grant to cover tuition costs for each year s/he attends.

Some opponents of charter schools, perhaps unaware that there were two well-established charter schools in the state—NCSA and NCSSM—or unwilling to acknowledge their charter school status, decried the charter school concept as potentially divisive reform that would again segregate minorities from whites. These same people seemed to ignore the “fundamental reality: there are already high levels of income and racial stratification in American public schools, which results from local property tax funding of schools, restrictive zoning laws, and high levels of mobility for middle-and-upper-income parents” (Schneider et al., 2000, p. 268). Some argued that there would be “white flight” from public schools. Some educational bureaucrats, politicians, and other opponents of charter school legislation voiced concern that charter schools would drain the traditional public school system of its brightest children.

Stephen Wray Wood, former NC State Representative, and co-author of the 1996 NC Charter School Act, reminded people on both sides of the issue that many of NC's “brightest” students were already attending charter schools specifically designed for them. Many of North Carolina’s finest students, Mr. Wood explained, were enrolled at NCSA or NCSSM. Mr. Wood asserted that the state did, in fact, already support charter schools for NC’s brightest children. He explained that the charter schools he and his fellow legislators were proposing were for the rest of the children; the charter schools they were seeking support for would, hopefully, offer parents of other children in the state the opportunity to choose (S.W. Wood, personal communication, October 24, 2005).

Since passage of the North Carolina Charter School Act (NCCSA) in 1996, which offered choice in educational services to many for the first time, some new questions have arisen. Why are African American parents, in unexpected numbers, choosing to leave traditional, integrated, public schools to attend largely segregated charters; and how

did they arrive at their decision?<sup>1</sup> This research study sought to determine the answer to both of these questions by focusing specifically on African American parents and the decisions they have made.

### *Statement of the Problem and Research Questions*

The purpose of this study was to analyze African American parent decision-making in an attempt to determine the factors affecting their choice of North Carolina's charter schools over traditional public schools. Two questions were posed by the study: Why are African American parents choosing to leave traditional, integrated public schools to attend largely segregated charters; and how did they arrive at their decision? Propositions that were examined during the course of the study in order to answer the how and why questions are:

1. Parents may be choosing charter schools because of their particular interests—self-interests and incentives.
2. Parents may be choosing charters because of their ideologies; perhaps a change in ideologies, the renewal of old ideologies, or the development of new ones.
3. New information may be affecting parents' decisions.
4. Parents' perception of the institutional setting of the charter school they have chosen in comparison to the traditional public schools they have left may be affecting their decisions.

It is essential to provide some historical background at this point in an attempt to explain the political forces that were empowering and impeding the charter school movement in the mid 1990s when the NCCSA was passed. In 1994 when charter school legislation was initiated in the House of Representatives, Democratic Governor Jim Hunt, described by Holland (2002) as “one of the nation’s most vociferous critics of publicly

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1998, one year after the first charter opened in NC, 21 of the state’s 60 charter schools were more than 85% AA (Dent, 1998). In 2000, 78 of the 78 charters had minority enrollments of 70% or more and 9 had enrollments that were 100% minority (Silberman, 2000). In 2001, one in three of NC’s 93 charters was predominantly AA (Center for Education Reform, 2001). At the end of the 2004-2005 school year, 38% of the 98 charters in the state were predominately AA; in Durham, NC, the site of this study, 76.9% of the students in charter schools were AA in 2004-2005 (NCDPI, 2005).

funded vouchers” was serving his fourth term, and, quite unusually for NC there was a majority of Republicans in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

According to Stephen Wray Wood, NC Republican State Representative from 1984-2004, the charter school act had its beginning in 1994 as a three page draft that he and Vernon Robinson collaborated together to design and co-author. It was a two-year project that required considerable negotiation and compromise. Even though the law passed without Governor Hunt’s endorsement, Mr. Wood explains that the law would not have passed without the combined leadership efforts of Democratic Senator Wib Gulley, Speaker of the House Harold Bruebaker, John Dornan of the Public School Forum, and Winston Salem City Councilman and founder of the NC Education Reform Foundation, Vernon Robinson. Mr. Robinson, described by Holland (2002) as “one of the most effective grassroots warriors for school choice in the country”, mobilized and orchestrated support for the bill by recruiting people from around the state who presented their opinions to the legislature explaining why they felt there was a need for charter schools in NC.

According to Mr. Wood, there were many compromises before the charter school bill reached its final vote. The majority of NC politicians in the House and Senate in the mid 1990’s were not proponents of charter schools he explained. In fact, it is Mr. Wood’s opinion that charter school legislation passed in 1996 because lawmakers preferred charter schools to two alternatives that were being proposed at the same time: vouchers and tax credits. In addition, there was strong impetus for reform in the General Assembly in the 1990’s, according to Mr. Wood, and even though many representatives and senators were not totally in support of the charter school concept, a limited number of charter schools that could only serve a small percentage of the total number of public school children was apparently the most palatable choice on the agenda at the time (S.W. Wood, personal communication, October 24, 2005).

North Carolina legislators, determined to ensure that charter schools in the state would be available to all students, passed a law requiring the ratio of white to minority students in each charter be comparable to the community it served by the end of its inaugural year or suffer closure by the state. The goal was twofold: to ensure that

minority students would not be excluded disproportionately; and to prevent charters from becoming elitist schools that Koppich (1997) has warned could drain white students and the best students away from public schools. Ironically, this statute presently endangers many charters not because they are excluding minorities but because, eight years after the first charter opened in NC, many charter schools enroll a disproportionate number of African Americans. Even though opponents of charters continue to insist that the law be enforced, it has not been. If the law were enforced, many racially imbalanced charters would be closed and many minority students would be denied the opportunity to attend a school of their choice.

It is significant to note that prior to the introduction of charter schools in NC in 1996, many students, especially disadvantaged African American students, were locked into the traditional public schools to which they were assigned in their district. If their parents were unable to afford to enroll them in a private school, unable to move to a new district, or did not choose to home school, their only option was to attend the school to which they were assigned. The state of NC does not have an open enrollment policy either interdistrict or intradistrict. However, some districts allow parents to apply for transfers to schools outside of their attendance zones if all students from within the requested school have been assigned, if there is additional space available, and if certain criteria have been met. All students who transfer to schools outside of their assigned district schools must provide their own transportation.

Affluent parents of all races have never been limited to the schools in their catchment areas (Hoxby, 1998). If they are not pleased with the public schools in their district, they can choose to send their children to a fee-charging, private, or religious school or move to a different district. Families exercising residential choice account for 24% of public school children (NCES, 2004). Children of the poor and disadvantaged have, in the past, had few options. With the passage of the NCCSA, many AA parents have a choice for the first time in their lives. What are their reasons for choosing charters? Could it be that they feel their children are not being well served in regular public schools? What were the conditions that led parents to leave traditional public schools?



By means of interviews with a small sample of AA parents, this study explored their reasons and explanations for choosing charters and examined the process they went through to arrive at their decision. Carol Weiss' public policy decision-making theory was used as the framework to analyze parents' decisions.

### *Conceptual Framework*

There are many articles in the literature (Allison, 1971; Edwards, 1954; March & Olsen, 1976; Payne, Betterman & Johnson, 1993; Schneider & Buckley, 2002, 2003; Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000; Weiss, 1983, 1995; Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock & Brady, 1986) that explore decision-making behavior and strategies. Weiss' (1995) theory, which accounts for individual decision-making, posits that different people bring different resources to the decision making process in the form of different "interests", different "ideologies", and different "information". She suggests that people make decisions based on the interaction of these three elements and that the differences individuals bring to the decision-making table affect the character of their decisions. In her framework, Weiss defines each element and argues that "every individual decision is the product of the interplay among ideology, interests, and information" (Weiss, 1995, p. 577). Since the main intent of this study was to try to determine how and why individual parents chose to enroll their children in charter schools, Weiss' (1983) "3 I's" of public policy decision-making theory was chosen as the framework.

Ideology, in Weiss' theory, encompasses values, principles, philosophy and political orientation that can sometimes be well constructed and coherent; but also, often haphazard and makeshift. Ideology includes "any relatively coherent value predisposition" and, Weiss explains, however weak a person's ideologies might be "they provide an emotionally charged orientation that provides a basis for taking a position" (1995, p. 575). For example, ideologically, African American parents may believe in their children's right to attend a traditional, integrated, public school but they may decide to enroll them in a segregated charter because they decide that the charter offers their children specific advantages.

Weiss defines “interests” as self-interests. According to Weiss, people are generally concerned about themselves, their children, their families. She posits that each individual decision-maker generally has a stake in the outcome of his/her decisions. For example, parents who are concerned about the dangers they perceive to exist in a large, traditional, public school might choose to send their child to a small, charter school where they and their children know and are known by the administrators, teachers, and staff and, consequently, feel that they will be safe.

Information, the third element involved in the decision-making process according to Weiss, is defined as the knowledge and ideas that help people make sense of what is going on, and why, in their everyday lives. Weiss argues that much of the knowledge that people bring to the decision-making process is based on their personal experiences. Other knowledge comes from family, friends, informal contacts, and the mass media. Weiss (1995) warns that the information used in decision-making is not necessarily accurate or right and often includes “partial, biased, or invalid understandings” (p.576). It stands to reason that the quality of the information people possess, or are able to acquire, affect the decisions they are able to make.

Weiss contends that all decisions involve the interaction of ideology, interests, and information. People have certain beliefs because of information they have acquired and they make decisions because of their interest in the outcome. People are either receptive to information because of their interests and their ideology or not receptive for the same reasons. Weiss’ “3 I’s” (1983) analysis of decision-making became “4 I’s” when she added “the institution” to her framework in 1995. She explains that the “institution domain” of schools “involves the structure, culture, standard operating procedures, and the decision rules of the organization within which decisions are made” (p. 576). In Weiss’ study, she explains how the institution affects those who work within. In this study, I try to explain how the institution affects those who are outside looking in and trying to decide which institution best suits their quest for optimum educational opportunities for their children. To this end, I look at the real and perceived size, academic performance, safety records, and teacher qualifications of both TPS and charters. Thus, this study employs all four of Weiss’ “I’s” as a conceptual framework to

analyze why and how African American parents are making the decision to enroll their children in segregated charter schools.

### *Significance of the Study*

By exploring why African American parents are choosing charter schools for their children, this study provides some insights into the hopes, dreams, and goals that African American parents have for their children. It highlights their understanding of what they must do to provide their children with a learning environment that they feel is appropriate.

Results of this study should be revealing to those who think that African American parents are content that their children are permitted to attend public schools with white students. One hundred thirty-nine years after the adoption of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment that abolished slavery; one hundred thirty-six years after the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteed equality under the law; and fifty years after the federal government stepped in to make it clear that separate was not equal, it seems that African American parents are in search of more. Even though it may appear to many that African American children are being adequately served, there is a growing discontent in the African American community that is reflected in the large numbers of parents who are seeking an alternative to traditional public education. This study should show how the African American parents who were interviewed perceive integrated public schools and why they are choosing segregated charter schools.

Implications for the future of both public and charter schools are suggested by this study's data from people who finally have a choice and are making their choices known. Critics contend that traditional public schools have frequently turned a deaf ear to their "customers". Many parents, especially African American parents, in North Carolina did not have a choice before the charter school law was enacted. They had to make the best of the schools their children were assigned to attend. If they could not move into a district or neighborhood that had "better" schools, or if they could not afford to attend fee-

charging schools, they were relatively powerless in the face of the traditional public school monopoly.

The idea of asking African American parents and students why they are choosing charter schools reminded the writer of an incident in her elementary classroom many years ago when she was a beginning teacher.

A distraught parent came to me and asked why her bright child was wasting time in class and not completing his assignments. I had tried my best to monitor his work. I had offered rewards to him and to the class for doing quality work and for turning it in on time. I had encouraged and admonished. I, too, was at a loss. Finally, I decided we should ask him why. So we did. His answer was simple and quick. He said he thought we would stop giving him work if he did not do it.

Empowered by his response and our new knowledge, we explained that this was just the beginning of his school years and that he had better get busy because we were determined to have him perform at his highest level. Remarkably, this made sense to him. Once we discovered the reason for his behavior, and he understood our goal, he got to work and began completing his assignments on time and to the best of his ability.

Researchers have studied the schools, the programs, the books and materials, the curricula, the administrators, the teachers, the budgets, and the buildings. African American children have been tested, evaluated, labeled, passed or failed or lost when they have dropped out. This study listened to African American parents and asked them why they are leaving traditional, integrated public schools and what they hope to accomplish by their move to segregated charters. Armed with their answers, perhaps we will be better able to serve the African American children we have been trying to serve (or determined not to serve in some instances) since our country's inception.

## Chapter II

### Review of the Relevant Literature

*“Racial domination was, from the outset, the most glaring flaw in the ideology of the American dream.... And that terrible irony, the simultaneous invention of American slavery and American freedom, has shaped American society every since. It has shaped its public schools as well.”* Hochschild & Scovronick, 2002, p. 28

This chapter presents a literature review in four sections. The first section provides an historical review of education in the United States specifically focusing on many of the indignities and inequities experienced by African Americans. The second section reviews examples of two communities and the strategies they implemented when they became dissatisfied with the lack of equality and self-determination in their children’s schools. The third section focuses on choice in traditional public schools. The fourth and final section considers the dynamics of decision-making and the effect of Weiss’ “4 I’s”—ideology, interest, information, and the institution—on parental decision-making. The purpose of this research was to determine why African American parents in North Carolina are choosing to enroll their children in largely segregated charter schools and how they arrived at their decision.

#### *History of Education in the United States*

##### *Eighteenth Century*

Except for the wealthy, education beyond the rudiments was not widespread in either the northern or southern colonies in the eighteenth century (Kaestle, 1983). According to early records, only about 1 out of 10 children attended school for many reasons. Non fee charging schools were not available for white children in most rural areas of the north or south and if their parents were poor, they could not afford to pay for

private schooling, much less tutors. In northern colonies, free black children generally did not attend school because of prejudice; and, in the south, they did not attend because of laws called “slave codes”. Slaves and children of slaves were not allowed to attend school or learn to read and write (Hornsby, 1996).

Recognizing that the children of the poor needed to be educated if there were to be law and order in the cities, church and political leaders opened charity schools for poor white children and freed blacks in Philadelphia in 1770, New York in 1787, and Baltimore in 1792 (Kaestle, 1983). Charity schools provided the first organized educational opportunities for poor white children and the increasing number of freed slaves settling in the north. The rationale for charity schools, in addition to eliminating crime and poverty, was to keep children off the streets and away from negative influences. According to Spring (1990), it was the first attempt to socialize children into “an industrious way of life” (p. 53). It is not known how successful the charity schools were at educating their young wards. It is known that their organizational structure succeeded in continuing to divide children by class and race. Poor white children attended charity schools while black children attended separate charity schools established for black children (Kaestle, 1983).

Children of well-off parents attended other public or private institutions. In fact, the majority of children in many states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, which supported charity schools for the poor, attended private schools (Spring, 1990). As was true in the seventeenth century, there was little equality to be found in education in the eighteenth century in the American colonies – both north and south.

Ironically, after the American Revolution, the focus in education was nationalism and the maintenance of order in a *free* society (Spring, 1990). However, historians seem to agree that even after the Revolution was won, inequity with regard to education was still common in America especially for poor white children and black children; and many Americans, especially those of African descent were far from living in a free society (Bond, 1970; Bullock, 1967; Cremin, 1951; Kaestle, 1983; Schultz, 1973; Spring, 1988 & 1990).

## *Nineteenth Century*

In the antebellum period of the early nineteenth century, many educators and politicians pushed for a free common school system like the one established in Prussia (Kaestle, 1983). Even though Prussia was not a democracy, American educators were impressed with the universal, centralized system of compulsory education that the Prussians established in the 1840s. White, American-born Protestants saw the common schools as a means of achieving cultural conformity and educational uniformity. Threatened by immigration that resulted in a population whose diversity was unmatched in Western history, educators sought to teach a common English language and a common Protestant morality (Kaestle, 1983). Kaestle suggests that too often, during this period, Anglo-American Protestant traditions and values were “mislabeled American culture” (1983, p.72) and were forced upon those who *chose* to come to America and upon those who were *forced* to come here as slaves. Katz (1968) suggests that idealistically the common school can be viewed as a gift to the poor from liberals who are seeking to democratize knowledge or cynically as an opportunity for upper class reformers to train workers and educate immigrants to their advantage.

Some might argue that it is not surprising, given the history of educational practices in the Americas in the two previous centuries, that the common school would prove to be unavailable to black children. Early in the nineteenth century, the country was affected by national stereotyping that assigned both positive and negative characteristics to certain groups and perpetuated racism. “Negroes were viewed as destitute of intelligence” and “racism was a pervasive aspect of white American culture, north and south” (Kaestle, 1983, p.88). Consequently, educational leaders were under pressure not to include blacks in the common school movement.

Massachusetts Superintendent of School, Horace Mann, one of the leading educators and advocates of the common school movement, and most other common-school reformers, avoided the minority issue (Kaestle, 1983). Mann was afraid to speak up for integrated common schools for fear that he would not get the money that he needed to fund the common school movement. Some might forgive his lack of courage to fight for common schools for all, but it is doubtful that anyone would forgive the insult

he delivered in a speech to blacks in Ohio in 1852 when he said, “in intellect, the blacks are inferior to the whites” (Kaestle, 1983, p.89). It would seem that the common schools Mann wanted for the United States of America were not intended for blacks.

In the antebellum south, most states did not adopt common-schools legislation. Kaestle (1983) explains, “slavery, sparse population, periodic economic crises, and aristocratic attitudes frustrated the plans of New England-style reformers” (p.183) who sought to implement the common school movement in the southern states. The vigorous, powerful, slaveholding elite was able to control the vote, which predominately was against common schools and especially against any form of education for blacks.

Public money provided elementary education for poor whites only, while white children of the wealthy attended fee-charging schools. Blacks were not allowed to learn to read or write much less to attend organized schools. Education was considered “inappropriate and dangerous for slaves” (Kaestle, 1983, p. 216). Some children of slaves did learn basic reading and writing from the children or wives of some plantation owners but this practice was not spoken about nor accepted by the general southern population, and was contrary to the slave codes that were still in effect in the middle of the nineteenth century (Bond, 1970; Cremin, 1951).

After the Civil War, blacks fought for the establishment of state school systems. In the early 1870s, during Reconstruction, for a short period, black children were enrolled in school systems at “percentages higher than those for whites” (Spring, 1990, p.192) and expenditures per capita were higher for blacks than for whites (Bond, 1970). This did not last, however, because of discriminatory laws and many forms of economic exploitation. The rapid spread of segregation laws was supported by the Supreme Court of the United States. The most influential case was *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 when the Court supported the constitutionality of a Louisiana law requiring separate but equal facilities for whites and blacks in railroad cars. Thereafter, for more than fifty years many states used the separate but equal rule to segregate the races in schools, transportation, recreation, and in sleeping and eating facilities.

Shortly after *Plessy*, expenditures for education had reversed such that spending for white children was four to five times higher than spending for blacks. Even though



some members of the white community in the south had hopes of industrial development and recognized the advantage of educating blacks as laborers, other whites saw blacks as economic competitors and resisted educating them. Incredulous as it may seem, at the end of the nineteenth century, “the conditions blacks had to endure in the south were close to slavery” (Spring, 1990, p.192).

Two influential black leaders, Washington and DuBois, were highly visible late in the nineteenth century each with his own ideas about how the struggle for black education should be pursued. Booker T. Washington, the son of a slave and a white man, who became the most influential black leader and educator of his time, recognized the plight of black people in the north and the south and endeavored to help them. In 1881, when he was only twenty-five years old, Washington founded the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, a vocational school for blacks (now Tuskegee University) in Alabama. He was convinced that blacks could benefit more from a practical, vocational education than from a college degree. He was willing to compromise and accept segregated industrial education in return for the opportunity to participate in what Spring (1990) describes as “the new industrial order of the South” (p. 194). In a speech Washington made to a white audience in Atlanta in 1895, often called the *Atlanta Compromise*, he accepted inequality and segregation for Blacks in exchange for economic advancement.

Another prominent Black leader, historian and sociologist, W. E. B. DuBois was Washington’s chief critic. DuBois, a free black man from Massachusetts born of a French Huguenot and a slave, wanted no part of Washington’s compromise. He saw segregated education as the acceptance of a subservient place in society. DuBois accepted the need for vocational education but he also thought that, “Black education should be concerned with educating future leaders of the Black community” (Spring, 1990, p. 192) and wanted capable Blacks to have the opportunity to earn college degrees. DuBois attacked the more prominent Washington’s political and civil rights views. He complained that because Washington was well respected by both the White and the Black community, he helped determine what racial policies and practices were acceptable (DuBois, 1903). DuBois was disturbed that Washington was placating White people at the expense of Black

people's dignity and that "The Tuskegee Machine" too often determined the "careers of individual Negroes" (Franklin, 1965, p. xi) to their detriment.

### *Twentieth Century*

In 1909, DuBois and other black leaders organized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This group determined to rid the country of segregation and resolved not to compromise. Washington's influence had begun to wane as DuBois and other new black leaders joined together in their fight for equality. They began a legal and political battle to integrate schools and to help Black people take their rightful place in society as full citizens. Many battles were yet to be fought. The war for equality was far from over.

A stumbling block soon appeared in the form of a new tool. The science of measurement to determine intelligence was introduced into American schools in the twentieth century that was destined to maintain the separation of students. Intelligence tests were initiated by the Army during World War I and subsequently implemented in public schools at the war's end. Psychologists thought IQ tests would enable schools to scientifically select and educate students for "their proper place in the social organism" (Spring, 1990, p. 239). Assuming your proper place according to your innate intelligence was given the label "meritocracy". Henry Herbert Goddard, Edward L. Thorndike, and Guy M. Whipple, leading psychologists in the early twentieth century, advocated the use of testing and test scores in public schools. The result was the separation of students into different curriculum groups and the reinforcement of ethnic and social-class differences.

According to Spring (1990), children from lower economic and social groups were channeled into vocational education and those from the higher social groups into college preparatory courses. The early measurement movement reinforced social-class and ethnic differences by claiming that they reflected differences in intelligence. A major study published in 1923 by Carl Brigham, the developer of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), as *A Study of American Intelligence*, "fueled the flames of prejudice" (Spring, 1990, p. 243) by dividing the ethnic stock of America into groups with "Negroes" at the bottom of the list. Unfortunately, the scientific nature of intelligence tests and of

Brigham's study gave "an air of objectivity to ethnic and social-class bias" (Spring, 1990, p. 243).

Some might argue that in the 1930s, President Roosevelt sought to balance the educational playing field with the initiation of the New Deal because he created several new agencies that provided a variety of educational services to those in need. However, schools were segregated in both the north and south at this time and separate but equal learning opportunities were far from equal. Roosevelt was not concerned with equalizing educational opportunities for African Americans. In fact, his concern for education was of secondary importance and not its focus (Kantor & Lowe, 1995). He was trying to put as many people as possible back to work, revive the economy, and relieve the hunger and suffering of millions of Americans. What Roosevelt did accomplish, according to Kantor and Lowe (1995, was a change in the "relationship between class, race, and the state" that opened the door for education to become the "chief instrument of social reform two decades later" (p. 5).

Certainly, Roosevelt did not embrace education as the solution for social problems. Also, educational reform did not come because of what Roosevelt did while he was in office, nor was it the product of his successor, Harry Truman. In fact, it took more than half of the twentieth century for the NAACP to win its battle to end segregated education (Spring, 1990), which it did with the historic *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954. With the *Brown* decision, the Supreme Court of the United States declared segregated schools inherently unequal. Ironically, it had taken the same amount of time to end segregation in Massachusetts' schools in the nineteenth century. In both instances, the impetus for change was ordinary Black people fighting for what they knew was fair and just. However, getting the decision from the Supreme Court to end segregation did not eliminate the problems African American children experienced in public schools, nor did it eliminate segregation.

Some posit that the policies of the 1960s, initiated by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson's Great Society were continuances of the educational and social policies Roosevelt began in the 1930s (Kantor & Lowe, 1995). However, Kennedy and Johnson, unlike Roosevelt, saw education as the "chief tool for building a Great Society" (Kantor

& Lowe, 1995, p. 4). In an attempt to eliminate poverty and expand economic opportunities for racial minorities and the poor, the Kennedy and Johnson administration poured billions of dollars into elementary and secondary schools and expanded federal programs from 20 to 130 (Kantor & Lowe, 1995). After Kennedy's assassination, Johnson endorsed programs begun by Kennedy. He attempted to raise human capital with federal programs like Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and even though he had not initially identified poverty and educational deprivation in racial terms, he eventually specifically identified African Americans as the focus of his concern (Kantor & Lowe, 1995).

Unfortunately, in 1965, when Coleman et al. (1966) conducted a study in response to Section 402 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, they found that if the schools in the nation were actually measured by the Supreme Court's yardstick, American public education remained unequal. In fact, Coleman and his associates determined that the great majority of American children were still largely segregated, that African American children were the most segregated of the minority groups, and that white children were the most segregated of all. The Supreme Court had remained silent for more than a decade after *Brown*. It did not take an affirmative stand to "dismantle segregation in the south until 1968 and in the north until 1973" (Kantor & Lowe, 1995, p. 8). According to Spring (1990), desegregation moved very slowly in the south so much so that at the end of the 1960s the schools were largely still segregated. However, he adds, "desegregation moved at an even slower pace in the North" (p. 342) where de facto segregation was rampant. Apparently, many felt that *Brown* only applied to those states whose laws required segregated education. By the early 1970s, however, the courts made it clear that the *Brown* decision applied to all schools in the country.

In 1971, the Supreme Court of the United States renewed its support of integration when it ruled in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* that students could be bused to different schools to achieve desegregation. Since its beginning, many African American parents have objected to busing their young children for the same reasons that white parents objected. They did not want their children to have to get up earlier; they did not want them subjected to the potential danger of bus travel; and, they were

especially concerned about their children being placed in “strange” and “possibly unfriendly situations” (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 472). Coleman et al. also determined that many African American parents felt that the burden of integration was totally theirs; and, if whites were accepting integration if it came at the “Negro’s” expense, whites were not really accepting it at all. Integration, from this view, caused even more hard feelings and frustration for African American parents and children.

The federal government’s support of busing to achieve integration proved to be short lived, however. By 1974, after the Court’s decision in *Milliken v. Bradley*, in which it ruled that the courts could not introduce remedies that crossed district lines for the purpose of mixing black children in cities with white children in the suburbs, many government officials, including liberal senators and representatives, began opposing busing. In the same year, Congress prohibited the use of federal funds for this purpose. Consequently, the fight for desegregation using this method essentially failed. According to Hochschild & Scovronicks (2003), “substantial desegregation in northern metropolitan areas did not fail: it was never tried”; and, since *Milliken*, it has been “too politically dangerous” for white elected officials to promote or support busing (p. 34). In addition to equality and desegregation issues in the 70s, problems for public schools included: low scores on international achievement tests; growing numbers of dropouts; the ever-increasing presence of drugs and violence; and teacher power struggles.

Nobel laureate economist, Milton Friedman had argued for an alternative model of school governance that emphasized parental choice in the 60s but, at that time, he was a lone voice. He believes “that markets are better arbiters of personal and social good than are state-mandated regulations” (Cookson, 1994, p. 28). In the 80s, however, conservative politicians and policy advocates espousing the virtues of markets and choice began to gain momentum. The “sociopolitical climate” had changed and was now receptive to what Boyd and Kerchner (1987) identify as the Reagan administration’s ability to affect a “remarkable shift” in the values that guided American educational policy (p. 4). The emphasis shifted from equity to excellence, and from the common school to parental choice and institutional competition.

Further empowering the shift in values was the 1983 report entitled *A Nation at Risk* produced by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). The country was taken aback by the “pessimistic, even ominous picture” the report drew of American education (Cookson, 1994, p.18). Chubb and Moe (1990) posit that the widespread unrest and criticism of America’s public schools in the early 80s actually had a “distinctive, narrowly focused theme: that the academic quality of public schools is unacceptably low” (p. 6). The theme may have been narrow but the debate caused by the panel’s report threw the country into what may have been the greatest educational debate of the country’s history (Cookson, 1994). In their report, the eighteen member NCEE panel warned that “our very future as a Nation and a people” is at risk because of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in the “educational foundations of our society” (1983, p. 5). Chubb & Moe (1990) suggest that the 80s ushered in the “worst of times and the best of times” for America’s public schools (p. 1) because they were the target of fierce criticism for failing America’s children and, at the same time, they were the focus of enormous efforts to identify and fix problems within the system.

The NCEE panel recommended specific, top-down educational reforms as a means to remedy America’s problems; thus reform became the mantra for educators, scholars, politicians, businessmen, researchers, and activists alike. According to Boyd & Kerchner (1988), political leaders, especially governors, in various states got involved and supported school reform because they were convinced that there was a definite link between “good schooling and economic prosperity” (p. 2). In their effort to reform, 45 states raised high-school graduation requirements while others required competency tests for teachers and more demanding standards for teacher certification. Some states empowered parents through school-based management while others offered higher teacher salaries and developed career ladders. Many states added hours to the school day and days to the school year (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Cookson, 1994). While there seemed to be an impressive number and variety of reform ideas calling for serious changes in public schools in an attempt to make them better, little attention was paid to the institutions themselves and little consideration was given to the pursuit of new institutions of educational governance. Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that unless there is

deregulation of the American public school system there is little hope that genuine reform will take place and, they continued, few recognize that the institutions themselves might be undermining academic performance.

In 1991 ten states adopted some form of choice legislation as school reform gained momentum. By the end of 1992, that number had grown to a total of 37 states (Cookson, 1994). Minnesota was the first state, however, to implement reform in the form of institutional change when it opened its first charter school in 1992. By the end of the 90s, nine states permitted public school choice throughout the state; 21 states permitted choice within some or all of their districts; charter schools were operating in over half of the 50 states and in the District of Columbia; and 79 private scholarship programs nationwide were providing more than 57,000 children the opportunity to attend a school of their choice in 32 states and the District of Columbia (Center for Education Reform, 2005).

Cookson (1994) posits that Republican governors favored choice as a means to effect reform more than their Democratic counterparts because Democrats tend to support public institutions and depend on teachers' unions for support while Republican are more inclined to favor market solutions for social problems. Choice had the support of conservative advocacy groups such as the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute, and a variety of private school organizations, including the National Association of Independent Schools (NSIS) and the Council for American Private Education, both of which are part of the Washington lobbying infrastructure that strongly supports school choice.

Opponents of school choice fought to maintain their position of power by offering limited choices within the traditional public school structure but as they witnessed the departure of students to home schooling and private schools some of them settled on a compromise, an alternative type of public school—the charter school. Perhaps they reasoned that at least charters were still a form of public schools. Charters are definitely not an alternative to the present national public school system but they are consistently supported by a majority of Americans according to Horchschild's (2004) analysis of surveys by the *Washington Post* and *CNN/USA Today*. Politicians on both sides of the

congressional aisle, at all levels of government, have found value and purpose in assisting poor families in their quest to escape failing schools and many support charter schools.

### *Twenty-first Century*

“School Choice Legislation Is All the Rage in 2005” according to the headlines of the May issue of *School Reform News*, a monthly newspaper for school reformers published by The Heartland Institute. The front page reports that 17 states are considering new choice proposals; and that President Bush’s 2005-2006 federal budget includes a \$50 million fund that cities can use to pay for tuition vouchers at private secular and religious schools (Snell, 2005). Seventeen states have laws authorizing cyber charter schools (LeFevre, 2006). On January 18, 2006, New Hampshire joined Florida, Maine, Ohio, Utah, Vermont, and Wisconsin to become the seventh state, along with the District of Columbia, to offer government-funded scholarships (vouchers). Florida’s government-funded Opportunity Scholarships, affecting roughly 700 students, were declared unconstitutional by the Florida Supreme Court in January of 2005. However, the Florida court’s ruling did not apply to Florida’s McKay Scholarship program, which provides vouchers to approximately 13,000 special-needs students (Richard, 2005). Seven states – Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania – have enacted laws that offer tax credits or deductions for education expenses or for contributions to scholarship programs.

Many people are looking at school choice options; some for the first time. The total number of students enrolled in all private schools in 2003 was about 6.3 million; an 18% increase since 1980 (NCES, 2003). Parents are choosing charter schools in increasing numbers, also. According to Education Week (Robeline, 2005), enrollment in charters has increased by about 14% since the 2004-2005 school year bringing the number of charter school students to about 1 million. Presently, there are nearly 3000 charters in forty states and the District of Columbia enrolling roughly 1.8% of all traditional public school children (CER, 2005). Home schooling is legal in all 50 states and the number of students being home schooled has increased from an estimated 10 to 15 thousand in the late 70s and early 80s to one million plus in 2003 (NCES, 2003).



During a five year period, beginning in 2000, the Heritage Foundation reports that families of over 624,000 students have used vouchers, tax credits, or tax deductions to attend a school of their choice (Kafer, 2005). However large these numbers may appear, they account for only about 15% of the total number of elementary and secondary school-age-children (5 to 17 year olds) in the United States. The total number of students who presently do not attend traditional public schools is actually very small when compared to the number of students who are still enrolled – about 54.6 million (NCES, 2004).

The idea of school choice in a free market has been energized and strengthened as Americans’ “faith in government declined” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 112), and, increasingly, parents have decided that they wanted more of a voice in their children’s education. Critics of the public school system and its inability to reform itself have become more vocal, more adamant, and more united. Advocates of choice have explored multiple means of wresting control away from the government monopoly that they complain has failed in the last forty years to raise scores and close the achievement gap despite ever increasing costs. Supporters of traditional public schools continue to look for means to offer choice and still retain control in the form of magnet schools, interdistrict and intra-district choice and charter schools.

Despite the continuing efforts of traditional public school leaders and supporters to level the field of educational opportunities and ensure that good schools are available to all children of all races, disparities and inequalities still exist in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many children are still locked into failing schools according to critics of traditional public schools (of which there are many) and dissatisfaction continues to grow. In Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, Superior Court Judge Howard Manning’s recent 45 page ruling accused the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district of “academic genocide for at-risk, low-income children” because 60% of its high school students failed to reach grade-level expectations on end-of-year tests. At the lowest ranked high school just 31% of students tested at grade level. The superintendent, James Pughsley, after admitting to being offended by the judge’s language, declined to disagree with the judge’s assessment. Instead Mr. Pughsley decided that he had to “focus on what really matters – the findings” and stated that, “There needs

to be a national conversation on what we need to do to make our high schools better...It's a larger problem than just Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools" (Nowell, 2005, p. 5D).

Mr. Pughsley is correct. The problem is larger than one school district in North Carolina according to recent surveys that report national school achievement. Despite some improvement in reading test scores, 44% of Black children in the United States scored "below basic" (NCES, 2003), and the gap between African American and Anglo children was a full 29 points. These scores reflect extremely high underachievement for minorities as a group. In addition, a disproportionate number of minority students do not receive high school diplomas. Presently, it is difficult to actually arrive at an accurate graduation rate because states have been allowed by the federal government to use various methods to determine the number of students they graduate, on time, with regular diplomas. Jay Green of the Manhattan Institute reports that he calculated the graduation rate in North Carolina at 63%, but the state claimed a rate of 92.4% (Archer, 2004). In a recent study conducted by Johns Hopkins University, North Carolina was identified as one of 15 states in the country with the "worst promoting power" because 60% or less of the students who start out as freshmen make it to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade on time (Viadero, 2003). Even though the Hopkins researchers caution that their results should not be used as a direct measure, they, along with researchers at the Washington-based Urban Institute who have also studied dropout rates, suggest that their study is an indicator of trouble, especially for minorities. Traditional public schools attended overwhelmingly by minorities were described as "dropout factories" (Viadero, 2003, p. 14)

The problems begin much earlier than high school, however. An inordinate number of minority children are placed in special education classes from which they do not escape. African American boys, especially, are in need of an alternative. *Education Week's* analysis of 2002-2003 data from the Department of Education reveals that there is an overrepresentation of black students in special education classes, 30% of who spend more than 60% of the school day outside of the regular classroom, compared with 15 percent of white special education students (Samuels, 2004). Recently released results of a study commissioned by the Cambridge, Massachusetts based Schott Foundation for Public Education found that black male students in Charlotte, North Carolina accounted

for 78% of students with mental retardation even though they represented only 43% of the district's enrollment (Samuels, 2004). Over-representation of minority students in special education is not a new problem, according to Samuels.

According to the National Survey of Latinos (Bowman, 2004), African Americans were the least positive of white, blacks, and Latinos in their faith in the public school system. Fewer than half the African Americans polled, 46%, gave top grades of A or B to their community schools. Only 36% of African Americans elected to give the nation-wide public school system A or B grades. More African American families than White, Latino, and Asian Americans, are dissatisfied with and have, perhaps, lost hope in the public school system. Dissatisfaction with public schools is not a new issue. African Americans and Irish Catholics demonstrated their dissatisfaction with public schools over two hundred years ago; and both groups managed to make some changes.

#### *Early Examples of Dissatisfaction with Traditional Public Schools*

The dissatisfaction theory of democracy explains what happens when a community changes and a gap begins to develop between the values of the community and the values of the school board. The theory has developed primarily through case studies of school district politics. According to Lutz & Merz (1992) when the "gap becomes intolerably great, the community resorts to political action" (p. 5). Lutz and Merz's studies explore the political action that several communities take when dissatisfaction occurs and nothing is done to close the gap between the community and the school. Frequently, as communities change, the board and the superintendent are unaware or refuse to attend to the community's changes. In the words of Iannacone and Lutz, "the handwriting is on the wall but the board and the superintendent do not understand or respond" (1970, p.176).

The values of the community are ultimately represented in school policy (Lutz & Merz, 1992). It sometimes takes years, even decades for change to occur but in the long run when communities change and there is nonalignment of values, the community will realign school policy with their values. Boyd (1976) identifies a "zone of tolerance"

within which policymakers may function. If they deviate very far from mainstream community values, they will generally encounter conflict.

Dissatisfaction theory involves the politics of school/community. Historically, common schools in the United States “were established by communities to serve their needs as they were perceived locally” (Lutz & Merz, 1992, p. 3). However, even though school leaders have often held that the schools represent the values of the community those same people do not always hear the voices in the community. It is not uncommon for school people to turn a deaf ear to special interests groups or groups that the school discounts as not having a valid complaint or argument. However, as history will attest, even if groups are unable to effect change immediately, they will eventually find a way to resolve their dissatisfaction.

One of the earliest examples of a group expressing dissatisfaction with public schools occurred in 1798 when the Black community in Boston decided that they needed separate schools for their children because they did not feel that they were being well served in integrated schools. Nine years later, the same Black community determined that their children were not being well served in segregated schools and decided they needed integrated schools. It was difficult to reverse the pattern of segregated schools in Boston once they were established. In fact, it took nearly 50 years for the Black community to secure the integrated schools that they decided would offer their children the best learning opportunities (Cremin, 1970; Schultz, 1973; Spring, 1990).

The Irish Catholic community is another example of a group that expressed dissatisfaction with public schools in the 1800s. When large numbers of Irish Catholics began immigrating to the United States their religious beliefs conflicted with those of the Protestant majority that had established the common school in the United States. Catholic leaders hotly protested the practice of Protestant Bible reading in public schools in every big eastern city (Morris, 1997). The results were riots, fierce fighting, gun battles, and death. Protestant school leaders considered the Bible a kind of “proto-Constitution” (Morris, 1997, p. 73) and used it as the central text for training citizens. Protestant foundations like the Public School Society in New York “supervised curricula, chose textbooks, and ensured appropriate prominence for the Bible” (Morris, 1997, p. 73).

According to Morris, Catholics in the 1840s felt that the American Protestant attitude toward education was narrow-minded and they complained that there were many insults to them and their children in the city curriculum. When its complaints went unheeded, the Catholic community decided to establish its own schools, which it gradually managed to do. By 1900 there were 3,300 Catholic schools enrolling a quarter of a million students (Morris, 1997). Catholic families, especially those in the Northeast where the greatest number of Catholic schools were located, were no longer locked into the public school monopoly.

Some Catholic families are still choosing Catholic schools. According to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) Annual Report on Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (2005) there are nearly 8,000 Catholic schools in the United States with a total enrollment of 2.5 million students. Of those students, 72.7% are Caucasian and 27.1% are minorities (11.7 % Hispanic, 7.8 % African American, 3.9% Asian, 2.6% Multiracial, and 0.4 % Native American). Most Catholic schoolchildren are Catholic. However, non-Catholic enrollment has risen from 2.7% of the total student population in 1970 to 13.6% in 2005 (NCEA, 2005).

### *Choice in American Education*

Vermont, for more than a 100 years, and Tennessee, for more than 80 years, have had school choice programs. Tennessee state law allows any student to attend the school nearest home, even if that school lies outside the student's district. In 1991 the state reported that 22,000 students attended schools outside of their home districts (Cookson, 1994). Vermont allows students from districts without a public high school to attend public or non-public schools, with taxpayers paying all or part of the cost (Carnegie Foundation, 1992). Present choice policies offered by traditional public schools are also predated by magnet school policies. Magnets, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), which began in 1972, were part of desegregation efforts in many states and school districts offering families alternatives to their neighborhood public schools.

In 1988, Minnesota adopted a voluntary, statewide system of open enrollment which became mandatory to all districts in 1990-91. Open enrollment policies are either mandatory or voluntary depending on the state. Mandatory policies require districts within a state to participate while voluntary policies allow districts to choose to participate or not. States with open-enrollment policies allow students to transfer to the public school of their choice. Like Minnesota, several states have adopted a statewide open enrollment program permitting students to attend any school in the state (Cookson, 1994). In other states, open enrollment is limited to intradistrict or interdistrict levels. Intradistrict transfers limit choice to a student's home district. Interdistrict transfers permit students to transfer to schools outside of the student's home district. Both intradistrict and interdistrict transfers are generally subject to availability and typically require parents to provide transportation. Some intradistrict and interdistrict transfer programs are referred to as controlled-choice plans. Under controlled-choice plans, choices are restricted to ensure the racial, gender, and socioeconomic balance of each school (Cookson, 1994).

As of 2001, 33 states had passed legislation permitting or requiring some form of open enrollment policy (ECS, 2001). Presently, almost every state and the District of Columbia offer one or more choices to parents in the form of: magnet schools, open-enrollment, interdistrict and/or intradistrict transfers, tuition tax credits, vouchers, publicly or privately funded scholarships, home schools, and regular charter schools or cyber charters. Only Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington and West Virginia do not have charter school laws. Some of the remaining states that have not passed formal laws have informal or locally initiated choice programs.

As previously stated, eligible students in seven states – Florida, Maine, Ohio, Vermont, Utah, Wisconsin, and New Hampshire – and the District of Columbia can receive government-funded scholarships or vouchers to attend the private school of their choice. The District of Columbia offers the first federally funded voucher program in the United States. Seven states – Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire – offer tax credits or deductions for education expenses or for

contributions to scholarship programs. Iowa, Arizona, Minnesota and Illinois offer actual tax credit for personally incurred educational expenses for one's own child. Florida and Pennsylvania established scholarship tuition organizations (STO) which act as the intermediary for individuals or businesses that want to make a monetary gift for which they can receive a tax credit. New Hampshire's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars Program authorizes the state to establish and make appropriations to its 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars Fund Corporation, a non-profit, public and private partnership that will provide educational scholarships to eligible children in grades 1-12 beginning in the 2006-2007 school year. New Hampshire's program affords individuals and businesses the opportunity to make tax-deductible contributions to the same fund. It is the first scholarship-voucher program that combines state, individual, and business contributions together into one scholarship fund.

More than 80 privately funded scholarship programs currently exist for eligible students in K-12 grades thanks in part to the example set by the Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF). Founded by Sam Walton and Theodore J. Forstmann in 1998 with personal funds of \$100 million, the Children's Scholarship Fund recruited matching donors, increased the initial pool of funding to \$190 million, and succeeded in kicking off the largest private education initiative in the county. Since its inception, the CSF has spawned 33 affiliates across the county and more than 70,000 children have been afforded choice in education because of CSF scholarships. Currently, more than 24,000 children are using CSF scholarships to attend the private school their family has selected. (Children's Scholarship Fund – Charlotte, 2005)

### *Choice in North Carolina*

As of January of 2006, the State of North Carolina had not passed public school choice legislation. Ninety-one percent of K-12 grade students attend public schools in the state. Six percent attend private school and 3% are home schooled. According to a 2003 report by the North Carolina Education Alliance (NCEA), 69 of the 117 public-school districts in the state offer parents no public-school choice options (Palasek, 2003). Only

nine districts have magnet schools as part of their choice options. Forty-four school districts offer charter schools but charter school law limits the number of charters in the state to 100 and that number was reached in the fall of 2005. There are no cyber charter schools in the state. Seven school districts allow parents to choose among public schools under an open enrollment plan designed by the individual district. In the districts where open enrollment is available, requests for transfers are subject to approval by the Office of the District Superintendent and, if denied, may be appealed to the Board of Education of the district. In the 2002-2003 school year, more than 45,000 students, 6% of all K-12 students in North Carolina, attended private schools. At that number, private school enrollment surpassed the enrollment of students in magnet schools, home schools, and charters. Magnet schools enrolled 5.89%, 3.4% were home schooled, and less than 1% enrolled in charter schools in 2002-2003 (Palasek, 2003).

In an effort to “give parents a way to find the best education for their children” North Carolina Representative Paul Stam introduced House Bill 931: Tax Fairness in Education in March of 2005 (Stam, 2005). The bill calls for an individual income tax credit of \$2,500 for married filers who jointly earn \$100,000 or less. In addition, it seeks to authorize county commissioners to appropriate and pay an amount not to exceed \$500 to parents who are entitled to claim as a personal exemption a child educated somewhere other than public schools. Representative Stam, a Republican from Wake County, introduced the bill in March of 2005 but it was never considered by the House. Since the 2006 Legislative Session is technically a continuation of the 2005 Session, House Bill 931 remains eligible for consideration when lawmakers return to Raleigh for the 2006 Session that begins on Tuesday, May 9<sup>th</sup> (NC General Assembly, 2005).

Even though the state of North Carolina does not offer tax credits or deductions, there is available one privately funded scholarship source - the Children’s Scholarship Fund – Charlotte (CSF-C). Unfortunately, CSF-C limits its scholarships to residents of Charlotte or Mecklenburg County. CSF-C is an affiliate of the national CSF and has afforded 400 eligible families partial scholarships each year since 1999. Families with children in K-8<sup>th</sup> grade are chosen by lottery and are guaranteed partial tuition at the religious or secular private school of their choice. Students, once accepted, who continue



on to grades 9-12 are guaranteed scholarships, also. Scholarship amounts are individualized and are based on family income and tuition costs. There is a \$1,950 cap on K-8<sup>th</sup> scholarships and a \$2,700 cap for grades 9-12<sup>th</sup>. Families must contribute a minimum of \$500 per child, per year in order to receive a scholarship. Once a family is accepted, all children in the family are eligible to receive scholarships as soon as they reach school age. The Charlotte fund receives matching funds from the national CSF but otherwise is supported entirely by private donations (CSF-C, 2005).

On a nationwide basis, choice in education may be viewed as limited by some, depending in part on the county/parish or state in which a person lives but, in reality, there are ever increasing opportunities to choose. Those opportunities have raised questions about decision making skills and many parents who, here-to-fore, had little voice in selecting their children's schools now find themselves in the role of decision-makers or as Schneider and Buckley (2002) call them, "citizen-consumers" (p. 133). Given the variety of choices available to parents in the twenty-first century, it might seem to some that choosing a good school for one's child would be easy, however researchers argue that the decision making process involves many factors that can complicate the task (Edwards, 1954; Payne, Betterman, & Johnson, 1993; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Tversky, 1972).

### *Should Parents Decide?*

The selection of a school other than a traditional public one, for instance, might involve considerable decision-making and strategy choices for some parents. Schneider & Buckley (2003, p.205) argue that it is at least a "two step process" because parents must first choose to leave the traditional public school in which their children are enrolled and then determine which school to choose as the best alternative. Some have argued that all parents are ill equipped as consumers of education but that low-income parents are more likely than more affluent, educated parents to make ill-informed choices (Ascher, Fruchter & Berne, 1996; Carnegie Foundation, 1992). Others argue that low-income parents will be less likely to have the "time, money, and the knowledge to seek out and

evaluate schools” which would enable them to make more informed decisions (Lacireno-Pacquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002). Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) posit that parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds have different sources of information; some have greater difficulty obtaining information about schools than do others, and thus may be less well informed.

Considering the challenges parents face when trying to choose a school for their children, some might argue that perhaps parents should not be allowed to make this important decision. Perhaps it should be left to professional educators. Van Heemst (2004) asks the question, “Should the government or parents decide which school a child will attend” (p. 48)? He posits that our current system is built upon the premise that the government should decide, but he argues that parents “know their children better than the state does [and that] parents should control the choice of their children’s education” (p.50). According to Van Heemst, the government empowers parents to fulfill their parental duties when it affords them the opportunity to select a school that best suits their child’s needs.

Van Heemst (2004) and Gilles (1998) agree that the parents’ role should be a decision-making one and that educators should take their place as advisors even though educational statisticians, including many liberal academics, view the home as the parents’ realm of authority and the school as the realm of public or government authority. Gilles (1998, p. 395) asks, “Why parents should choose?” and continues by explaining, “the majority ought not substitute its educational judgment for that of a child’s custodial parents merely because it disagrees with their reasonable conception of the child’s educational good” (p. 396). Gilles argues that “parents have better incentives to be faithful agents for [their] children than public officials” (p. 396). He suggests that both parents and public officials are fallible but posits that parents are “linked to their children both by nature and by long-term custodial relationships” and are more likely to do “what is good for their own” (p. 396) than are government agents.

## *Decision Making Strategies*

How do parents decide? By what means do parents arrive at their decision to leave a traditional public school or to stay? How do they choose among the educational alternatives available to them, which, for some, could be numerous? Psychologists Payne, Betterman, and Johnson (1993) argue that “how one decides how to decide is crucial” (p. 6). They present empirical evidence of human adaptation in decision-making and argue that individuals “decide how to decide by considering both the cognitive effort and the accuracy of various strategies” (p.13). They posit that most individuals use a “variety of strategies, ranging from careful and reasoned examination of alternatives to simple and fast rules of thumb” (Payne et al., 1993, p.13). Decision-makers employ these various strategies in an attempt to achieve accuracy, to simplify the process, and to limit the amount of cognitive effort they expend. According to Edwards (1954) there are two kinds of variables that influence decisions – utility and probability. He argues that people evaluate the variables in a decision-making situation, assessing the attractiveness or unattractiveness of the variables and then make their decision. He adds that decisions are inevitably impacted by information processing.

Sniderman et al. (1986) explain their research on some of the heuristics or means for simplification that people use to make decisions about political issues. They argue that people take advantage of judgmental shortcuts or heuristics in order to compensate for informational shortfalls. They present a metaphor – a chain of reasoning – and argue that there are “reasoning chains” that people use when faced with decisions (p. 406). They posit that it is because people follow some chain of reasoning that they are able to make complex decisions relatively quickly whether they are knowledgeable or not. Sniderman et al. suggest that a general “set of beliefs” or an ideology is the first link on the reasoning chain that people rely on to work out their opinion or position on an issue. If we apply the “reasoning chain” argument to choice in education and begin with the first link—ideology—it might appear like this: If a person is strongly committed to traditional public schools, has had good experiences with them in the past and believes like Boyer (1992) that they “remain the best hope for strengthening our democratic

nation” (p. xvii), it would be very difficult to persuade that person to support home schooling, private schools or even charter schools much less persuade him to remove his children from a traditional public school. The first link on the person’s reasoning chain – his belief in traditional public schools – would enable him to make a quick decision with regard to school choice without knowing anything about the alternatives available to him.

It seems that a “chain of reasoning” would imply that people would start at the beginning of the chain considering their ideologies/beliefs, move to the intermediate “links” which would include information, and then proceed to the end – their conclusion or decision. Sniderman et al. (1986), however, contend that people generally do not reason conscientiously; that they do not arrive at their decisions by proceeding directly along the “chain”. People frequently begin the reasoning process with their beliefs or feelings and then jump immediately to the end – the end being their opinions. People do not complete each step in an argument or in the decision making process; rather they skip from the first link to the last quite quickly. Then, curiously enough, according to Sniderman et al., they double back and complete the intermediate steps in the chain, which include alternative theories, explanations, and new ideas and information. Sniderman et al. (1996) argue that “not only do people reason forward, from general to specific; they also reason backward; from specific to general” (p. 422). It is their opinion that “people reason backwards, not to disguise their motives but to complete missing links in their chains of reasoning”. Further, because people can reason “both forwards and backwards with affect guiding them, they can indeed figure out what they think about questions” and make decisions (p. 422).

Payne, et al. (1993) posit that sometimes the use of various strategies is a result of limited information-processing capabilities of people and an attempt by them to make the most accurate decision. They warn that even though people “frequently make reasonable judgments and choices, the use of heuristic decision strategies sometimes can lead to decision errors” (Payne, et al., 1993, p. 248). In addition, because individuals are faced with ever changing problems, they must be flexible in their choices of strategies if they are to reach their goal of high degrees of accuracy while exerting reasonable amounts of effort. Other considerations that may affect strategy selection and may be of primary

importance to the decision maker include “minimizing conflict and/or justifying the decision to others” (Payne, et al., 1993, p. 15). For example, a parent may want to move his children out of a traditional public school but he may not want to deal with the questions posed by family and friends and he may not feel that he can adequately justify his decision.

One strategy that decision-makers use when trying to make a choice according to Tversky (1972, p. 285) involves a “covert sequential elimination process” which he has labeled “elimination-by-aspects.” Tversky argues that when people are confronted with several alternatives they often experience uncertainty and exhibit inconsistency because they are overwhelmed by the amount of relevant information. In order to make a decision, they go through an “elimination process governed by successive selection of aspects” which can involve either negative or positive alternatives (p. 285). For example, if parents are faced with choosing from three or four schools, they might eliminate from consideration schools that are more than ten miles from their homes because they either cannot or will not travel that distance. Another aspect such as class size might be the second eliminating aspect.

One of the problems with the strategy is that the order of attributes or aspects is totally subjective; thus, choice probability is dependent on the value people place on each aspect. Tversky suggests that the appeal of the logic of elimination by aspects is that it is easy to state, defend, and apply. However, Tversky maintains that even though elimination by aspects as a strategy can serve as a “useful simplification procedure” it “cannot be defended as a rational procedure of choice”. The major flaw in the principal “lies in its failure to ensure that the alternatives retained are, in fact, superior to those which are eliminated” (Tversky, 1972, p. 298).

Another strategy identified as “preferential choice” (Payne et al., 1993, p. 2) involves limited choices. Payne explains that when faced with a decision that involves limited choices (such as choosing between two schools), people will frequently process all of the information that they feel is relevant and make decisions that require “tradeoffs”. An example of preferential choice might include deciding between one school that offers smaller class size, has excellent test scores, but is further away; and

another school that has more children per class, lower test scores, and is closer to home. If being close to home is the main criterion, a parent might settle for larger class sizes and lower test scores.

Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, and Brady (1991) argue that feelings/ideologies enable both well-educated and less educated people to figure out what they think about a problem and make complex decisions according to what they believe without necessarily knowing much about the problem. Carol Weiss (1983) includes ideology as one of the “3 I’s” of her public policy decision-making model also. Weiss argues, however, that it is not ideology alone but the overlap, the interplay and the constant interaction of ideologies, interests and information that affect the decisions that people make. Weiss (1995) “aims to account for decision outcomes” (p. 573) by arguing that it is because people bring different resources to the decision-making task in the form of different ideologies, different interests, and different information that they make different decisions.

### *Ideologies and American Education*

Ideologies – divergent to be sure – have been part of education in America since its inception. It was the ideology of the earliest settlers that influenced them to strive to educate some of the children—generally boys and generally white boys. It was the ideology of many wealthy slave owners in the south which led them to deprive black children of the opportunity to learn to read and write while, at the same time, ideology motivated some slave owners’ wives and children to covertly teach slaves reading and writing. Ideology prompted proponents of the common school in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to attempt to unite everyone through the “melting pot” of free public schools. A different ideology held by Catholic immigrants caused them to reject the common school and establish schools of their own in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was also the ideology of some advocates of free public education in northern states that caused them to establish separate schools for white and black children.

Weiss (1995) posits that “people tend to formulate ideologies that are in accord with their self-interests” and that people “espouse value positions that support the interests of their ethnic, class or occupational status” (p. 578). Differing ideologies and the decisions that are made because of them continue to have an effect on American education today. Even though, as Weiss (1983) asserts “most people – even highly informed and experienced officials – do not have coherent, detailed, comprehensive ideologies,” politicians, educators, parents, and the like, on both sides of major issues argue their views with vigor and enthusiasm (p. 231). A hotly disputed example is the major ideological divide between the supporters of traditional public schools and those who support school choice.

In their book, *Politics, Markets, and America’s School*, Chubb and Moe (1990) claim that there is little hope for genuine reform in our public schools unless the present governance structure is overturned and there is deregulation of the American public school system. They argue for choice, and maintain that “markets offer an institutional alternative to direct democratic control,” adding, “we think reformers would do well to entertain the notion that choice is a panacea...a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification” (p. 167). Schneider et al. (2000) explain that theoretically “choice exposes public schools to powerful market-like forces built on decentralization, competition, and consumer sovereignty” and “if public schools respond to these forces, differences between public and private schools should narrow” (p. 239).

Those who are opposed to choice see the issue quite differently. The Carnegie Foundation (1992) report complains that school choice “more than any other reform strategy” has become “highly charged” and “ideological” with a “zealousness... that smothers thoughtful discourse” (p. xv). Boyer (1992) asserts that we need to create choices within the public schools we already have and argues that public “schools are failing not from bureaucratic gridlock, but from the pathologies that surround them – neglected children, troubled families, and neighborhoods in decay” (p. xvii). According to Cookson (1994) choice advocates have started a crusade that has at its base: values, identity and freedom (all forms of beliefs or ideologies). He asserts that “the school choice movement is a loose confederation of individuals and groups with little in

common except a deep contempt for public education as we know it” (p. 6). Traditional public school advocates seem to agree with Cookson and fight back by asserting that cooperation and not competition is what is needed to fix the nation’s public schools. They agree with Boyer (1992) that there is choice in traditional public school systems and that they are not the educational monopolies that they are accused of being (Cookson, 1994).

Choice proponent Van Heemst’s book, *Empowering the Poor* (2004), argues that choice will benefit the disadvantaged; that it is the poorest children in our country who suffer the most because they are locked into public schools that have not and do not serve them well. He asserts that it is unjust for our government to fund schools differently causing children who live in impoverished districts to attend schools that are substandard. As Van Heemst sees it, the United States offers four types of education that are valid, legal, and public and asks why are all four - public, private, parochial and home school – not funded by the government. Van Heemst’s argument reflects his belief in vouchers - public money being spent to educate children in other than traditional public schools. Opponents of vouchers argue that public money should be used to support public schools only. Vouchers, they maintain, should certainly not be provided to families that choose to send their children to schools that are religiously affiliated because, as they see it, it is a violation of the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution. Proponents of vouchers assert that the Establishment Clause has been misinterpreted (Gilles, 1998, Viteritti, 1998). They argue that the Establishment Clause was intended to protect against a state-supported church and not to “treat any interaction between religious organizations and government as legally suspect” (Viteritti, 1998, p. 421). Viteritti (1998) suggests that opponents who use the Establishment Clause as their reason for denying vouchers to families who choose parochial schools are seeking to “undermine the fundamental religious rights that the First Amendment was meant to sustain, conferring a mandate within public policy that confuses freedom *of* religion with freedom *from* religion” (p. 421). And the ideological debate goes on.



### *Parents' Ideologies as a Factor in Decision Making*

Ideologically, Americans view choice as “something that is good in itself... it is a crucial indicator of the freedom of a people” (Levin, 1989, p. 1). In the literature, however, researchers express concern that parents will not be able to make good educational choices for their children. Specifically, critics of choice are concerned about the “values” of low-income parents who, they think, will be “unduly influenced by non-academic factors” when trying to choose a school for their children (Schneider & Buckley, 2002, p. 134). They posit that if parents choose schools not because they offer quality educational opportunities but because they are convenient, have good sports teams, or have other ancillary or irrelevant non-educational characteristics, choice could reduce pressure on schools to enhance academic performance (Henig, 1996; Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000).

According to Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock and Brady (1986), “people do not make decisions whimsically – they have reasons for their preferences” (p. 405). The problem, they argue, “is not that the mass publics know too little, but that no one knows enough” thus they rely in part on beliefs or feelings to compensate for what they do not know. Weiss (1995) posits, “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). Sniderman, et al. (1986) assert that both the “sophisticated and “unsophisticated” rely on “gut think or irrationality” to help them make decisions (p. 426). Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) argue that parents who have chosen to choose a particular school for their children select a school that is “high on the attributes they value” (p. 268). They contend that school choice presents parents with new options and the “opportunity to choose a school that maximizes the fit between [their] preferences in education and what the school offers (p. 87). Schneider, et al. (2000) note that a parent’s “choice [of a school] is often driven by ideology” (p. 93).

Parents from many different racial/ethnic and income groups value academic excellence according to a study of more than a thousand charter-school parents in Texas

(Kleitiz, Weiher, Tedin & Matland, 2000). Of the five factors parents were asked to rank in order of importance, researchers found that concern for education quality was valued most by 93%-96% of respondents and was not mediated by race/ethnicity or by income. In the same study, Kleitiz et al. (2000) found that substantial majorities of all subgroups “say that class size is important in making decisions about their children’s’ schools” which they consider “one of the more concrete indices of school quality” (p. 850). These findings dispute arguments that suggest that academic concerns are not central to the decision when minority, low-SES house-holds choose a school for their children (Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Cookson, 1992; Henig, 1996; Wells, 1993) and support the findings of other researchers (Armor & Peiser, 1998; Green, Howell & Peterson, 1998; Peterson & Hassel, 1998; Schneider, Teske & Marshall, 2000; Witte, Bailey & Thorn 1992, 1993) who argue that minority, low-socioeconomic parents are very concerned about academics.

#### *Parents’ Interests as a Factor in Decision Making*

Weiss (1995) argues that the *interests* that people have are “rarely hard and fast, single-position commitments” and that “people work out the specifications of their interests in light of the information they have” (p. 578). Further, Weiss points out that people define their interests depending on how they perceive their situation and that the redefinition of their interests goes on continually. In addition, people are sometime forced to reconstruct their notion of their own interests if faced with new information or new choices especially if changing their interests leads to greater benefits. For example, African American parents who may have initially been interested in their children attending an integrated school, may decide to move them to a school that is attended almost entirely by children of their same race if they determine that the segregated school is the better choice with respect to class size, school size, individualized instruction, teacher commitment, or quality of curriculum. If the information about the new segregated school is true, then the parents’ interest in their children getting the best possible education will be realized. There is a trade off in this example because parents’

ideologies might support a multicultural educational setting for their children, but the promise of higher academic achievement is a far greater reward for both parents and children. This example supports Weiss' (1983) claim that people tend to formulate their ideologies in accordance with their interests. Because of new information and new opportunity, the parents had to re-examine their interests. The change in their interests enabled them to make a choice that superseded their ideology.

Having the opportunity to make a choice—which some see as a right and others view as a privilege—has the corresponding responsibility or “cost” of due diligence in order to make the right choice. Just as Weiss (1983) believes that almost all participants in policy formulation have a stake in the configuration that policy takes, it can be argued that parents have a stake or interest in the outcome of the decisions they make with regard to their children's schools. The stakes are truly high for parents because choice has transformed the act of enrolling ones child in a school from a passive process into an active, decision making task offering incentives to parents to maximize the fit between what they prefer in education (what they are interested in having their children experience) and what a school offers (Schneider et al., 2000). Consequently, parents are highly motivated to make a good choice.

According to Schneider et al. (2000), parents who simply choose to choose are definitely more satisfied with their children's schools than are other parents and “clearly benefit from choice” (p. 268). People's interests are primarily self-interests and, according to Weiss (1983), are second only to ideology as a primary decision making factor; both of which when combined “carry higher emotional loadings” than does information (p. 224). Payne et al. (1993) use the terms “cost-benefits” and “incentives” when explaining what motivates people to make particular decisions that affect their self-interests (p. 14). They argue, “increased incentives will generally lead to greater effort but not necessarily to the increased use of more optimal (reduced error) decision strategies.” For example, even though parents might be highly motivated to make good decisions with regard to their children's education so that their children are afforded better educational opportunities, they may be unaware that their decision-making strategies are flawed. Many researchers agree that parents are interested in the welfare

and the educational opportunities of their children; that they are highly motivated to make good choices (Greene, Howell & Peterson, 1998; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin & Matland, 2000; Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000); but their interests and motivation do not necessarily insure that they will, in fact, make good choices (Payne et al., 1993).

### *Parents' Information as a Factor in Decision Making*

“The acquisition and use of information by parents is central to the study of school choice” (Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000, p. 108). Fortunately, environmental changes have greatly reduced the cost of gathering information in the twenty-first century. The mass media enables the average person to gain information on a daily basis. Simply by turning on a television set or by accessing the internet a plethora of information is available. However available general information may be, basic information about schools frequently is neither readily available nor widely circulated and can sometimes be difficult to understand. In order to find the right school for their children people must seek accurate, current information. This is where the cost/benefits issue enters the picture. If people are interested in achieving greater accuracy in their decisions, Payne et al. (1993) argue that their decision-making procedures will generally require the processing of more information and less use of heuristics. Thus, strategies that provide greater accuracy cost greater effort (Payne et al., 1993). Weiss (1995) insists that people make decisions based on information - old and new - or a combination there of; that “information helps people figure out where the problems are and which potential solutions hold promise for coping with them effectively” (p. 576). Further, she adds that information comes from many sources; and that “much of the knowledge (information) that people bring to bear on a decision comes from their direct experience” (p.576). Weiss (1983) argues that people’s interests are affected by new information and that “new information can alter their definitions of both where their interests lie and the most judicious course for achieving them” (p. 234).

For example, old information about how schools operate can come directly from parents’ own experiences. It can also be provided by shared past experiences of family,

friends, or neighbors. New information about schools and educational choices can pour in unsolicited from others who want to share information they have about their child's school – positive or negative—from interest groups such as charter school advocates trying to increase enrollment; proponents of choice; proponents of traditional schools; the news media; teachers and teacher unions; politicians, administrators, and others. New information about schools can be obtained by parents directly from many of the sources listed above as well as from particular schools of all types, support groups, and from various internet sites. However, Weiss (1983) emphasizes, new information must be in line with someone's pre-existing knowledge because if it is “not congruent with their understanding of how the world works it is likely to be regarded with skepticism.” and possibly disregarded (p. 229).

New information seems to have potential for influence when people find their ideologies and interests in conflict (Weiss, 1983). For example, parents who had positive experiences while attending traditional public schools may send their children to similar schools until they learn that a charter school offers more individualized instruction due to smaller class size. They may have been *ideologically* committed to traditional public education due to positive personal experiences but new *information* about smaller class size might weigh heavily on the *interest* they have in their children being afforded, what they perceive to be, a better learning opportunity. Because they equate smaller class size with education quality, they may decide to enroll their children in a smaller charter school.

According to Weiss (1983), “there is high symbolic value in requesting information and justifying decisions on informational grounds” (p. 234). But, Weiss (1995) argues, information is only one basis upon which decision-makers decide and even though information is often critical, it is usually outweighed by the ideologies and interests of the decision makers. Weiss (1995) posits that “every individual decision is the product of the interplay among ideology, interests, and information” thus it could be argued that parents make decisions with regard to their children's education based on the interplay of the same three forces as parents interpret them (p. 577). Weiss (1995) asserts that the interaction of the three forces is “constant and iterative” and that decision makers

work out the “specifications of their ideologies and interests in conjunction with their processing of information” (p. 229).

*The Institution as a Factor Influencing Parents’ Decision-Making*

Weiss (1995) explains that the “institutional domain involves the structure, culture, standard operating procedures, and decision rules of the organization” (p. 576). Weiss emphasizes that when she addresses the “institution of schools” she is not referring to a single school but rather to the consistency in U.S. schools which she argues “is the result of institutional beliefs and practices that are common across the schools” in the country. Parents are not affected by the strong influences that institutions are able to bring to bear upon their employees from within. They are, instead, consumers of educational services, outside of the institution, who are free to consider the perceived advantages and disadvantages of charter schools and TPS from which they may choose.

Many parents depend upon their personal experiences with the institution of TPS as students and as parents of students from which they have collected first hand information and formed opinions. Other parents, who attended a TPS but whose children have never attended one, can rely upon the information they gleaned from their personal experiences as students. If their experiences at TPS were positive, then they are more likely to feel confident that a TPS would be a good choice for their children. Parents whose experiences were less than positive might consider a new institution, a charter, in which they may not have had first hand experiences but about which they have not as yet formed a negative opinion either. African American parents who are dissatisfied with the institution of TPS now have the option of leaving TPS for the relatively new and unproven institution of charter schools.

## Chapter III

### Design and Method of the Study

“We’ve trusted the bureaucracy to reform the schools and they haven’t done the job. It’s time we talked about trusting parents to make the decisions on what school is best for their children.”

Roy Allen

Former Democratic Georgia State Senator

Wall Street Journal, September 21, 1993

Charter schools in the state of North Carolina are enrolling African American students in numbers larger than expected (see Footnote 1) by state politicians, educators, and researchers when the North Carolina Charter School Act passed in 1996. Fears of white flight from traditional public schools in the state have cooled while educators, politicians, and others try to determine *why* African Americans parents are choosing charters. Could it be that AA parents have decided that it is time to try and break up what some see as the lethargic monopoly of the traditional public school system that keeps “poor children trapped in failing schools” and offers “appalling student outcomes” (Boyd, 2000, p. 233)? Or perhaps, they have reasoned that they have a right to decide where their children attend school, just as the Supreme Court established when it ruled in favor of a parent’s right to choose over 80 years ago in the case of *Pierce v. Society of the Sisters* (1925). At that time the court commented that “the child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.”

The current study sought to explore possible answers to why African American parents are choosing charters and to try to understand how they are arriving at their decisions. The goal is to enlarge the framework for understanding African American

parents' decision to choose charters, to expand our understanding of their motivation for leaving traditional public schools, and to describe the factors that have possibly influenced their choices.

Using Carol Weiss' (1983) "3 I's" of individual decision-making as a vehicle for understanding and analysis, the following central propositions were considered in order to answer the "How" and "Why" questions that the study posed: What are the *interests* of parents who have chosen charter schools? What is the *ideology* about schooling of parents who have chosen charters? Upon what sources of *information* do parents who have choose charter schools rely? Also, a fourth "I", *institution*, which Weiss (1995) added when she renamed her analysis "4 I's", asks what do parents perceive to be the advantages of the *institutional* setting of the charter schools they have chosen in comparison to the traditional public schools they have left; and finally, how have the two institutions, traditional public schools and charter school, influenced their decisions?

#### *Rationale for a Qualitative Approach*

This study was conducted using a qualitative inquiry method which Krathwohl (1998) asserts is "extremely useful for exploration – to find out how to understand a phenomenon" (p. 225) The goal was to bring to life, to make real, to illuminate from African American parents' perspective the process they experienced in trying to make decisions regarding educational opportunities for their children. A qualitative study approach enabled the investigator: to attempt to understand how the parents in the study view their world; to show how their perceptions and intentions in decision-making situations determined their behavior; and to provide concrete and detailed illustrations of the phenomenon under consideration.

Definitions of qualitative research in the literature support the selection of a qualitative approach for this study. Glesne (1992) explains, that qualitative design "generally searches for understanding of some phenomenon" (p. 16). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) contend:



Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials...that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives. (p. 2)

Creswell (1998) agrees that Denzin and Lincoln's definition "conveys similar ideas" to his, but he expands their definition by adding, "qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem" (p. 15). The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting." Finally, Krathwohl (1998) notes that when a qualitative research report "provides us with someone's perceptions of a situation that permits us to understand his or her behavior" then that research "provides, besides understanding, an emotional acceptance, an empathic feeling toward the individual" (p. 230 & 231).

As other qualitative researchers (Mead, 1928; Rist, 1970; and Weiss, 1995; Wolcott, 1973) have found, it is through first-hand involvement with subjects that statistics and abstractions become flesh and blood (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The qualitative design approach of this study was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to focus on collecting data in the field, through in-depth interviews of individual parents at their children's schools, and to present a descriptive, holistic picture of the findings from the parents' perspective. Hopefully, this qualitative study will enable the reader to understand the many complex dimensions of the decision making process which led the parents to move from traditional public schools to charters because the "climate of the situation, the atmosphere of events, and the feel of the individuals were presented" (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 229). A quantitative study would not have generated the parents' perceived reality, which, to the parents, *is* reality (Krathwohl, 1998). Nor would a quantitative study have provided the detailed view of the topic, nor

the data that was gleaned from the in-depth, interactive interviews with individuals that this qualitative study afforded (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

### *Justification for Case Study Design*

The choice of an exploratory intrinsic case study design strategy for this study was determined by the questions the study asks, by the interest the investigator has in the case, and by the fact that the case sought to *explore* happenings and not to explain them. According to Yin (1994, p. 9), there are “some situations in which a specific strategy has a distinct advantage. For the case study this is when a “how” or “why” question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control.” Yin points out that the case study design enables “an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” and permits the investigator to explore and explain phenomenon in a natural setting (p. 3). This case study is identified as “intrinsic” because the researcher is interested in the decision that African American parents in North Carolina have made to leave traditional public schools for charter schools and according to Stake (1995) “if we have an intrinsic interest in the case, we may call our work *intrinsic* case study” (p. 3). Lastly, this study is identified as an exploratory study because the researcher sought primarily to explore the questions and propositions posed by the study and to search not for causes but for happenings and understanding (Stake, 1995, p. 37). The goal was to “represent happenings” as vividly as possible and thereby “optimize the opportunity of the reader to gain an experiential understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 40).

Through participant observation and in-depth, face-to-face interviews with parents at their children’s schools, the researcher was able to develop considerable rapport with and trust among the parents. The focus was on the parents in their natural setting, their perception of their world as they define it, “what was important to them, why they say and do what they do and what structural or contextual features influence their thoughts, behaviors and relationships” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 85). The researcher tried to see their reality through their eyes and present a clear understanding of

*why* they were choosing to leave traditional public schools; *how* they arrived at their decisions; and, *what* they thought charter schools offered their children that traditional public schools did not.

In Chapter I, four study propositions direct attention to what was examined within the scope of the study in order to understand parents' perceptions and behaviors with regard to their: ideologies, interests, and information sources, and their attitudes toward traditional public schools and charter schools. Probing into the complexities of parental decision-making enabled the researcher to unlock clues for understanding African American parents' decision to choose charters. The researcher viewed the parents and administrators whom she interviewed more as collaborators than simply as respondents because, as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggested, we had to work together to "construct a story and its meaning" (p. vii);

#### *Site Selection and Sampling Logic*

In this study, two schools were investigated. There was no exact way to determine which charter schools in North Carolina would produce the richest sources of data so schools were screened for suitability from the 2004-2005 charter school list provided by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) using the schools' demographics as the primary criterion. Since the goal of the study was to attempt to understand the decisions made by African American parents who were choosing to enroll their children in predominately-segregated charter schools, both of the chosen schools had populations that were 99% to 100% African American.

Other factors were considered as well. It seemed essential to choose schools that were recognized in the community and had established reputations, traditions, and histories. In order for parents to address their experiences with a charter, they had to have had time to develop those experiences. Both of the chosen schools opened in 1997, thus, they had been in operation for at least eight years.

Also, even though both of the schools in the study were located in the city of Durham, it was deemed important to select schools that were situated in totally different

types of neighborhoods in order to attempt to reach a more diverse population. One school was located in the inner city, in an essentially all African American neighborhood and one was located in an affluent, White neighborhood. As Freeman (1999) explains, because of the variation in the social complexion of school districts it is important to consider geographical distribution “to avoid choosing schools that might be embedded in similar class or cultural traditions” (p. 78). Although parents in the study were not limited by districts lines, there were transportation considerations and, as Freeman (1999) points out, where a school is located can influence “who decides to work there and who chooses to attend” (p. 78)

Since the research objective was to try to illuminate the how and why aspects of African American parents’ decision-making at two charter schools without trying to generalize to the total population, a purposeful (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) or “criterion-based” sampling was chosen over random sampling (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 69). “This is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can’t be gotten as well from other sources” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 70). Maxwell (1996) suggests that a

small sample that has been systematically selected for typicality and relative homogeneity provides far more confidence that the conclusions adequately represent the average member of the population than does a sample of the same size that incorporates substantial random or accidental variation (p. 71).

The parents and administrators of the two chosen schools were the unit of analysis. They were the community of interest and comprised a naturally bounded population. According to LeCompte & Preissle (1993), naturally bounded groups are defined by their constituents who presumably share particular behaviors, values, and beliefs.

Schwandt (1997) points out that investigating two sites should suggest some hypotheses applicable to other similar school communities, and studying the population

of two schools in-depth may provide more valid data than researching numerous sites in less depth. Depth is traded for breadth according to Glense (1992) who advises that in-depth understanding comes from spending “extended periods with a few respondents and observation sites” (p. 27). Also, limiting the study to two schools was helpful because there were resource constraints of time and money. Both of the schools in this study were nearly 200 miles from the researcher’s home, which required that she spend nearly four weeks in a hotel while collecting the data.

### *Access and Entry*

Seidman (1991) warns that racial differences and backgrounds can present additional problems, especially to White researchers attempting to establish relationships with African Americans. I was very much aware that I am a White woman seeking entry into two, essentially, all Black schools. However, I have had many very comfortable relationships with African Americans since I was a small child. I have had first hand experiences with them as caregivers, neighbors, friends, clergymen, co-workers, physicians, employees, employers, students, customers, politicians, teachers, and professors; thus, I felt confident that the African American administrators and parents whom I wanted to interview would agree to meet with me and share with me their views and opinions.

I secured the phone numbers for the two schools I had chosen from the DPI list that I mentioned earlier and made my initial contacts with the school secretaries. Some scholars who write about qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glesne, 1992, Krathwohl, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1989) report that gaining access into a school is sometimes quite simple and sometimes not. They agree that it can frequently require ingenuity, patience, and tenacity. The secret, as they communicate it, is to recognize and identify the main “gatekeepers” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 121), befriend them, and seek their cooperation.

Undoubtedly, the main “gatekeeper” at Haven Charter (HC), a K-8<sup>th</sup> school, was the principal’s administrative assistant, Mrs. Hall (names of schools, school personnel,

and parents used in this study are pseudonyms) with whom I spoke the first time I called. At Montana Charter (MC), a K-6<sup>th</sup> school, the secretary referred me to one of the assistant principals, Mrs. Bennett, who turned out to be the main “gatekeeper”. I was able to speak with Mrs. Bennett the first time I called MC, also. Both ladies were most gracious and friendly and both enabled me to speak directly with their principals relatively quickly. Admittedly, this was not accomplished with my first call nor with my second, but, following their suggestions as to when to call back, I was able to speak to both principals within the week and to schedule face-to-face meetings. Bosk (1979) explains that gaining his “initial entrée was a multistage diplomatic problem” (p. 194). Even though I viewed gaining entry as more of an adventure, I did come to understand that “entrance and acceptance are continuous processes” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 256). As I made my way from “gatekeepers” to principals to parents and back again over the course of my fieldwork, I learned that acceptance “must be negotiated anew at each level and with each new informant” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 256).

It was not my intention to schedule an interview during my initial conversation with either principal. I simply wanted to make an appointment to meet with them for a few minutes, introduce myself, explain my study, explain why I wanted to include their school, and ask them to consider my request. I told both principals that I wanted to explore why AA parents were choosing to enroll their children in charter schools. After speaking with HC’s principal, Mr. Denver, for about fifteen minutes he insisted that he wanted to ensure that he would have at least an hour or more to devote to our first meeting/interview so he checked his schedule and added my name to his calendar as we spoke. MC’s principal, Mr. Peek, suggested, during our initial twenty-five minute telephone conversation that I come to his school and spend the day observing and shadowing him. Before we ended our first contact, he checked his schedule and graciously offered a date for my first visit assuring me that I was welcome to spend the entire day. Even though they did not verbalize it, both principals seemed motivated to ensure that my visit to Durham would be productive when I told them that I would be driving up from the coast, about a 400 mile round trip, and would be spending the night

in order to meet with them. Both principals were sent letters to confirm our interview dates and to thank them for agreeing to meet with me.

After meeting with both principals, explaining the purpose of the study, and presenting them with a copy of the informed consent form, both agreed to participate. They both made me feel most welcome. Even though I knew that I would not be able to interview all of the parents in both schools, I suggested to the principals that all parents in both schools be invited to participate. Both principals agreed. I met with Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Hall, advised them that their principals had agreed to let me draft a letter to send home to all of the parents. Following their advice as to the best day to send the letters home in order to get the best possible response, I prepared the letter.

In the letter, parents were offered ten dollars (\$10.00) for participating in a one-hour interview that would take place at the school. They were also informed that a contribution of an additional ten dollars (\$10.00) would be made, in their name, to their child's school library fund. The letter provided a schedule from which parents could choose a specific date and time to be interviewed. Specific weeks, dates, and times in May were identified. In order to assist working parents, interview times were offered from 7:00 am to 6:00 pm, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for two weeks at each school. Parents were asked to include their telephone numbers so that interview appointments could be confirmed. The letter also informed parents that only 20 interviews were going to be scheduled at each school, so they were encouraged to sign and return the letters as soon as possible. As an additional incentive, the letter informed parents those students who returned signed letters, whether parents agreed to an interview or not, would receive a surprise, to be given out by their homeroom teachers, and supplied by me. The final draft of the letter was approved by both principals before it was copied. I prepared both letters, made copies, and delivered the letters to the schools prior to the dates that had been agreed upon by the Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Hall.

Response to the letters at both schools was quite disheartening. At Montana, with a student population of 220, only nine signed letters identifying parents' choices of days and times to be interviewed were returned. At Haven, whose population is 294, zero signed letters were returned—not one, single parent signed up to be interviewed. Mrs.

Bennett and Mrs. Hall assured me that the lack of response was due to many factors. They both explained that many of the parents probably had not taken the time to read the letter because it was so close to the end of the school year. Also, they suggested that the parents may not have attended to the letter because they are very busy due to the fact that the majority of them work; and/or perhaps it was due to the fact that both schools were involved in end of grade testing and the parents were concerned and distracted. They both told me not to worry, that they would make some phone calls and try to fill the interview schedules and they did. They spoke with twenty parents from each school who agreed to a time and a date to be interviewed. Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Bennett provided me with each parent's name and phone number so that I could confirm the appointments. The day before each interview was to take place, I called each prospective interviewee. Of the forty parents scheduled, 37 interviews were confirmed, 3 parents could not be reached despite multiple attempts to confirm or re-schedule. Thirty parents were able to make their scheduled interviews and 3 others rescheduled. Thirty-three parents, two administrators and one assistant administrator were interviewed.

All of the parents whom Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Bennett contacted and who ultimately were interviewed were working parents. In that regard, they could be regarded as typical of the parents at both of the charters in the study because according to Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Bennett, very few of the parents at their schools do not work. Mrs. Hall reported that she used the Parent Teacher Association list as a source for parent participants and simply went down the list and asked parents if they would consider taking part in a study. At MC, Mrs. Bennett had fewer phone calls to make because nine parents responded to the initial letter that was sent home. She reported that she used the school directory and went down the list, calling parents until she found 11 parents who were available and willing to participate.

### *Data Collection Techniques*

In an effort to contribute to the trustworthiness of the data that was collected in this study, complementary multiple-data-collection methods were employed. The data



were collected from documents; from a diverse range of individuals in two different schools, in multiple settings, using individual, in-depth interviews; and from direct and participant observations. The principle of using multiple sources of evidence in order to develop “converging lines of inquiry” (Yin, 1994, p. 93) is identified as triangulation and recommended by many researchers (Denzin, 1970; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1987). Maxwell (1996) explains triangulation as a technique that reduces the possible risk that the resulting conclusions are biased or limited by a specific method, and it enables the researcher to better determine the validity of the study.

### *Documents*

According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), documents help to understand a phenomenon by providing its history and by providing contextual dimensions to the observations and interviews of a study. Some of the documents that were examined for this study included newsletters from individual charter schools, newspaper articles, individual charter school reports, brochures, flyers, reports from the North Carolina Education Alliance, and reports from the North Carolina Office of the Governor – Department of Public Schools.

### *Direct and Participant Observation*

Some of the data I collected for this study were in the form of field notes taken while doing participant observations and direct observations. Field visits to both charter schools created opportunities for direct observations which took place in the schools’ lobbies, halls, classrooms, principals’ offices, secretaries’ offices, bus loading and unloading areas, and in one school’s cafeteria and gym. Yin suggests that when you are able to do fieldwork, when you are able to visit the case study site, “relevant behaviors or environmental conditions will be available for observation and such observations serve as yet another source of evidence in a case study” (Yin, 1994, p. 86).

Yin identifies two types of observation—direct and participant—and then explains that direct observations can be formal or casual in format. He distinguishes one from the other by explaining that when formal observations are taking place they are the

main focus and purpose. Less formal or casual direct observations might occur throughout a field visit, including during interviews. The interview may be the main source of evidence/information at that particular time but information other than that which is being collected through questions and answers is also available through observation.

Yin (1994) defines participant-observations as “a special mode of observation in which you are not merely a passive observer. Instead, you assume a variety of roles within a case study situation” (p. 87). Van Maanen (1988) uses the terms “fieldwork” and “participant-observation” interchangeably. He argues that fieldwork/participant observation is “one answer - some say the best - to the question of how understanding of others, close or distant, is achieved” (p. 73). Schwandt (1997) posits that participant observation “involves entering the world of those one studies, gaining their trust, developing empathy, and understanding their ways of talking about and acting in their world” (p. 111).

In addition to the direct observations that I made, my observations also took on participatory roles at times because of the level of acceptance afforded me by the administrators, teachers, staff, parents and children. When I arrived each morning, while waiting for my interviewees, I frequently greeted and spoke with teachers, staff, parents, and children. Many of the people to whom I spoke did not know who I was or why I was there but they reciprocated warmly. I was very much at ease at both of the schools in my study and I believe I communicated my comfort level by smiling and speaking to the children and adults I encountered. They did not seem surprised to see me at their school and even though some of them looked at me curiously at first (I was a White stranger after all) they smiled back, spoke to me, and made me feel welcome. After seeing me in and around the building for a few hours, then a few days, then a couple of weeks, they came to recognize me and seemed very comfortable talking with me freely, asking me my name, and chatting with me about school, lunch, and whatever else was on their minds.

At MC before school care was provided so sometimes as many as ten children arrived as early as 6:30 am. Since I generally arrived at MC around 6:45 am I was able to

spend time talking with the children and their caregiver before my appointments began. Later in the day, at MC, if a child came to the front desk while I was there and needed a band-aid or was upset and seemed to need comforting, I was happy to oblige. One child, a first grader, at MC who was a frequent visitor to the front desk because of behavior problems knew me by name and I his. He and I talked about the general difficulties of school and the need to try to do our best and especially to co-operate.

While shadowing Mr. Peek at MC I was immersed in what he called a “typical day”. Following Mr. Peek’s lead, I met all of the school buses and cars as they arrived, and greeted the drivers, children, and parents as they arrived. I shadowed Mr. Peek as he visited classrooms, spoke at a weekly breakfast meeting, and generally made his way around the school (rarely stopping to sit down). Mr. Peek was in the process of doing annual teacher evaluations on one of the days I was present. He and I visited four classrooms for at least 45 minutes each and at the end of the day he met with the teachers to present feedback. I was invited to attend the feedback sessions, also, and I did.

Mr. Denver, the principal at HC, took me on a tour of his school and introduced me to teachers, staff members, parent volunteers, and students. He made it clear that I was free to explore the school, to sit in on classes, and to talk to anyone on campus. Because I visited both schools spending eight to nine hours each day over a period of nearly three weeks, many teachers and students came to recognize me and became more comfortable speaking with me. As they became more relaxed with my presence, students would inquire as to why I was there and would chat with me about their teachers, their classes, their school, their day. During their breaks or after school, in the hall or near the front desk, teachers and I would chat about the school and the students – good and bad - and why they wanted to teach at a charter school. Field notes and/or memos of these informal encounters were recorded either as we spoke or immediately there after.

Both direct and participatory observations are examples of data gathering done in the field that enable the researcher to “capture what is significant in descriptive field notes and memos that form the basis for coding and analysis” (Kratwohl, 1998, p. 248). As Feldman (1999) suggests, “the field notes that accrue from these activities can serve as important pieces of evidence to either corroborate or contest what participants have

said in interviews....Furthermore, field notes can be used to document what is not observed, allowing the researcher to ponder the significance of what is absent from a setting” (p.79). I spent a total of over 50 hours at each of the two schools in the study observing either directly or indirectly as a participant.

### *Interviews*

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) view the interviewer as an active participant in the interviewing process which they see as a “social production” in which the “respondents are better seen as narrators or storytellers...Working together, the interviewer and the narrator actively construct a story and its meaning” (p. vii). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used in this study in order to gather data from interviewees in their own words. The interviews were focused around a dozen or so multi-part, open-ended questions (see Interview Guides in appendices) presented in a conversational manner that probed for in-depth responses from each participant (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The goal was to encourage respondents to share their opinions and insights and get their perspectives about events and facts as they see them and not as the researcher views them (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Yin, 1994).

Although the interviews were conducted in ways that allowed the participants to be as comfortable as possible, and elaboration and initiative were encouraged, the interviews were closely guided by the research questions and the overall aim of the study. The set of questions helped to establish effective channels for the direction and scope of the interview and allowed me to give all of my attention to my informants’ commentaries (McCraken, 1988). Before the interviews were initiated, the purpose of the study was made clear to the participants. I told the respondents that the purpose of the study was to try to find out why African American parents were choosing to enroll their children in charter schools. All of the questions that were asked were framed to make their relevance to the research as clear as possible. All respondents signed and were given copies of consent forms.

Yin (1994) endorses the interview as “one of the most important sources of case study information” (p. 85). He suggests that well-informed respondents can provide

valuable insights that can lead to unanticipated sources of evidence and provide prior history of the situation. It is during interviews and “through elicitation and personal interaction [that] the investigator is better able to obtain data addressing the questions asked in the study” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 166).

In this study, 31 individual parent respondents were interviewed, face-to-face, formally for approximately 55 minutes or longer at the school their child(ren) attend(s) in an available classroom, a conference room, or the library (none of which was being used at the time). In an effort to create an atmosphere in which the respondents would feel relaxed and comfortable, the interview location was private and agreed upon beforehand by the respondents. Two parents, who were unable to come to school on their chosen date because of conflicts, agreed to be interviewed by phone for over an hour. Both principals and one assistant principal were interviewed for about an hour and a half in their offices. All interviews, including the ones conducted over the telephone, were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. Two parents were unable to make their appointments because of problems with work or baby-sitters. They declined attempts to re-schedule. Two people, who did not show up for their scheduled appointments, did not respond when I left messages on their voice mail in an effort to re-schedule them. In this study, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with principals at both of the schools, one assistant principal, and 33 parents. A total of 36 of the 42 individuals scheduled for interviews were, in fact, interviewed. When transcribed, the 36 interviews alone yielded nearly 400 pages of text.

The first interview participants were the schools’ two administrators. I interviewed Mr. Peek at MC, in his office, for about an hour and a half beginning at around 4:30 pm. Our interview was the finale that punctuated an entire day of shadowing him that had begun at 7:15 am. (Early into the day I wished I had not worn high heels.). HC’s principal, Mr. Denver, and I met in the morning for about two hours. After the interview he gave me a tour of the school taking time to introduce me to teachers, staff members, parent volunteers, and students. Both principals agreed to be audio-taped and both agreed to my taking field notes. Both principals made it clear that I was welcome to

explore their schools, to observe, and to speak with any and all personnel. They seemed proud of their schools and of what they were trying to accomplish.

I was delighted but not really surprised that the respondents whom I interviewed were willing and eager to speak with me and share their views on charter schools, their educational experiences and those of their child(ren), and their expectations and perspectives. Even the ones who seemed hesitant at first opened up and spoke candidly about their reasons for choosing a charter school. During the “get acquainted” phase of the interview two mothers shared experiences of the murder and death of their husbands, the effect of their loss on them and their children, and the support they and their children get from their charter schools. All of the respondents shared stories of positive and negative experiences they and their child(ren) had had at other schools and were having at their present charter school. All of them shared their hopes and dreams for their children and their determination to ensure that their children have the best possible learning opportunity available. We laughed and we cried together. The interviews proved to be very informative since I was interested in obtaining educational histories of the students and the factors that prompted their parents to enroll them in a charter.

It was important to this study to explore possible patterns of shared interests, ideologies, and sources of information parents depend upon and to try to understand parents’ disillusionment (if any) with the traditional public schools they had left.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis is a process of systematically sorting, organizing, synthesizing, and arranging data that has been collected in order to be able to present what has been discovered to others. “Sorting and organizing requires comparing, contrasting, and labeling the data”; the goal—to bring some semblance of order to the “largely undifferentiated mass of data that has been generated from observations and interviews” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 4). Broken down into stages, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) suggest analysis can be “conceptually manageable as well as mechanically feasible” (p. 146). One of the problems in qualitative, descriptively oriented research – “the major problem”,

according to Wolcott (2001) “is not to *get* but to get *rid* of data” (p. 19). The potential for data overload requires constant decision making about data not worth entering in the first place.

At its most basic level, analysis actually began during the early stages of this study when I began sorting through the list of charter schools provided by the DPI to select the schools to be included. According to Glesne (1992), analysis is not a stage in the research process but rather a continuous process that should begin as soon as the research begins. Glesne posits that during the first interviews and observations, an important act of early analysis is listening analytically. Analytical listening not only enables the researcher to develop new questions but also prepares her for the real task of analysis that comes at the end of the collection process (Glesne, 1992). In this study, analysis operated concurrently and in a systematic manner with data collection. The sorting, organizing, and coding occurred throughout the life of the study (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

The task of inspecting, categorizing, and coding the evidence was shaped by the propositions that directed the study as described in Chapter One and by the literature review in Chapter Two. Yin (1994) suggests that this theoretical approach to case study analysis is preferable to other techniques because it helps focus attention to data that is pertinent, while ignoring irrelevant data. The effect of focusing, a form of pre-analysis, is useful as anticipatory data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Using a cross-case analysis, the answers from different people to common questions asked during standardized open-ended interviews were grouped together. The analysis began with a sorting and tentative coding of the variations in answers (Patton, 1990) as they were collected using a specific analytic technique Yin (1994) identifies as “pattern matching logic”. The goal of this strategy is to analyze data “by building an explanation about the case” (Yin, 1994, p. 110). The concern of the analysis is the degree to which a pattern matches the predicted ones.

The final step in the analysis included solid descriptive data that Patton (1990) advises must come first in the report and be presented in such a way that readers can “understand and draw their own interpretations” (p. 375). Geertz (1973) insists that thick

description *is* ethnography, and by providing it the researcher generates interpretations which enable the reader to “clarify what goes on...to reduce the puzzlement” of events, settings, people, and situations (p.16). Thick description in a case study serves the same purpose. As Geertz points out, thick description makes the researcher’s account of what has been observed more believable and takes the reader into the heart of what is being interpreted. Geertz (1973) contends that the goal of thick description is to “draw large conclusions from small, but densely textured facts” (p. 28).

Analysis was not considered complete until all the data had been accounted for. In an effort to insure that the analysis is of the highest quality, all relevant evidence was examined. The analysis sought to show that as much relevant evidence as was available was examined (Yin, 1994). I constructed answers to my questions from the data that were collected, analyzed it inductively, and provided a detailed rendering of the events in my final report.

### *Trustworthiness of the Study*

All research seeks to rise to the level of trustworthiness and should be able to “withstand interrogation as to the soundness of the findings and conclusions” (Freeman, 1999, p. 84). Validity and reliability are commonly used standards against which to judge quality in both quantitative and qualitative work, but Ely (1991) argues that they are “conceived of and arrived at in different ways” by the two different approaches (p. 94). Creswell (2003) agrees and asserts that in qualitative work, “validity does not carry the same connotations as it does in quantitative research, nor is it the companion of reliability or generalizability” (p. 1995). Krathwohl (1998) argues, however, that even though validity and reliability are viewed differently in the qualitative approach, they are not totally lacking “therefore qualitative researchers cannot escape quality judgments whether or not they subscribe to standards” (p. 336).

In an effort to adapt and supplement criteria common to quantitative research to fit qualitative methods and data, Lincoln and Guba (1995) have identified parallel terms describing quantitative research (on the left) and qualitative research (on the right):



Scientific rigor	Trustworthiness
Internal validity	Credibility
External validity	Transferability
Reliability	Dependability
Objectivity	Confirmability

They contend that four of the criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) when collectively combined can determine the trustworthiness of a naturalistic investigation and its findings.

Krathwohl suggests trustworthiness, or scientific rigor, comes from the details—the dense data that makes the study come alive. Details about research methods—appropriateness of collecting, assembling, analyzing, and processing the data; the path connecting the researcher to the information and the resulting interpretations; anything and everything that would help someone trying to replicate the study - assures the reader that the researcher made reasonable decisions in carrying out the study. Including details of methods in qualitative work “shows the concern of the researcher with establishing the reader’s trust and with meeting the expectations for rigor in a study contributing to scientific knowledge” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 338).

Four of the criteria and procedures for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative research, established by Lincoln and Guba (1995), are identified and discussed as they apply to the methods used in this study.

### *Credibility*

Credibility, a term used to parallel internal validity, has been identified and discussed by several theorists as important (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 1992; Krathwohl, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Patton, 1990; Rossman & Rallis, 1998), and according to Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998), is “the most important component in establishing the trustworthiness of the results and inferences from qualitative research” (p. 90). Qualitative researchers do not look to experts to determine

the credibility of their studies as do quantitatives, but rather “assess the credibility of their conclusions by making sure that they are credible to those individuals whose multiple realities are reconstructed or described” (Tshakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 70). Several techniques which are recommended by theorists (listed above) for determining credibility were used for this study.

The first technique was prolonged data gathering and persistent observation in the field. Time on task is a major factor in the acquisition of trustworthy data according to Glesne (1992). If considerable time is spent at the research site then there is time to observe what really is going on. Time spent interviewing affords the opportunity to build rapport with respondents and those being observed are less likely to “feign behavior or feel the need to do so” (Glesne, 1992, p. 146). I spent several months gathering data as well as a month, in the field, on site, spending nearly two weeks at each school focusing on the setting and the participants. I had time to notice significant details, collect field notes, make memos, and try to develop an understanding of the people and the climate at each school. I had time to conduct formal, in-depth interviews with administrators and parents and time to chat informally with administrators, parents, teachers, children, and staff throughout both schools. The considerable time that I spent at each school enabled me to build rapport with the people I found there and assisted me in conveying my findings in my final report.

The second technique I used was triangulation, which is the use of multiple data collection methods and data sources: methodological triangulation and data triangulation. This study combined direct and indirect, formal and informal observations conducted in both schools in various settings; in-depth interviews - both formal and informal – with a range of respondents; and document review. The work of Patton (1990) has led to the popularization of the use of multiple qualitative techniques in the same study. He has written extensively about triangulating multiple qualitative data sources and posits that the multi-method approach to research is superior to the mono-method. Yin (1994) asserts that with triangulation “multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon” and the “corroboration of facts is achieved” (p. 92). Without triangulation, Yin (1994) insists, “converging lines of inquiry may be lost” (p.

92). Maxwell (1996) contends that “triangulation of observations and interviews can provide a more complete and accurate account than either could alone” (p. 76). Others suggest that triangulation not only checks whether inferences are valid, but also helps to discover which inferences are valid (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p.200).

Member checking, a process that involved soliciting feedback from respondents, was the third technique that I used. Member checking is used to confirm and corroborate the investigators’ findings and is considered the most crucial, the most important credibility check used to test the authenticity of data (Krathwohl, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). All methods are vulnerable to self-report bias (Maxwell, 1996), thus being conscious of their fallibility, it is important to work toward ensuring that the information that is collected is credible. According to Maxwell (1996), “the main threat to valid description is...the inaccuracy or incompleteness of the data (p. 89). Therefore, through member checks, if participants agree with the interpretations of the investigator as she reports them, then the process provides further evidence for the credibility of the results.

In this study, while in draft form, copies of specific sections of my report were mailed to the respondents from whom the data were originally collected: two principals, an assistant principal, and 33 parents. All participants were encouraged to read my account, challenge what they found there, and add any additional information that they felt would assist me in understanding their perspectives. Each respondent was provided with a stamped, self-addressed envelope with which to reply. As Schwandt (1997) explains, member checking is more than a “simple corroboration or act of validation by respondents; member checking seems but one more opportunity to gather data about the integrity of the inquirer’s findings” (p. 89). By providing all respondents with an opportunity to express their agreement or disagreement with my interpretations and conclusions, I hoped that any assertions as to investigator misrepresentation would be quieted.

### *Transferability*

Transferability is a term used as a parallel to external validity by Lincoln and Guba (1995) and as a synonym for generalizability by other researchers (Krathwohl, 1998; Schwandt, 1997; Yin, 1994). According to Schwandt (1997) trying to generalize findings can be problematic with qualitative research. External validity (transferability or generalizability) “involves a conceptual leap from the evidence of one study to similar situations. Although this leap occurs in all research, the limited and selective nature of qualitative evidence makes it more speculative” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 343).

Qualitative research focuses on and yields knowledge of particulars which are considered in their own right. According to Schwandt (1997) some qualitative researchers attempt to reconcile the importance of understanding the specific with the idea of generalization by arguing for transferability as Lincoln and Guba (1995) have done. Some argue that transferability can be achieved through the collection of “rich” data (Maxwell, 1996, p. 95) and the development of “thick description”—an idea coined by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) and applied to ethnographic research by Clifford Geertz (1973). “Rich” data and “thick” description both describe data and descriptions that are “detailed and complete enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 95). Schwandt (1997) argues that to “thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode” (p. 161). Marshall and Rossman (1995) insist that triangulating multiple sources of data “can enhance a study’s generalizability” and that the use of “more than one data gathering method can greatly strengthen the study’s usefulness for other settings” (p.144).

The collection of rich data, the development of thick description, and triangulation are used to assist readers in forming their own opinions about the transferability of research findings from this study. I collected detailed and complete information and developed a thick description of what was going on in both schools. My goal was to provide understanding and insight into the schools, their climate, and the people I found there. Data was collected from the administrators’ perspectives and from

the perspective of each parent through formal, in-depth interviews and through informal interviews. Data was collected informally from conversations with teachers and staff. All formal interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Detailed, descriptive field notes taken during observations recorded specific, concrete events that I observed. I explained the triangulating techniques I used for this study earlier in this section so I will not repeat them here.

Marshall & Rossman (1995) insist that the transferability or “the burden of demonstrating the applicability of one set of findings to another context rests more with the investigator who would make that transfer than with the original investigator” (p. 143). I cannot determine, in advance, what the transferability of my study will be or even if there is a basis for transferability from the information included in this study. That will have to be decided by the reader.

### *Dependability*

Dependability is the third construct Lincoln and Guba (1986) identify as a criterion for judging the quality—the trustworthiness—of qualitative inquiry. They suggest that dependability is parallel to what quantitative researchers identify as reliability. Marshall and Rossman (1995) question the “notion” of dependability/reliability as it relates to qualitative research because reliability concerns itself with replication which they argue is “problematic” to qualitative/interpretive studies. In fact, they insist that “qualitative research does not pretend to be replicable” (p. 146). They argue, “Positivist notions of reliability assume an unchanging universe where inquiry could, quite logically, be replicated. This assumption of an unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the qualitative/interpretive assumption that the social world is always being constructed” (p. 145).

Schwandt (1997) reports that qualitative researchers seem to be “divided as to whether this criterion [reliability] has any meaning whatsoever in judging the accuracy of fieldwork accounts” (p. 137). Creswell (1998) contends that reliability plays only a minor role in qualitative inquiry. Apparently, Sanjek (1990) questions reliability as a criterion for assessing qualitative work because he insists that qualitative fieldwork is primarily

concerned with accurate descriptions of human action which he argues can be established without recourse to establishing the replicability of the account.

On the other side of the argument, Kirk & Miller (1986) declare that if a qualitative study seeks to satisfy the dependability/reliability criterion, “it is incumbent on the scientific investigator to document his or her procedure” (p.72). Silverman (1993) seems to agree because he insists that reliability can and must be addressed in fieldwork if the investigator uses conventional methods for recording field notes and for analyzing transcripts.

Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggest the need for an external audit of the “process of the inquiry” to determine dependability/ reliability (p. 77). The audit would determine if the findings of the study can be confirmed by someone other than the researcher by examining the process. In an effort toward establishing dependability, I sought to develop a sound rationale for the methods I used and I based my findings on data that were collected through established, conventional methods and procedures identified as appropriate for qualitative research. I offered a rationale for the use of qualitative methods and I explicated, in detail, my methods for: gaining entry, managing the roles of observer and participant observer, data collection, recording; and analysis. I also offered a description of how the sites and sample were selected. In addition, data are preserved and available for reanalysis. As Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggest, these steps allow others to challenge or reanalyze the data and to inspect my “procedures, protocols, and decisions” (p. 146) – the process of my inquiry.

### *Confirmability*

The final construct, confirmability, is parallel to objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) and asks whether the findings, the interpretations, the conclusions of a study are confirmed by the data and can be judged objective or neutral. Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggest an external audit of the product (data and reconstructions) as a technique to determine if the study has confirmability. Marshall and Rossman (1995) posit that confirmability lies in the data, also. They ask, “Do the data help confirm the general

findings and lead to the implications” (p. 145)? Essentially, all four theorists suggest that the burden of confirmability rests on the data themselves.

Schwandt (1997) explains that confirmability is “concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry are not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (p. 164). It requires linking assertions, findings, and interpretations to the data themselves. The procedure that is recommended to meet this criterion is auditing, which is also the same procedure that was suggested for dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). The audit concerns the product of the inquiry.

### *Delimitations and Limitations of the Study*

This study confined itself to interviewing and observing administrators and parents at two charter schools in Durham, North Carolina, whose populations were 99%-100% African American. This purposive sampling procedure decreased the generalizability of findings.

According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) using interviews as a method of data collection has disadvantages. They posit that the interviewer can unknowingly affect the responses of the interviewees through “gestures, mannerism, or verbal feedback” (p.102). Further, they contend that when the researcher and the interviewer are one and the same, there is a possibility that the interviewees can detect “subtle signs of agreement with statements and/or responses that are anticipated” (p.102). Crewell (2003) concurs and suggests the researcher’s presence may bias responses.

Observations and/or participant observations (see p. 186 Creswell) can present problems if the researcher is seen as intrusive. “The influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” generally known as reactivity, can also be a problem (Maxwell, 1996, p.91). Boglan and Biklan (1982) warn that it is sometimes difficult to “counteract subjects’ potentially stereotypical views of you” and that, “race, sex, age, and other characteristics may influence the rapport you establish” (p. 138). It is important to be aware of this influence and, since it cannot be eliminated, to use it productively. Maxwell suggests using open-ended questions and avoiding the use of leading questions.

I was very much aware of the effect I could have on each of the respondents by the personal characteristics I brought to the interview. With each new respondent I tried to create a relaxed, safe, non-judgmental environment in which s/he was assured of anonymity and felt free to answer open-ended questions from his/her own perspective and experience without fear of criticism or reprisal.

### *Ethical Concerns*

This study posed little, if any, risk to the respondents at either of the two schools involved since all participants responded anonymously and because the focus of the study was on their opinion of why they have chosen to leave traditional public schools and how they arrived at their decision. The school administrators might have perceived the study to be a faultfinder and they might have felt that they were at risk because they might have felt that the study was examining those qualities which attracted families to their schools. Parents might also have felt at risk because they might have felt that the study was questioning their judgment in placing their children in, as yet, unproven charter schools. Issues of possible concern were addressed with all participants prior to each interview.

All participant confidentiality concerns were addressed and all reasonable steps to allay those concerns were taken. Confidentiality in the contexts of interviews, observations, analysis, and dissemination was maintained to ensure that all participants' identities were protected. It was assured in writing that the goal of this study was to protect each and every participant from all possible harm. These documents were made available to each research participant.

A sincere effort was made to be as accurate and unbiased as possible in the interpretations of all notes. Since the goal was to understand the people who were being interviewed and observed, I listened closely to the interviewees. I tried to understand their perspectives and the meaning they attached to their words and actions (Maxwell, 1996). In a sincere attempt to avoid researcher bias, the data that was collected was reviewed multiple times, the tapes were listened to multiple times, and the sites were visited and revisited. The goal was to avoid selecting data that fit any preconceived ideas



or theories that I might hold and to avoid imposing my personal values on the conduct and the conclusion of the study. Further, respondents in this study were asked to check and confirm or deny my interpretations of the data. Respondents were mailed copies of the transcriptions of their interviews and a draft of the summary of the research. They were encouraged to respond via stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Their agreement provides evidence for the credibility of my results (Tashakkori & Geddlie, 1998). It is hoped that this research will be informative and will reflect my integrity.

## Chapter IV

### Presentation and Analysis of the Data

This chapter reports on the data from the interviews and, to a lesser degree, on observations of the study participants and on information drawn from an examination of relevant documents. It is arranged according to two levels within the two charter schools—administrators and parents. Administrators provided their view of their charter schools as they see them and their views of traditional public schools (TPS) identifying the factors that they have determined motivated parents to exit TPS and enroll their children in charters. Parents’ “shared perspectives—their collective standpoint—[which] offers the most important implications about the nature of the educational marketplace and school choice policies” are presented (Cooper, 2005, p.181). Verbatim interviews with administrators and parents are reported; keeping in mind that, as Silverman (1993) has suggested, interview responses need not be heard as “simply true or false reports on reality...instead, we can treat such responses as displays of perspectives” (p. 107). Documents provide historical and demographic information and serve to corroborate observations and interviews and/or to raise questions.

This chapter provides an account of how parents’ interests, ideologies, information, and their perception of charter schools as compared to their perception of traditional public schools affect their decisions. Weiss’s (1995) “4 I’s” framework for understanding decision-making was used to analyze their responses. To reiterate, the purpose of this study was to analyze African American parent decision-making in an attempt to determine the factors affecting their choice of charter schools over traditional public schools. Two questions were posed by the study: Why are African American parents, in unexpected numbers, choosing to leave traditional, integrated public schools to attend largely segregated charters; and, how did they arrive at their decision?

Propositions that were examined during the course of the study in order to answer the how and why questions are:

1. Parents may be choosing charter schools because of their particular *interests* – self- interests and incentives.
2. Parents may be choosing charters because of their *ideologies*; perhaps a change in ideologies, the renewal of old ideologies, or the development of new ones.
3. New *information* may be affecting parents’ decisions.
4. Parents’ perception of the *institutional* setting of the charter school they have chosen in comparison to the traditional public schools they have left may be affecting their decisions.

Stake (1995) suggests that when reporting a case study, an early vignette enables the reader to immediately start to develop a “vicarious experience, to get the feel of the place and the time” that the study is attempting to portray (p. 130). To that end, the following vignettes are presented. They offer a window into Montana Charter and Haven Charter from the viewpoint of two parents as they explain some of the reasons they have for choosing charters schools.

#### *Vignettes from Parent Interviews*

##### *Vignette 1*

*Mrs. A3*

*Mother of Two at Montana Charter (MC) - Suburban K-6<sup>th</sup> Charter, 99.9% African American Student Body in predominately White, Durham, NC neighborhood*

“I was totally disappointed with the public school system. Not just for my children but with experiences with my nephews and nieces. It was just a horrible experience for my son. He has always been above average or a grade level ahead even in [traditional] public school. Nevertheless, because they [teachers in traditional public school] did not challenge him, he totally became lazy.

You know, I even went to [son’s traditional public] school back in October because...my son didn’t have any behavior problems or anything like that...he’s actually a model student at MC and he was also at private school...I tried to talk to the principal.

I tried to talk to the teacher. I mean, I didn't even find out about AIG (Academically Gifted) class although we had gone to several PTA meetings. We didn't even find out about AIG until Christmas. But when I went to them in October, you know, their attitude was, "We have one curriculum." Their thing was, "Either put him up a grade or he's going to sit here in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and just be here."

After my husband and I decided we didn't want to put him up a grade - we wanted him to be with peers his own age - the principal actually told me about AIG. The teacher didn't tell me anything. And this was right before Christmas and they still did not even test him for AIG until February. The school year was over. He wasted a whole year and just got lazy.

I don't want to talk bad about the public school system but just saying...the focus at [my son's] public school was order and not academics...It was more trying to have a controlled environment. I understand that they have to have control to teach in order for children to learn but it [public school] was more of a behavior based school than an academics based school....going from a private school and seeing what they had to offer versus public school...I kind of wanted to find something in between because private school cost so much but I wanted to give my children that education and safety and...you know....the whole concept of promoting excellence and being successful in life. I wanted a school that instilled values.

Public schools, to me, have a curriculum and they just go with the curriculum. I don't feel that they go the extra mile. They don't go outside of the curriculum to promote any kind of personal growth. My main concerns for my children are academics and safety. Academics, safety and self-esteem are the focus of MC. They make sure that the children get what they need. They also help build up their self-esteem.

The main thing that I heard about MC was that if they [students] were behind when they got to MC, the school gave them that tutoring and the educational help that they needed.

Keeping the parent informed and involved is important. They [teachers at MC] tell you what you can do to help your child. They send home a packet of information,

work, reading lists, and summer programs. They [school faculty] say that they [the children] are out of school but we still want them to learn.

Just because you're out of school they [teachers] don't want you to forget anything. They'll send home a packet of information to prepare them [the children] for the following year and they refer you to different summer programs. They take a personal interest in every child. The teachers are very dedicated. They get upset if your child doesn't excel.

I'm blessed. I feel lucky that I can go to work everyday and feel comfortable that my children are getting what they need at MC school. I have no desire for my children to go back to public school at all."

*Vignette 2*

*Mrs. B2*

*Mother of Three - Haven Charter (HC) - Inner-city K-7<sup>th</sup> Charter, 100% African American Student Body in a predominately African American neighborhood*

"My [oldest] son [a rising 8<sup>th</sup> grader] goes to public [middle] school because of football. HC has basketball, track, and soccer but not football. [I'm] not too happy with [oldest son's] school because there is a lot of gang activity associated with his school. I tolerate the [public] school my daughter [a rising junior] attends because my husband is there with her.

Actually, on the 6 o'clock news last night they did a whole special about parents and the task force for gang activities through the Durham Police Department. A whole special about why kids join the gangs, gang signs, what parents are to look out for. How to tell if your child's associated with a gang.

It's scary. It is very, very, scary. There *are* gangs in schools [in Durham]. Different gangs, various gangs. The majority of the gangs are among the African American young men and with the rising numbers of Hispanic population, you see Hispanic gangs now coming.

At [daughter's high] school some girls are in the gangs. They have resource [police] officers that stay there the whole day. I'm talking maybe five or 6 officers. They do other programs like character ed. and the Dare Program.

[Youngest son, a rising 3<sup>rd</sup> grader] has been here [at HC] since first grade. He did Kindergarten (K) in public school. We moved him because there were 32 kids in his K class. She [K teacher] had a TA [teacher's assistant] that floated between five K classes.

[Youngest son] is at HC because the classes are smaller, the curriculum, and mainly his teacher is able to do more one-on-one with him. It's safer. For one thing there are not as many kids as are in a public school.

They [the public school] had a lot of good teachers that our kids really, really loved, but I'm a firm advocate that a child's behavior starts at home. It's a parent's responsibility for teaching a child how to act not the teacher's and my husband and I have always taught our children, just like our grandmothers taught us, "You do not misbehave in school. You go there to learn."

The majority [of the parents] come [to HC] because their children have had problems in public school. I think a large majority of them think their child has been disenfranchised at the public school...has been neglected...because they are African American. A large majority of them feel their child was targeted – labeled – because they are African American. And because of their behavior they were stereotyped as a child that creates problems – not able to learn – goes to the next teacher – they hear stories – the new teacher automatically assumes – okay, something's wrong – this child is going to be a problem to me.

[Parents come to HC] hoping this will be a place for a new start. Sometimes it is. One of the things Mr. Denver [principal] does – that I like - is when school opens, he does not let our teachers look at the cumulative files before they meet the children. I think there are a lot of new starts given here but, then, on the flip side – the cream always rises.

First you've got to start at the home with the parents - the home environment - and then you've got to have...I think it's the *home* environment and *then* the school environment – and in the middle... all the resources that you need to bridge...the student being in the middle – and all three components have to work together.

Most definitely small class sizes, individual attention, the curriculum - are all better [here at HC] than being in a large public school. Most definitely.

[It's good that HC is 100% African American] because so many times as a black culture we box ourselves in. We limit ourselves. So many times we're uncomfortable with the unfamiliar. Just as other people from other cultures are. And here at HC one of the things we try to do is to let our students know that there is life outside of the projects, outside of BET [Black Entertainment Television], outside of food stamps. And our principal tries to enrich our students' lives by taking them to museums and plays; to let them see there's more out there – something to reach for.

I believe all parents want the best for their children and so many of our parents want to give their children the cultural diversities, the experiences, but because of, maybe, lack of funds, time, energy - they're not able to do that. So [here at HC] the school's part is, okay, we can do this for your child. We can take your child to these different places and we can teach your child how to set a table, teach your child manners, teach your child how to shake hands properly, how to address an adult, how to dress properly when they're going out. It all works together in forming a holistic child – an all around child.

It doesn't hurt the school [that it is 100% African American]. However we want diversity because we want to give a real life experience. The world is not all White. It's not all Black.

I don't think that it's fair that a child is left at a school that is not performing well; be made to stay there when there are other opportunities out there that, if given, that child could succeed in another environment. So I think choice is very, very important.

I would vote for vouchers. My ideal school would be a Christian Charter school but they won't let us do that because we're a public school. But they won't put God back in public schools. I remember we had prayer. We opened the day with the pledge, then we had prayer. Every Thursday the Gideons came.

I am re-enrolling [youngest son, a rising 3<sup>rd</sup> grader] for next year. You have to look at each school carefully because there are not so good charter schools just like there

are not so good public schools. And again, I think, the key to a child's success is that parent involvement – number one is the parent factor.

A charter school is always my first choice [if given a voucher and a choice between traditional public, private, or charter schools].”

### *Methodology*

Interviews with key participants were the major source of information. Thirty-six people were interviewed, 34 in-person and two via the telephone. Among the interviewees were 33 parents, two principals, and one assistant principal. In addition to the interviews, telephone conversations with Mr. Stephen Wood, former North Carolina State Representative; Mrs. Lyndalyn Kakadelis, Director of the North Carolina Education Alliance; Mr. David Mills, Educational Consultant for the North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education; and Mr. Matthew Laner, Assistant to the Director of the North Carolina Office of Charter Schools helped to provide background and current information about charter schools and non-public schools in the state. Interview questions may be found in Appendices A and B. Every interview was tape-recorded and transcripts were then made from the tape recordings. Documents were analyzed and were used to support, expand, and/or to question information gleaned from other sources. Parents' interests, ideologies, sources of information, and their perception of charter schools and traditional public schools, as they relate to the decisions they have made and are making were coded, organized, and analyzed using Weiss' "4 I's" (1995) framework for understanding decision making.

### *Local Educational Context*

Durham, both a city and a single-city county in North Carolina with a population of 198,376, is the setting for the educational opportunities from which the parents in this study may choose (US Census Bureau, 2000). Once known as the King of Tobacco, Durham is one part of the three city "Research Triangle", and is now known as the "City



of Medicine” and the “County of MERIT”; an acronym for Medicine, Education, Research, Industry and Technology (“Durham,” 2004). According to the Harold Sun, Durham has earned the County of Merit title partially because it is home to Duke, a world-renowned research university; partially because the largest university-related research park in the world, Research Triangle Park, is located there; and partially because four major science-based diet centers serving over 10,000 people annually from around the world call Durham home.

The racial makeup of the city/county area of Durham is 45.51 % White; 43.81% African American; 8.56% Hispanic/Latino, and 3.64% Asian. Average per capita income for the state of North Carolina is \$28,968; for Durham it is \$22,526. Fifteen per cent of the state’s population lives below the poverty line. Nineteen per-cent of the total population of Durham, under the age of 18, live below the poverty line. Of the 74,981 households in Durham, 21,000 have children under the age of 18 and 15.9% or 11,921 households have single females as the head of the house (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2004).

As explained in Chapter I, the state of NC does not offer vouchers, nor does it have a statewide open enrollment policy at either the interdistrict or intradistrict level, but the traditional public school system in the city/county of Durham has adopted an open enrollment policy. Durham’s policy allows parents to file an application for transfer to schools outside of their attendance zones to the Office of Student Assignments and grants transfers if all students from within the requested school’s zone have been assigned, if there is space available, and if the student has an acceptable record of attendance and behavior from the previous year. If a request is denied, parents may file an appeal to the Superintendent. If the Superintendent denies the appeal, the applicant may appeal to the Board of Education. Students who choose to transfer to schools outside of their assigned attendance zones must apply in writing, between April 1 and June 1, and if accepted, will be notified before July 1. If a transfer is granted, transportation to and from school is the responsibility of the student/family. Durham Public Schools do not provide transportation outside of a program/school’s attendance zone.

In the Durham school district, in the 2004-2005 school year, there were 38,059, K-12 students enrolled in either traditional public, private or charter schools. Of that total, 30,704 attended traditional public schools, 5,515 were enrolled in private schools, and 1,850 attended charters. In the traditional public schools, 59.2% of the student population was African American, 26.55% was White, 11.7% was Hispanic/Latino; 2% was Asian and .2% was Native Americans. Of the 5,515 students enrolled in Durham private schools 79.3% were White, 12.8% were African American, 3.4% were Asian, and 3.2% were Hispanic/Latino. The 1,840 students in Durham's seven charter schools were 76.9% African American; 23% White; 2% Hispanic/Latino; and 1% Asian (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2005).

### *Results/Findings*

The following sections present a description of the two charter schools in this study; the viewpoints of the two principals, and one assistant; and highlight the views of the parents. Specifically, parents were asked to identify the qualities that attracted them to charter schools, to provide their reasons for not choosing a traditional public school, or for choosing to leave a traditional public school. They were asked to explain their feelings about choice in education and about the lack of diversity in the charters they have chosen. Finally, even though I did not pose a direct question with regard to the role parents play in their children's academic success, I have included parents' comments on this topic because many parents passionately shared their convictions/beliefs voluntarily.

### *Description of the Two Charter Schools*

#### Montana Charter

Founded in 1997 – Enrollment 221 – 99.9% African American

Very early one Wednesday morning in May of 2005 when I arrived at Montana Charter (MC) for the first time, I was pleasantly surprised to find a large, single-story,

white stucco building sitting on a hill, surrounded by five acres of mature hardwoods. The building, which had formerly been used as a synagogue, is quite contemporary in design, faces a large paved parking area and looks down on the street below. The school is located in a suburban neighborhood of large homes, on spacious wooded lots on the west side of Durham, near the Duke University campus.

Upon entering the building, I saw a young woman across the lobby seated behind a desk/counter. As I walked over to her, I passed six young children dressed in navy and red uniforms sitting in chairs or lying on a couch. The young woman smiled, and asked if she could help me. I introduced myself and told her that the principal, Mr. Peek, was expecting me at around 7:30. When asked why the children were at school so early, she explained that MC offers before school care to parents who need to drop their children off before going to work. She said that generally there are six to ten children each morning who begin arriving at around 6:30 am. Regular classes begin at 8:00am.

As she attended to the children and/or answered the phone I walked around the lobby and down the nearest hall. There were several display cases in the lobby filled with student projects. Mobiles hung from the ceiling showcasing math projects. A banner hung above the counter where the young woman was working. It proclaimed, "Montana Charter School – Children First – Beginning with the end in mind". A huge bulletin board mounted on a wall opposite the front desk announced: "Raising Reading Achievements in 2005 - 75% of Montana Achievers reading on or above level in May of 2005". Every class in the school had a section on the bulletin board in which teachers had posted a year's worth of book titles read either by or to students. Many of the lists extended above and below the edges of the bulletin board.

Mr. Peek arrived at around 7:00 am, quickly surmised who I was, greeted me with a warm smile, shook my hand with both of his, and invited me into his office. We never sat down, however, because someone alerted him that the buses were arriving. He informed me that 98% of his students arrive by bus and that it was his daily practice to meet and greet all of the students as they disembarked, which he did as I watched.

He greeted them all with a smile, calling many of them by name, asking them, "Are you a leader?" When a young male student (a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grader) got off of one bus

visibly upset, Mr. Peek told him, “Stand here with me. Don’t give up. Stay here with me.” After all of the other students had entered the building, Mr. Peek asked the student why he was upset. They discussed an incident on the bus, Mr. Peek encouraged him to let it go, and to focus on the day ahead. Mr. Peek hugged him, patted him on the back, took him by the hand, and the three of us entered the building. The young boy smiled at me as he looked back over his shoulder.

As explained earlier in Chapter III, Mr. Peek was on his feet and in motion throughout every day during the two-week period that I was on site at MC. He was available in his office; visible in classrooms, in the halls, or in the cafeteria; participating in meetings concerning students; and/or meeting with parents, teachers, and/or students. He greeted the teachers, the parents, and the students with a gregarious smile and always with a positive comment. When he was called to his office to speak with a student who was having a discipline problem, his words were firm but at the same time positive and hopeful. Even when he suspended a student for injuring another student, he spoke encouragingly, advising the student to keep up his studies, to read, and to prepare to return and be a “leader”.

*Mr. Peek says, “It’s all about the children.”*

*A former administrator in Durham traditional public schools for 25 years  
In 2004-2005 - Serving his first year as principal of Montana Charter, K-6<sup>th</sup>  
His Verbatim View of Charter Schools and Why Parents Are Choosing Charters*

“The number one difference (between charters and traditional schools) is...we don’t have the hierarchy...the bureaucratic review for decision making, for resource identification and mobilization. You don’t have to jump through 2, 4, 5 layers of bureaucracy. Our board speaks directly to me. I call them on the phone. I have to utilize my background and resources and the staff here to keep the school afloat. The joy is that when you have the resources and you know the community, you can cut to the chase and you can orchestrate stuff expeditiously. So I love it because I don’t have to talk to a whole bunch of folks to get something done.

The other unique piece is that it's small enough that you can see everybody each day that you're here. All of the children I should be able to face everyday. All of the teachers I should be able to see every day and they should see me as somebody that's up in the front office that they can call on. So you have a personal relationship with them.

It's important because we want the children to maximize the learning environment. The best part is the relationship that they have with the facilitators of learning and the folks that have their care and custody. If you want to reach children whether they are academically gifted or whether they are struggling academically, you must have a relationship with them.

They [the children] have to feel like somebody welcomes them to school; that somebody cares about them and recognizes them as somebody. My day is incomplete if I don't get a chance to see the youngsters. I will neglect the adults in the building before - rain, shine, sleet, or snow - I have to be at the door when they come in. It's all about the children. [After school] I don't want the busses to roll if I'm not there. I ride the buses at the beginning of the year. Yes, I ride every bus, go to every stop the first week of school every day until I get to know the youngsters and they get to know me. I tell them, I've been to your house. It's important because youngsters need to know that I know where they live even if I don't remember their addresses. I can say and they can say that I've been to their house. I can say to them, do we need to go to your home? Do we *want* to go home? Do I need to take you home? It's the connection that I want the school to have with the home and home to have with the school.

You're unable to do that [in traditional public schools]. I spent enough time in public schools. We were so large. Even if you wanted to do it, it was not manageable and people did not feel comfortable doing it because it did not take on a real sense of connectivity. It was like a façade. It was like an exercise because you didn't get a chance to do everybody. We have 221 students in grades K-6. Next year we want to add 7<sup>th</sup> and the next year 8<sup>th</sup> [but] it is important that we stay small.

[Some say it is more efficient to have a large school]. I think it's more efficient to invest in the youth of today whether it cost us more than we're accustomed to. What motivates me are the youngsters that come and go. I will spend the last dime whether it

is within the budget or outside of the budget to reach a child. I think we should invest in making sure that our youngsters are successful and then evaluate whether it's cost efficient.

I would say that the majority of our population are parents of students who have already had a failed experience in a traditional public school. [The younger ones in Kindergarten] have older siblings or they are looking for an option that does not duplicate what they are familiar with in public schools today and [traditional] public schools get a lot of publicity because there's so much happening. [Traditional public schools] have become a mirror of society. That's the nature of society. So my idea is that when they come to the charter school, they have had a negative experience [in traditional public schools] or they are intimidated by what they believe the experience would be based on the publicity they hear.

And the attraction for us has been the smallness [of our charter school]. Because they feel they can talk to us. Parents feel good. They can call up and ask to speak to the principal. Matter of fact sometimes they want to talk to me even when [the problem] has already been resolved. So that connection and that relationship is a pleasure for the parents. It's a pleasure [for me] to be able to operate in when you've [already] had the traditional experience.

[Parents choose our charter school because] it's the atmosphere. It's the [school] climate. The climate of this school is definitely one of embracing the children. And I've worked diligently to have that be the voice of whatever they hear. I tell parents everywhere I go, the theme that you saw on the banner outside of the school I commissioned, *Children first – beginning with the end in mind*. [That is] the guiding principal by which we come here every day.

I have a philosophy – I've tried my best to do something creative rather than suspend our youngsters from school. We ought to suspend parents from work and let them come to school. As you noticed today, I was saying to the parent, 'I want the two of you to talk about what we need to do to make sure you're successful in school – meaning both the parent *and* the child.' I extend that offer to all the parents before I utilize the power of suspension that I have. I understand that probably better than any single human

being [Mr. Peek served as the hearing officer involved in long-term suspension for the Durham public school system].

Zero tolerance for violence is definitely a policy of mine but it's not one that I practice. I try to evaluate each situation and make the consequences become a learning experience and not condemn the youngster. There in lies the reason that if parents - if they'll join hands with the youngster and we can teach the child - we'll give minimum consequences. Some of them need some visible consequences. My preference is to suspend parents *from work into* schools to take care of their child.

[Parents see and feel academic press at MC?] Oh yes. They [parents] know that we engage the youngsters. Big time. We don't even do half-day school for the last day. But I tell them. I have a slogan, 'There is no vacation from learning.' Learning does not take a vacation.

The [learning] gap [between Black and White children] is created before we get into the learning [school] environment. So if we're going to be honest about it and work diligently at closing it, we're going to have to reach out and embrace the early childhood educational institutions. We need to partner with them. We need *before* school, we need pre-school kinds of readiness assessment and we need to connect with them [pre-school children] prior to them getting to the traditional learning environment. School is not where learning starts. Learning starts at conception.

[Children are making progress here, bringing up their reading and math scores?] Oh yes. All of this is happening because of two things: One – the teaching faculty is here because they want to be here. You don't have to stay here. They don't get tenure here. They don't get all of the benefits. They get one-year contracts here. They're almost "at will" employees. We have to sit down every year – first we ask them if they want to come back. Second, *we* have to endorse them because they continue to enhance our philosophy by reaching children and families and making them successful. You [the teachers] can't sit and relax when you come to MC school. You have to be energized, mobile, and stay the course and I like it like that.

There has to be a match [between the families and the school]. Otherwise the success is minimized. We do embrace the families and once the families come, they see

what we offer and they get a chance to talk about it. Our greatest ambassadors for the school are the parents and children who have already been here. We really struggle with that match – being unified and being connected here at our school.

We realize that parents come here because they want to. We don't have an attendance zone. They choose to come here. So if we don't satisfy their value system – their expectations for learning – they can take them [their children] out – yesterday! One of the things that makes it neat here is that if we don't meet their needs, the values of the family, they don't come back. When they [parents] discover that there is a value conflict [like] when I [suggest, but] can't suspend the parent from work [because they don't want to come], they say, 'I don't have to do this.' Some come with expectations that, 'I will be able to leave my child and I don't have to worry about it.' That's not true.

Disenchantment with the traditional public schools [enabled this charter schools to become established]. I can tell you that categorically. I knew all of the pioneers, the founders of this school in 1996. I also began looking at the erosion of public schools by violence and the response that we [those working in public schools] were making and the alienation of the public and all of the things we started talking about that [traditional] public schools are supposed to represent. Folks were feeling alienated from the school-house and I was participating and seeing that happen.

The immediate community [local people in the community] started three charter schools [at about the same time]. MC was focused on the general population. The founders definitely wanted choice. Choice was the overriding thing more than anything else. In my opinion, it's going to be what sustains us. If we do the right thing for children, parents will be our resource for continued existence. If they can have a voice in what happens to their children, and feel invited to participate in the education of their children, they will stay with us. I never met a parent who didn't want the best for their children. Even when they err in their judgment, I still remind them that I know that they want the best. So we don't condemn them.

We make a concerted effort to have more parental involvement. On their MC family school contract they sign up and agree to spend so many hours a month here at the school on their initial application.



Because we're a Title One Improvement school, all of our teaching staff has to be highly qualified. So we can't do any lateral entry, no initially licensed teachers. That's a state mandate because we get federal funding and under NCLB legislation we're in that Title One Improvement category.

When you get veteran teachers who have 25 years experience and you pay them at the top of the state salary schedule plus the MC supplement, you can make it attractive for folks to come here. If they have something to compare it to, if they've been in public school – once they come here they would never go back.

It is significant [that MC serves primarily African American students] because it has happened. It should not be the driving piece for the school. They are here because they are seeking a better opportunity for themselves. They believe that the opportunity exists because it [MC] has not been contaminated by the institution. [Institution of traditional public school?] Yes.

The impetus [for leaving traditional public schools] may have been because of lack of service but when the option was provided through charter school it was like a Godsend. [They were thinking] we aren't being served but maybe if we go over here [to charter schools], en mass, we can perhaps have influence and have everybody be served.

Yes, that's the operational piece. Matter of fact, I really think the creators of the charter school notion had something else in mind when they thought the option would exist. I don't think it became a reality with the intent that it was given. I'm convinced that it all came about as a compromise to the voucher. Ideas and concepts transcend the institution.

The most powerful piece that these children are going to go away with is that we encourage them to be somebody, and that they are somebody. That's why I spend so much time lifting their spirits. Mine [my job] is to motivate the children and give them hope when there's despair and to embrace them when there's nobody near and to have them to know that somebody's watching them when they think there's nobody.

That's why I have to have something to say to them, 'You're okay,' 'I'm betting on you.' And when I challenge them, I'm always telling them, 'Invest in your education because it pays big dividends.'

I told them at the beginning of the year, when I catch them doing the 5 Ps and they can recite them, ‘Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance’; I will pay them five dollars. I’ll take anybody’s five dollars and give it to a child.

My ultimate dream is to leave a legacy of being a child advocate. The children don’t care if I wore a suit or drove my favorite truck. They just want to know that I care about them and that the hug that I gave them or that moment in time that I listened to them and said, ‘Look, you can do it!’ or ‘Look, go ahead, I’m watching you.’ or ‘Step up to the plate!’

When I give consequences, when I have to put a child out of school, they never get angry with me because before I do that I embrace them enough that they know that it’s the behavior that I’m aiming at. It’s not *you* I’m condemning. I tell the teachers, ‘Don’t attack the child. Make sure you say to them, it’s the behavior that you’re using.’

For 25 years I acted like this in traditional public school. They dispatched me to go out and bring some calmness to the acting out children. Out of that experience I became bigger and stronger. That’s the joy that I get here, now. I get a chance to do something now, *before* I need to correct them.

*Mrs. Babin*

*Parent of two and Assistant Administrator at Montana Charter (MC)*

*Has served in some administrative capacity since MC’s second year*

*Her view of charter schools and why parents are choosing charters*

I have enjoyed every moment of my time at Montana Charter. My children (both of whom attended Montana Charter and are now in traditional public high school) even enjoy coming back now. [I enrolled my two children at Montana Charter even though] my children were successful in public school and were well served even though the classes were large.

[The reason the charter school movement got off the ground in Durham is because] I think that those who were involved in the [traditional public] school system and had older children realized that some needs weren’t being met or saw that the

problem was over- crowding in schools and that's why their needs weren't being met. So perhaps if they started a school, that was a smaller size, individual needs would be met. There would be more successful students. I would say - partly [people were disgruntled]. Nobody had ever heard of charter schools. I studied it and went to the meetings and read up on it.

[Charters] had small classes. It was a great experience [for my children]. They had great teachers. [As a parent] I personally haven't had a bad teacher here. Montana Charter offers an excellent staff, excellent teachers, a standard course of study, plus small class size, and low teacher turnover. 75% [of our teachers] must be certified.

[Parents who send their children to charters are looking for] individual attention, small class size, feeling comfortable about coming into the school. That's another thing that parents have a problem with – a bigger classroom and then some of their education isn't up to par so they kind of feel threatened if they're asked to do things. That's one of my goals here. [I want] to get parents back in school so that they can complete their education.

[Here at Montana Charter] we are much more involved with the parents, the children, and the families, I believe, than public schools. We offer more support. We are very family oriented. The other assistant picks up children if the parents need help getting a child here and I take them home when I'm needed. We provide school busses even though we don't have to provide bus service. We have satellite points where we pick up children.

We believe that all children can learn. We have a reward system. I've seen teachers crying because a student's reading score went up. Teachers get so excited when their students improve. Our teachers are committed.

We advertise on the Channel 8 the free channel, in the newspaper, word of mouth. I visit day care centers and pass out brochures. We invite day care centers to visit. We invite parents each month to come in for breakfast to make them aware of their choices. Charters are a great alternative.

Haven Charter

Founded in 1997 - Enrollment 290 – 100% African American

Well before I arrived at the building that Haven Charter (HC) occupies, I could see its tall steeple in the distance. Welcoming signs and banners on the front lawn confirmed that I was at the right place. The school is housed in a large, traditional style, red brick, former Baptist Church, in a downtown commercial area of Durham. Directional signs lead the way to the office of the secretary (the gatekeeper) Mrs. Hall, who had assisted me in making today's appointment with Mr. Denver, the school principal. Mrs. Hall smiled, greeted me warmly, we exchanged introductions, chatted for a minute, she called Mr. Denver to inform him that I had arrived, and offered me a seat.

As other people entered her office I stepped out into the hall to wait. A large banner hung on the wall just inside the front door opposite Mrs. Hall's office. It read:

Haven Charter

A School of Excellence

Preparing Leaders of Tomorrow

Making Strides in 2004-2005

Reading and Math ARE OUR FOCUS!

Annual Yearly Progress Target

100% Daily Student Attendance

(2003-2004 Daily Student Attendance 94.3%)

100% Parent Involvement

80% Mastery and Passage on the Reading and Math EOG

80% of our Males and Females will read on or above grade level

80% of our Males and Females will pass math on or above grade level

Parents + Teachers = Student Success

I did not wait long for Principal Denver (who greeted me with a smile and ushered me into his large, well-appointed office). We spend a few minutes getting

acquainted, discussing my study, and then we settled into a relaxed conversational mode. Overall the interview was guided by the study questions but Mr. Denver spoke openly and voluntarily of how he thought he had come to be the principal of HC, of his mission, of the legacy of his fourth-grade teacher who had taken him under her wing and inspired him to become a leader. He said, “I was inspired by my fourth-grade teacher who would send her students who were feeling down to a mirror to repeat, ‘Yes, I can!’” She continued to encourage him and to provide him with guidance throughout his elementary, high school and college years.

Mr. Denver and I talked for nearly two hours then he took me on a tour of his school. The former sanctuary provides a large assembly area and there are dozens of classrooms on three different floors that divide the building according to grade levels. As we made our way around the campus we observed some classrooms quietly from the hall and some we entered to watch and listen as the teachers and students continued their lessons, aware of our presence but undisturbed. Mr. Denver introduced me to many teachers and staff; and made it clear that he was glad that I had chosen his school to be part of my study and that I was welcome on campus to speak with parents, teachers, staff and students.

*Mr. Denver believes, “Children have to be loved.”*

*Formerly an administrator at NC Central University for ten years*

*In 2004-2005 - Serving his second year as principal of Haven Charter, K-7<sup>th</sup>*

*His Verbatim View of Charter Schools and Why Parents Are Choosing Charters*

“Being principal of Haven Charter has been the best experience of my life. I love children and I love what we do here as an instructional leader.

These are the breadwinning years when you can mold and shape and sculpt the foundation of every child. This is when you begin to build the architects, the engineers, the language arts teachers, the preachers, the ministers, the nurses – everybody – the missionaries – it all begins here! That’s what we have to do. We don’t want them tainted. We don’t want them poisoned. We want them to be bright citizens of tomorrow.

[Charter schools are special – different - from traditional public school because of] size. We have a 15 to 1 student/teacher ratio...the community...the sense of community – it's *small*. We only have about 300 students here...the one-on-one teaching-learning experience. It's the opportunity for students to be coached in so many different ways. We have only about 35 exceptional children – less than 11% of our population and they get special pullout [instructional time] and inclusion [in the regular classroom]. We mainstream and we pullout for support.

The other thing [about charters] is teachers have the opportunity to develop here. I am superintendent *and* principal. There's no central office. It's good because you don't have to deal with middle management. Teachers *really* make decisions. Teachers are involved around the table. Our teachers are paid more than traditional public school teachers. I show our faculty what the state salary is and [then] this is what we can give you. Ninety-six per cent of our teachers are licensed. The state says that 25% of the teachers in a charter school do not have to be licensed but because we are a Title One [school] our goal is to have 100% licensure.

Teachers do not have tenure here because we're 'at will'. Teachers know they have the same regulations and rules here. It's an advantage. I see us operating as the independent universities do. The 16 universities in the state have autonomy.

We have this type of setting in which we are managed by a board who love and care about and have a passion for education and want to see this school grow beyond its borders. [Traditional public school boards] set policy for an entire school district. They don't actually get to see how a school is run. They hire a management team – a superintendent. The superintendent brings her team in and then they saturate the central office. But look at all of those dollars. Here we're saving the state money. We don't get capital money for buildings.

What I love about charter schools is parents have a right to choose. When parents have a right, this is the greatest thing ever! America does not want to give a voucher system but I believe that this is the voucher. I believe that parents have a right to choose schools that they feel their children can be educated in. They feel a disservice in the traditional setting—that's the reason they come to charter schools. They come to charter

schools because they feel they've been wronged. They feel as though nothing is happening because of the bureaucracy, and they want their child to learn in a small setting.

Now they're talking about re-forming high schools – making them smaller. It's going to happen but we've done so much – built the buildings and they haven't thought about what goes into those buildings and they waste so much money that...they ought to be looking at how we can transform kids in the educational system. We have problems [in education]. I have problems when I constantly see African American children on the bottom – especially the males – in reading. I have problems seeing African American children on the bottom in math.

I explain it [the academic achievement gap] by saying that I don't believe that we have given every ounce of energy to educate ALL children. Children of color have always struggled. I believe it goes back to the civil rights movement. We've never been able to embrace integration in a way that it should have been embraced.

Also, there have not been “like” teachers of color in school settings. We have not done things to attract them to the profession and so that made it difficult; but, I believe if you put sound, good hearted people who can see beyond color [in the classroom] they can teach.

If I begin to segregate you then that's my bias. So now we deal with teacher disposition and look at [the question], “Do teachers understand culture?” Do they understand diversity? Do teachers understand that diversity is more than black and white? Diversity is exposing children to all kinds of culture and life.

And then we have the same with middle class, upper class, lower class and we don't cross. And the moment we cross, we withdraw. I think that's been some of the issues in America.

Also, a lack of understanding; a lack of saying, ‘This is what we need to do for the children to make sure they learn.’ We don't do enough talking. Principals don't talk to principals. Yes, we talk but we don't get a chance to because it's so competitive. [We're all thinking] my school has to be a school of excellence. [Are charter schools competitive?] Oh, gosh! Yes! We don't talk...*sometimes* we don't talk.

Mr. Peek at Montana Charter talks. He came out of traditional public schools. He was a “mender”. He knew how to talk. He knew equality. He crossed all of the barriers. And that’s a good thing and I respect him because he’s older than me - one – but his wisdom and experience are excellent. His attitude is open. You can’t beat it.

The whole issue of parent involvement is a beast that’s hard to tackle. You get clusters of parents. Now, our parents are involved. You get clusters of parents who are so committed. In this setting you still have parents who do not work; but we have young parents here. We have parents who found us, who want to be here and they want to make time to be here. So parent involvement – our goal is to have 100% involvement. We see it increasing every year but again I go back to the issue of exposure and diversity.

Our school is 99.9% African American. Our federal reduced lunch population is probably about 80%. That sends a great message to me to say that these parents are working parents. These parents are not going to be able to be here.

So what we’ve learned to do is to be creative. We try to have quarterly principal breakfasts. We try to send a workshop home with a child, with a note: this is what we’ve discussed, tips for testing, workshop tips on finance. We’ve done workshops on homework, workshops on end-of-grade testing (EOG); anything that builds the life skills of the parents because we know they want it. The role of parenting...we send that home to them just to find ways to get them involved.

They (parents) serve on committees but they also sound tired. But, overall, if we need them they’re here. If something happens in the classroom they’re here. That’s one good thing about charter schools. They [parents] understand discipline. They understand that we are serious about our uniforms. Some child comes out of uniform. We call the parent. We say, ‘Listen, your child is out of uniform – s/he needs to be in uniform.’ They [parents] understand what has to happen in this school. They’re committed to the belief system.

We do a week of orientation so parents can get a chance to walk through the school, visit in the classroom. They have a choice. They can decide to stay here or leave. In Durham [traditional public schools] you attend the school in your district. If you want to transfer to a different school, you have to petition to go outside your district.



HC provides bus transportation. We go to the outskirts of town and they meet on the corners. We pick them up. I feel parents choose us because of our commitment to excellence. Our motto is 'Strive for excellence – why not success!' The sub theme is 'Preparing leaders of tomorrow.' We want to see these kids become like we are – leaders.

I'll never forget when I was in Alan B. Rutherford Elementary school. When we left there we used to hear, 'You can tell that's a Rutherford kid.' We were proud. That's the way we want Haven Charter to be. I got that last night. I went to church last night and one of the church members said, 'I met two of your students; they were so well mannered. I can't remember their names but they spoke highly of you as their principal.' Those are the kinds of things we want to hear.

I think parents are our number one recruiters and when they speak positively about HC and the goodness that it provides to every child – that's the greatest commercial we could ever have. I believe parent plus teacher equals student success. And when we have that, it's a win-win situation.

[Parents are leaving traditional public school because of] dissatisfaction. The children who come here in Kindergarten...never having experienced traditional public schools come here because their parents have a *choice*. They say, 'They've heard good things.' We know that we are a business and we have to have excellent customer service. If you [teachers or staff] are not giving excellent customer service, then we have to ask you to leave.

[Traditional] public schools still function [with the attitude] that, 'We're going to have kids regardless [of customer service]. It's a monopoly. We can't say that. [Is choice a powerful thing?] Oh, yea.

We have to work extremely hard [to close the learning gap between African American and White students] and realize that some of the deficits that we have come to us from traditional [public] schools. With the older children – children who come to us in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, or 7<sup>th</sup> grades – we have to break through those barriers of deficits. Yes, we can [bring those children up to level] with lots of work; lots of coaching and pushing.

We [school administration, teachers, and staff] have set the tone for the culture [of HC] and as we set the tone of the culture, our kids begin to conform to the values established in this school culture.

One of the greatest things that we have here is our students are able to run their own miniature society in which they enforce the culture/values of this school. It's called 'Micro-Society'. We call it universal society. Students lead in the government. They get a chance to hear student cases. They run their own ventures and agencies and earn salaries.

So students get a feel for what the real world functions like and they apply those skills learned in language arts and math in their own ventures and agencies. As we [administrators, teachers, and staff] continue to set the tone they learn how to operate in the society. Within this [school] society we have high values. We respect each other. We don't use profane language. We dress a certain way. We have to look the part and be the part.

I believe we have established a school culture that is open, that is set in tradition but we can think out of the box, too. In our school culture our faculty, our students, our staff have learned that we celebrate our culture and we celebrate every facet of every child to make them proud of whom they are.

We have the court. We have the legislative branch. They get paid. It's really beautiful. It's a miniature society in which students really learn the tools needed in a real world society. Here, we teach students how to engage each other. It's taught.

Here we're small enough that I can get with you and talk to you [the student]. I know the children. I can really talk to them about their attitude and behavior. We have a 98.5% attendance here.

They have to want to be here but first of all we have to want them here. And as we want them here we have to give them a greater appreciation of why they're here. We have to instill in them the values and say. 'You're here because you're the greatest person that could ever walk on this earth.'

[We cannot do this in traditional public school] because we've lost compassion. We've lost that sense of community. In this world, now, some people don't speak to

their neighbors. I happen to know my neighbors. We love each other. But when you don't talk. When you don't have a sense of community – a sense of church – a sense of neighborhood – then you lose it [compassion]. It's lost in [traditional] public school because of the leaders. Leaders have to instill it. And leaders have to embrace and model what they believe.

I believe in love so I'm good at showing love. There's not an ounce that this faculty can't get out of me. I believe in socials and I believe in attending socials. I believe in letting them [faculty and staff] have time to breathe. But, also, when I go to faculty meetings I sometimes fuss but I don't fuss out of dislike. I fuss because I love them and I want them to do well. And I tell them that we have to praise our children.

You have to praise children no matter what. As I praise you. As I give you 'hats off' and 'kudos' that's the same thing you have to do with the children."

#### *Parent/Guardian Participants*

The 33 African American parents/guardians whose views, opinions, and experiences contributed to this study included 27 mothers, 1 father, 1 uncle, 1 great aunt, and 3 grandmothers. They are a diverse group who have decided to take advantage of the opportunity for choice presented to them by charter schools. Four respondents have four-year college degrees, two have associate degrees and two are college students. Fifteen are married, 12 are single parents, 2 are divorced, 3 are widows, and 1 is separated. Thirty of the 33 participants work full time; 2 are full time college students who work part-time; and 1 is retired. Even though it was not the intent of this study to record data concerning the personal characteristics of each interviewee, they frequently volunteered information during the course of our conversations.

#### *Top Five Perceived Values of Charter Schools*

Parents identified many attributes that attracted them to the charter schools they have chosen. Overall, though, size was at the top of most of the parents' lists. Parents

value both small student body populations and small class sizes. The individual attention and instruction that they feel that their children are receiving came in second. Third, parents value loving and caring teachers; high expectations set forth by both teachers and administrators came in fourth; and fifth, parents found value in their charter school's efforts to co-operate with them and consistently communicate with them in a timely manner.

Of the respondents, 87.8 % reported that they were drawn to their particular charter because compared to the TPS that are available in their district it is relatively small and because there are fewer students in each classroom. Twenty-six parents (78.7%) reported that they thought it was the size of the school that enabled the teachers to get to know their children and it was the class size that afforded their children the individual attention and instruction that they want for their children and that they feel their children need. They reported that fewer students per classroom enable teachers to identify each child's individual instructional level and to provide additional assistance as needed. In their own words, 22 of the 33 respondents (66.6%) spoke of how loving and caring the teachers in their charter schools are and how important their nurturing is to the success of their children. Twenty parents (60.6%) felt that the teachers and administrators stress academics, have high expectations of all of the students, and expect all of them to learn at their highest level. Finally, 48.4% of the parents reported that communications are very important to them and that they appreciate the excellent effort their charter schools make to keep them informed about their children –good or bad.

#### *1. Most Valued Attribute of Charter Schools is Size*

The average enrollment in traditional public elementary schools (K-5) in Durham is 518 students. Traditional public middle schools (6th-8th) enroll, on average, 784 students and traditional public high schools average 1,330 (NCDPI, 2004-2005). Both of the charter schools in this study are considerably smaller than their TPS counterparts. Montana Charter, with students in grades K-6<sup>th</sup>, has a student population of 221 and Haven Charter's enrollment is about 290, in grades K-7<sup>th</sup>. Many parents (87.8%) in the study did not want their children in large traditional public schools. Ms. B7's comments

reflect the opinion of the overwhelming majority, “I wanted something better for [two daughters]. They’re very intelligent. I’ve seen a lot of children get lost in the public school system. I wanted a smaller school. I wanted, you know, smaller classrooms. I was looking at sending them to like Duke School for Children or Durham Academy but I’m a single mother and I just couldn’t afford it.” According to Ms. B7, her daughters’ pre-k teacher thought the girls were very capable students and her recommendation to Ms. B7 was, “They really don’t need to go to a public school and if you can’t afford to get them in one of the better [private] schools try the charter schools.” “I was like, all right. I’ll try the charter school.” After having her girls enrolled at HC for seven years Ms. B7 reports, “They were both reading chapter books in Kindergarten. You know I was proud of them. I love this school.”

## *2. Parents Value the Individual Attention and Instruction Afforded by Smaller Classes*

Again, an overwhelming majority of the parents (78.7%) report that they believe their children receive significantly more individual attention and instruction and have a greater chance of succeeding at their charter schools because the classrooms have fewer students in them. Mrs.B4’s comment was, “I love the smallness of the classrooms [at HC] and the attention that the teachers are able to give the students.”

Mrs. A5 reports, “I like the small classes at MC because I feel like teachers have a chance to assess the children a little bit better. She can work with the child at the child’s level as opposed to when there’s a larger class and you [teacher] have to more so concentrate on those who are either cutting up or not doing exactly what they’re supposed to be doing. So you kind of leave the one who does what he’s supposed to all the time off to the side and they kind of get lost a little bit.”

Mrs. B6 had this view, “You have some children – they learn faster than others and then you have some that learn slower than others and if you teach them all on one level, how you expect them – you’re gonna lose some of them along the line.” Ms. A2 agrees and adds that if a student has a problem learning something at MC, “The teachers, they’ll catch it a whole lot faster than they would in a bigger, crowded classroom.”

Mrs. B10 recounts recommending HC to a friend who was looking for a school for her child who was having problems in TPS. She advised her friend that at HC her child “would get the attention that they need;” that the school “would be able to pull up the weak spots and make them stronger.” Ms. A2 whose oldest son attended a TPS before coming to MC believes “It [size] really matters.” She explains, “If your child is in smaller setting he learns more, he grasps, you know, a lot of concepts a lot faster than in a [large] public school. I feel my kids (two boys) are learning a whole lot more being in a charter school – being in a smaller environment. They get more input [from the teacher] than they would in a big school because the teacher has more time, you know, to be with every child.”

Ms. B7, whose two daughters are high achievers, believes that they have done very well during their seven years at HC because of the teachers, the curriculum, and the size of the classes, but she insists, “I think it was a combination of all of that but mainly the small classroom size.” She explains her reasoning by sharing the experiences she and her older sister had in TPS. They were only nine months apart and were in the same classroom from K through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She reports that she excelled academically but her sister, “just kind of slid through. She got lost in the large - 50 students in a class – classrooms. She didn’t graduate. I feel like if she went to a charter school it probably would have helped. She needed more support. She needed more individual attention.” Mrs. B6 believes that at HC the administrators and the teachers “pay attention to each and every child.”

### *3. Parents Believe Teachers and Administrators at Charter Schools Really Care*

Many parents (66.6%) report that the individual teachers and administrators at the two charters in this study are focused on their children’s academic success but even more importantly, parents believe, they genuinely love their children individually. Teachers repeatedly were referred to as loving, caring, wonderful people. Mrs. A13 points out that, “the teachers show them [the students] love – all of them – regardless – whether they’re in their classrooms or not in their classrooms.” She reports that she believes that her daughter’s teachers are truly dedicated to their students. She contends that the teachers

“give them that courage and [the message] we love you, we *want* you to understand.” She says, “the teachers [at MC] love [all of] their children – not just mine. They have a tremendous job. When I first met them [I thought], they’re young, they might not be too good. I was skeptical. [But] they were definitely born to be teachers. They are committed. It’s [MC] really a good school with wonderful teachers.”

Another mother, Mrs. A15, agrees that the teachers care about all of the children at MC, and contends that, “They’re [the teachers] here for the heart of the child and that’s what we need.” Ms. A2 believes that the “teachers care more than in public school because [there are] less children. Around here (MC) everybody knows all the kids by their first names and I think that’s great. If you’re in public school a lot of teachers just say, ‘Hi, how’re you doing?’ They don’t know your first name. But here everybody knows everybody’s name. I think that’s neat! It’s too crowded in public school.”

Mrs. A3 reports that the teachers at MC are “very dedicated. They’re upset if your child doesn’t excel. They take a personal interest in every child.” Mrs. A20 agrees and adds, “I really feel that [caring] here. They really care about the kids. They’re really concerned about them learning.”

One parent, Mrs. B1, conveys that her confidence in the school’s teachers stems from her confidence in Mr. Denver, the principal. Mrs. B1 said, “Everything that’s making the school run rests on the teachers Mr. Denver hires and you already know that he’s a good person so you know he’s going to look into [ask], does he have the best teachers he can have at this school?” Many parents at HC seem to have exceptional confidence and trust in their principal, Mr. Denver. Many comment that Mr. D cares about the whole family and that his caring is quite evident. Parents report that he sets up job fairs to help family member find jobs; he offers GED classes in the evenings; he sends home workshops so that parents who are not available during class time can still participate in their children’s projects; he pays for field trips to enrich the lives of students that include the whole family; and he regularly reaches out to all members of the school family to offer on-the-spot problem solving strategies.

Mrs. B4 asserts that the administration, teachers and staff at HC are “wonderful.” She believes that they “really care about us [parents and students] as a people. We’re not

just a statistic. They're not just using us to get more money. They genuinely, really do care." She declares, "I am so lucky. Sometimes I sit at home and I want to cry. I feel like what my daughter gets here every child should have a chance at." Mrs. B10 concurs and adds, "It's a blessing to have a school like this."

#### 4. *Teachers and Administrators Set High Goals for All Students*

More than half (60%) of the parents in this study repeatedly spoke of the positive attitude teachers and administrators have at both MC and HC and the "can do" message they convey to them and to their children alike. Mrs. B8, grandmother of a little second grade boy in his second year at HC, shared her opinion of her grandson's charter: "I feel like it is a good place because they do set the standards high. They *expect* the children to learn. Sometimes in public school, they don't always get the children to learn, they're just passed on and I really would prefer that he *know*. And I feel like here, before they pass him on, he will know what he needs to know in order to go on."

Mrs. A5, a parent at MC, reports that "[her daughter]'s teacher is good. He seems to be a very challenging teacher because he sees his (students') potential and tries to take them further than the objectives. So I like that."

When asked if she feels that HC has high expectations for its students, Mrs. B10 answered unequivocally, "Of course!" Then she adds, "Especially, Mr. Denver (the principal) because he says everybody is successful and everyone can do it!" She reports that when her oldest daughter came to HC after having had problems in TPS, "They (HC teachers) did not look at the child as if she couldn't do. They looked at the child as if, here we are. We're going to help you learn and we *know* you can learn. It's been great here ever since. She continues to explain why she values HC: "I think education is the most important part of a child's life in order for them to be successful and that's one thing that I know that Mr. Denver (principal) and the rest of his staff are doing - making sure that these kids are prepared for the future."

At MC, Ms. A2 echoes the same perception when asked about teacher and administrator expectations. "Yes," she said, "teachers and administrators set high goals and expect *everyone* to achieve with no excuses."



### *5. Communications Between Parents and Charter Schools Are Better*

Nearly half of the parents (48.4%) emphasize their appreciation of the informative, and timely communications they receive from their children's' charter schools and they report that they feel more involved, have more of a voice, and feel that their opinions and input are valued. At MC, Mrs. A13, reports that her 5<sup>th</sup> grade daughter's teacher "comes to me about everything. He says, 'I need you to talk to [daughter] about this.' Mrs. A3 reports that she feels "keeping the parent informed and involved is important" and that at MC the "teachers tell you what you can do to help your child."

Mrs. A15 feels that communications are better at her son's charter school because "they (the teachers) are taking into consideration what the parents are saying and they're taking into consideration the ability of the child and that's what all parents want."

Mrs. B1 reports that if your child has a problem at school, Mr. D, HC's principal, "stops what he's doing and he listens to your problem. If you have a problem with the teacher, he calls the teacher in [to meet with] himself and you. Yes, Ma'am, it will get solved before you leave."

Mrs. A20, whose third son, a 5<sup>th</sup> grader has been at MC since K, appreciates the efforts the teachers make to keep her informed and emphasizes that, "they'll let you know. They'll call you up, they'll let you know when you come in. They'll stop and talk to you, let you know if there's anything different." She smiles and adds, "They give you good news, [too]. They tell me all the time that he's a sweet boy."

### *Parents' Views of Traditional Public Schools*

All 33 of the parents in this study experienced traditional public schools (TPS) as students during their K-12 years, 31 of whom graduated. Only one parent, a father, attended a Catholic middle and high school. All but nine of the 33 respondents have enrolled one or more of their children in a traditional public school at some time. Currently, seven parents have a total of 12 children enrolled in traditional public schools in grades 8<sup>th</sup> or higher. There is not a charter high school in the Durham area.

All 33 of the parents said that their experiences, as students, with TPS had been positive but many of those same parents report that, as Ms. B1 put it, the TPS “were different then. We didn’t have the problems they’ve got now. The teachers were straightforward. They didn’t play. [Teachers would tell us] you do this, you get in trouble. Some teachers in public school – either they don’t want to do it [discipline the students] or some of them might be too scared of the kids to even chastise them.”

For Mrs. A15, whose only son, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader, had attended a public school during his first three years, the problems at his TPS included the building, the books, fears of violence, and the teachers. She explained that the “school was mostly black and they were lacking in books. Most of the people don’t realize it. They don’t have all the books they need and their building and stuff are not up to par. They have too many clashes with gangs and too many clashes with kids’ discipline. And, I understand, a lot of teachers...are teachers...even though they have their degrees – that’s fine – but our children need teachers who have a love for kids and that’s what people are looking for. We need those who teach for love more than money because kids need love.” She says that if she had left her son in a TPS and had “listened to them, my baby would be on all kinds of medicine, he’d be lost, he’d be labeled.”

Two of the 33 parents said that they were definitely going to return their children to a TPS the following year. One of the two parents, Mr. B3, wanted his son to go to the middle school he had attended because he was still well known there, had enjoyed his years at the school, and thought that his son would have a good experience, too. Also, he added that he felt that HC was not challenging his sixth grade son academically.

Five parents said that they might consider enrolling their children in a TPS in the future if they were ever displeased with their present charter. Two parents were undecided as to whether they would even send their children back to a TPS. Twenty-four parents, 72.7%, reported that they would never send their children back to a TPS again. One parent, Mrs. A6, stated, emphatically, that she would make sure that none of her children or grandchildren would ever go to a TPS again.

Parents voiced their reasons for not wanting their children in TPS. Mrs. B10, whose two older children have had negative experiences in their traditional public

schools, though reticent at first, did admit, that she feels African American children are “treated differently in the public school system.” Mrs. B1 explained, “Too much stuff going on there. I feel like they’re in jail over there. You got the police over there at the door ‘cause kids bring weapons and drugs.” Mrs. B4, whose two older children graduated from traditional public schools insists that her daughter, a 5<sup>th</sup> grader, “Has never been to public school and I’d never put her in one. Even if they was to shut down HC, I’d put her in another charter school. I wouldn’t consider myself a very good mother if I took my child out of this environment and put her in a public school environment. I just have so much faith in this school right now. Why would I take her from what I feel like is a safe environment and put her some where that I know is dangerous?”

Mrs. A15 reports, “I came [to MC] because I was disappointed in the public schools. I felt that they were not giving him [her 3<sup>rd</sup> grader] the proper time to help him. I felt the public school had broken down his confidence and his self-esteem; that they were looking for a way to label him instead of saying all children learn at their own ability.”

Mrs. B10 graduated from high school in ’86 and admits that she had a very positive experience in an integrated TPS in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina where the teachers, both White and Black, “were accepting and they cared and they taught us all. But things have changed.” Mrs. B10’s tone changes as she reports her daughter’s negative experience in a predominately-White TPS in Durham when she moved to the area from Florida five years ago. After hesitating for a moment she said, “Oh God, I really don’t want to pull the racist card” but she admits that she feels that the teachers “thought that [her daughter] was a slow Black child” and that they had low expectations of her because “we were living in a housing project for Black people and they knew what community she came from. So I think they expected her to be slow because of where we were living. The only reason we were living there was because we were new here.” She still seems surprised that the teachers treated her daughter differently because that had not been her personal experience as a Black student in an integrated school in SC; but, she also seems convinced that the teachers did not expect her daughter to do well, thus she did not.

Even though she does not think TPS teachers treated her daughter fairly, Mrs. B10 defends them and with understanding in her voice says, “You know they have a lot to deal with now because society is different, because those kids [in TPS] are so angry. It’s different now.” Even though she has sympathy for TPS teachers, she admits, “I’m afraid now for my teenage daughter for when she has to step into a public school to finish high school. I want to protect her. I wish I could just keep her here at HC forever, really.”

Also, in defense of traditional public schools, Mrs. B4, whose two older children graduated from TPS and whose youngest, a 5<sup>th</sup> grader, has never attended a traditional public school, reports that some parents leave TPS to come to charters “because they blame the [TP] school for their problems. [They claim] when the child fails – the school let’em down.” However, she asks, “How could I blame my child’s failure on the school – totally – if she was to fail?”

#### *Parents’ Views of Choice/Vouchers*

One parent, Mrs. B15 at HC, believes that the best thing about the charter school concept is that “it gives parents a choice to where their children can go [to school].” According to Ms. B1, “Everybody wants choices. It’s mandatory,” she said and if she had a voucher her children would “either be here (at HC) or at a private school.” Given a choice, she said she would never put her two sons back in a TPS.

Mrs. A3, when asked if having a choice is important, responded, “Yes, and charter schools offer you that option. It is so hard to go to a school outside of your district.” If she were provided with a voucher, Mrs. A3 would send her two sons to the largest private school in Durham, Durham Academy. She says the reason she would choose a large private school is because, “I want them to have a diverse setting.”

Before charter schools opened in Durham, Mrs. B10 reports, “I didn’t have a choice.” Mrs. A15 concurs and reports that she felt locked in. She said, “Yes, and I was so hurt. That’s what I like – choice.” And if provided with a voucher she insists that she would keep her only son in a charter school.

Mrs. A13, a divorced mother of three school age children, reports, "I'm going to be honest with you." If given a voucher and the choice between traditional public school, charters, and private schools, "It would be private first. If I couldn't get them in private, it would be charter. Oh, yes," she continued, "with money, that [TPS] would be the last one." She feels strongly that AA parents should be afforded the opportunity to choose. She says, speaking in the third person, "You can't leave'em [AA parents] out. They need to have a choice. They need to have a choice of everything because if they don't then they'll feel like...well, what are we going to accomplish? We don't have a choice. We have to go wherever they want us to go because we don't have a choice about things. So *now* we have a choice and they have these charter schools for AA. Now they can accomplish something. And we've got the one-on-one-teachers. They [the teachers] say, 'Okay, you've got a problem here...you've got a problem...let's work with this and pull this up to where you're supposed to be.' Basically, it's helping. It really is."

Mrs. B 8, a grandmother whose grandson attends HC laments, "I didn't have a choice for my children." She concurs that choice is empowering and admits, "I would have loved to send mine [her two sons] to a private school when they were young but unfortunately I couldn't." She thinks HC "feels private," she "feels more secure with the environment. There's not as many children as in public schools."

Only one parent, Mrs. A5, whose daughter is a 6<sup>th</sup> grader at MC who has attended a charter school since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade but has aged out of her present charter, reports that she feels having a choice really puts "the burden on the parent. Having the choice, it's hard to decide. And if you choose the wrong one, then you're like, why did I choose that one? 'Cause it's the school that *you* chose not the school they said you had to go to. So I don't know. I'd like to say I like to choose, but then when I don't get my choice then I'm like, dang! Then you have to settle for where they tell you you have to go." Given a voucher, she says she would choose a private school for all three of her children.

Parents were presented with the hypothetical question: Where would you send your children if you were provided with a voucher that would cover the cost of tuition at the school of your choice? Thirteen (39%) of the 33 parents said they would choose to keep their child in a charter school. Thirteen (39%) would enroll their child in a private

school; four (12%) said they would choose either charter or private. One parent, who attended parochial schools as a child, said her first choice would be a Catholic school and one said she was undecided. Only one of the 33 parents interviewed, a father, said he would elect to send his son to a traditional public school.

### *Parents' Views of the Lack of Diversity in Their Charter School*

None of the 33 respondents in the study seemed concerned about the lack of diversity at either MC or HC. They were all willing to give their opinion as to why they thought that the level of diversity at HC was zero and practically zero at MC but it seemed to be a non-issue to them. A couple of parents spoke of the students being afforded the “black experience” that their grandparents had had before schools were integrated. Those parents spoke openly that they thought that it was good for their children. Others felt that it was not the “real world”. As Mrs. B2 put it, “The world is not all black or white.” But the lack of diversity is not the major concern at either of the charters in this study. Mrs. A13 expressed the opinion of the majority when she said that she is happy with a 99.9% AA student population at MC “as long as my child is learning.”

When asked if she were concerned about the lack of diversity at HC, one parent, Mrs. B1, said, “No, because, really, everybody don’t know about this school and if everybody knew about it Mr. D would have a problem because then he’d have to get a bigger school.”

Parents’ acceptance of the lack of diversity in the schools’ population seems to extend to their acceptance of the lack of diversity in the schools’ faculty, also. As Mrs.A2, whose two sons attend MC reports, “I prefer male teachers for my boys and I don’t care what color he is.”

### *Parents' Role as They See It*

Even though I doubt that the parents who participated in this study ever read the report, many of them seem to agree with Coleman et al's (1966) findings; that parents really do matter, that the decisions that parents make and what goes on in the home probably have a greater affect on a child's success than what happens in schools. Six parents (18%) in this study reported that they were aware of the achievement gap between AA students and White students and feel that they bear some, if not most, of the responsibility for closing it. They also seem to understand that, since they have choices, it is ultimately their responsibility to find the best school for their children.

Having had good experiences in TPS in Florida, Mrs. B 10 did not hesitate to enroll both of her older children in the Durham public school system when she arrived in the fall of 2000. However, by the end of their first year, in a predominately-White school, her daughter had been identified/labeled LD, and subsequently retained; and her son, whom she knew had reading difficulties, was not getting the assistance he needed. She reports that the teachers at his school "said he couldn't do this and he couldn't do that. He couldn't get an IEP (individual education plan). And I was like, okay, we're going to do something, we're going to do something – *I'm* going to do something because *he's* not going to be lost! *He's* not going to be a statistic. *He's* not going to be out on the street with gang members!"

Mrs. B1 said, "I don't think it's really up to the school to close the gap. It's really up to the parents...but some parents are illiterate....they can't read... some of them dropped out of school. They can't really help their kids, like they want to."

Mrs. B4 posits that "parents have to take an interest in their child's education. If you don't care, your child knows you don't care, then they don't care." She reports that most of the parents she has met at HC have their children and their children's education as their top priority but it is also her opinion that a "few mothers, basically, just want the kids out the house. Some of the parents are here because it's convenient. I still have to go back to the home. If there's influence at home – home is the base. If my child got up every morning thinking that I didn't care whether or not she succeeded in school, then

she'd come to school and fail. But every morning before she leaves, I give her a kiss and I say, 'You go to school and you do good and you be good cause you are somebody and you can be somebody.' And she goes and if she comes home and if it's something she's not done too well in, we sit down and we work it out. Like I say, if it doesn't start at home, I don't think a school can do anything actually."

Mrs. B4 continues, "If you've got your parent or your guardian – somebody that cares – then that gives the child [the feeling that] I am somebody...I can be somebody... and then that child cares. But if you have nothing at home, no guidance, no role model – all these young kids are turning to the streets and they're getting involved in gangs and its [because] a lot of young mothers that's on drugs. They don't really care – it's like I said, they just want the kids out of the house. If you expect your child to come to school and cut up, if you expect your child to come to school and fail – if your child brings homework home every night and brings it back to school the next day undone – that child's not going to learn anything."

Mrs. A15 believes that "we need a lot of parent participation to show that they are concerned, that they do love their kids and that they're willing to work on, what I call, a child-parent-teacher relationship. That's the key. Saving our children because, you see, they're our future. We don't want our children discouraged. They're our future."

Ms. B7, a single mother of two girls, believes that charter schools have a better chance of closing the achievement gap than do TPS because of their size, but the true deciding factor in her mind are the parents. In her opinion, some parents do not set high goals for their children as she does. "A lot of [her daughters'] teachers come to me and tell me that [her daughters] do so well on their tests. They don't have a choice. That's my thing. They don't have a choice. If they're living in my house, if they're coming home, they don't have a choice but to excel in academics." She contends that a child will not be successful if the school does not receive support from home "because once they go home, there's no school. There's no school. Okay, you [the teacher] can tell them, 'Now look you're going to study this right now' and the kids – as long as they're under that teacher – you know – they're going to study. They're going to read that book. But when they go



home, if their parents don't say, 'Do you got home work? Do you need to read?' It's not a lot of parents like me. We [parents] are the key."

When asked if she thought that charter schools, because they are smaller and offer more individualized instruction would help to solve the achievement gap between AA children and White children Mrs.B2 responded, "I think it's going to help. Is it a cure all? No." She added, "First you have to start with the parents." It was her opinion that in order for students to be successful, the home, the school and the students "all 3 components have to work together."

### *Analysis Using Weiss' Framework*

As explained earlier, Weiss' "4 I's" analysis framework was used in this study to explore how African American parents' interests, ideology, information and attitudes toward two institutions – traditional public schools and charter schools –affect the decisions they make. This section presents the study's findings regarding parents' interests, ideologies, sources of information and their perceptions about the two institutions between which they have the opportunity to choose.

### *Parents' Interests*

As explained in Chapter 1, Weiss (1995) posits that people are generally concerned about or interested in themselves, their children, and their families. Their interests are generally self-interests that directly affect them. She argues that each individual decision-maker generally has a stake in the outcome of his/her decisions and that a person's interest is just one of three elements of individual decision-making that accounts for decision outcomes. It appears that the parents in this study perceive that their interest in their children being afforded an opportunity to learn in a nurturing environment, at a high level, with individual attention, from caring instructors is being fulfilled by small charter schools. The stake, or the interest, that they have in the outcome

of their decision is their children's educational success and, as they have explained, their success in life.

One parent, Mrs. B10, a single mother of three, points out that HC is a good match for her and her children because, among other things important to her, it offers the additional attention and instruction that her children, who were not well served in traditional public school, need. She said, "It's [HC] a good match for my family because I wouldn't be able to afford extra help for my children if I had to pay for it. It gives me the opportunity to give them extra. Mr. Fox [assistant principal at HC], once he knew I was looking for extra help, he gave me the connection and then had me sign up and get [my son] into the after school tutoring program."

As shown in the many quotes in this chapter, taken from verbatim transcriptions of interviews with parents, the parents who took part in this study are interested in many different aspects of their children's education that they deem important. The overwhelming majority, 87.8%, are interested in small schools and small classrooms. Because of the size of the charter schools their children attend they (78.7%) feel that their children are afforded more individualized attention and instruction, which they think is significant for their children's chances for success about which they are very much interested. They are interested in their children being safe from violence, gangs, labels, low expectations, large schools, large classrooms, and over-extended teachers who, they believe, have lost control and are scared to discipline or don't care enough to try. These are all negative elements that they perceive to be part of TPS.

The AA parents in this study are interested in high expectations being set for their children whom they feel can achieve given caring teachers who will accept them where they are and help them get to where they need to be – successful. They are interested in their children being: loved and cared for as individuals; known as the special people that they are; and being recognized and talked to by administrators and teachers. Finally, they are interested in being included in their children's education and kept informed so that together – students, teachers, and parents – they can work as a team.

### *Parents' Ideologies*

Weiss (1983, p. 224) argues that when people make decisions, ideologies, “however weakly integrated, provide an emotionally charged normative orientation that provides the basis for position taking.” Also, she posits, people “formulate ideologies that are in accord with their self-interest” (1995, p. 576). This study considered the ideologies of the 33 parents who were interviewed in an attempt to determine if their ideologies – old or new - influenced their decision to choose charter schools for their children.

It seems, from the data, that most of the parents in this study have experienced an ideological change with respect to TPS since they were students attending them. Even though almost every one of the interviewed parents (90.9%) report that they, personally, had good experiences as students in traditional public school -- and all of them, who had school age children before charters opened, sent their older children to traditional public schools without serious complaints -- the majority of them (93.9%) seem to have lost confidence in the large TPS system and now believe that their children are being better served in charter schools. Their old opinions, beliefs about public education seem to be breaking down. Parent complaints about TPS are many and range from their large size to the absence of personal involvement by the teachers; or as Mrs. A12 explains, “There’s no love and caring” in traditional public schools.

Further proof that almost every one of the parents in this study has had a change in attitude about TPS and feels strongly that their children will not be well served there, could be deduced from the fact that only two parents are choosing to send their children to a TPS in the coming school year. One parent, Ms. A5, admits that she is choosing to send her oldest daughter to a TPS of her choice, out of her district, purely on a trial basis next year. She reports that the Durham Public School System offers a special high school program for students who, if accepted, can earn two years of college credit while still in high school. She sees this as two years of college that she will not have to worry about paying for and it is her understanding that in order for her daughter to be considered for the program, she must attend a traditional public school in seventh and eighth grade and

make good grades. Ms. A5 admits that she has doubts about her decision to leave charter schools and addressed some of the things about TPS that worry her: “I’m really concerned about the student population and the number of kids and the different types of kids and what they do and how they do it. I am going to have a talk with her about that and if I see anything that is her stepping out of line or her not being her normal self – we’ll be back here quickly.”

She explains that her daughter, a rising 7<sup>th</sup> grader (whom she describes as a “good student, smart, loves school, learns easily, [is] focused, works hard, wants to be something when she grows up”) has attended charter schools since kindergarten with excellent results. However, Mrs. A5 says that she wants her three children to go to college and reports that as a single parent, college is going to be difficult for her to afford. If her daughter can earn two years of college credit while in high school, Ms. A5 sees this as a great financial saving.

She is also enrolling her son, a rising Kindergartener, in a traditional public school next year. Both of her children will be in schools out of her district that she chose. She says she wants “him to try it”. She insists that if she is not satisfied with her son’s K experience she will bring him back to MC. Neither of her children has ever attended a TPS. Ms. A5 is not committed solely to charter schools or traditional public schools. She is committed to her children, to their education, and to their success in life; and she seems determined to exercise her options as a citizen consumer to ensure that they get the best opportunities available.

Historically, AA parents have believed in traditional public schools, have been committed to them, and have fought for equal treatment within the American public school system; but their opinions, their beliefs, seem to be changing. As Mrs.B10 explains, “It’s so easy for a child to be lost in the (TPS) system.” Parents’ self-interest, to have their children succeed, is helping to bring about this change in their ideology.

The parents in this study seemed to be adopting the ideology of consumership (Cookson, 1992). They no longer seemed to see traditional public schools as “redemptive institutions” (Popkeqitz, 1991, p. 148) that are going to enable their children to achieve socioeconomic advancement, become independent, and have more prosperous lives than

they themselves have had. Empowered by choice, many of them for the first time seem determined to place their children -- as Mrs. A4, who has four children in four different schools, explained -- "In a school that is going to benefit them individually."

The parents in this study were neither pragmatists, described by Cookson as "educators and scholars who have studied alternative schools, and through their research, have come to believe that diversity in education provides a healthy leaven to the weight of the public school bureaucracy" nor were they "true believers," people who are "not reformers at all, they simply had faith in the virtues of the free market and apply those beliefs to educational governance" (Cookson, 1992, p, 88). They were, however, concerned parents who were discovering and experiencing the power of choice, or consumership, outside of traditional public schools. Schneider et al (2000, p.37) assert that the shift "in power toward parents provides a more bottom-up, consumer-driven model of public education." The parents in this study believed that they had a right to choose and that they were the ones best suited to decide where their children should attend school. One mother at HC, Mrs. B10, with tears in her eyes and passion in her voice, said, "If you're single and Black, they assume that you can't make good choices and they assume that you can't raise bright children, but it's a lie! She continued, "I'm sorry. It just hits my heart when it comes to my children." Then she smiled and added, "It's the best -- to have a choice."

The parents in this study seemed to be looking for the best educational opportunity available for their children. They are citizen consumers who have adopted the ideology of consumership. All of them stressed the value of education for their children. Mrs. B10 may have summed up their collective opinion when she said, "I think education is the most important part of a child's life in order for them to be successful, and I know that's what Mr. Denver (at HC) and the rest of his staff are doing -- making sure that these kids are prepared for the future." Parents at MC felt just as strongly that their charter school was preparing their children for success in life, too.

## *Information*

According to Weiss (1995, p. 576) the word information need not “necessarily connote accuracy or rightness.” In fact, she posits that the word information frequently “subsumes the partial, biased, and invalid understandings that people rely on as they make decisions” (p. 576). Further, she argues, information of any kind is only used if the decision maker determines that it is congruent with his/her interests and ideology. This study sought to determine the sources of information the parents in this study relied upon to assist them in making their decision to enroll their children in charter schools.

According to a 1996 Twentieth Century Fund report (Ascher, Fruchter, & Berne, p. 40), parents are not “natural consumers of education” and “few parents of any social class appear willing to acquire the information necessary to make active and informed educational choices.” Schneider et al (2000) posit, however, that motivation to get information because of perceived benefits can influence the search for information.

The parents in this study who were dissatisfied with traditional public schools because of negative experiences their children have had were highly motivated to find a place where their children were safe from the inequities, the gangs, the large impersonal classrooms, and the uncaring teachers that some of them had experienced and others perceive to be part of traditional public schools. Many, 72.7%, who have children presently enrolled in TPS or who have had children enrolled, rely on information they have from direct experiences. Weiss (1995, p. 576) posits that “long personal immersion in the environment provides particularly salient learning.” This group of parents also relied on the news media and word of mouth information from relatives, friends, neighbors, and teachers.

The remaining 27.3% of the parents, all of whom attended TPS, have direct experiences from the past but do not have current direct experiences because their children have never attended a TPS. This group reported that its information comes from family, friends, neighbors, teachers, and the media. All Information, regardless of the source, can be negative or positive; and the veracity of the information about both TPS

and charters frequently depends upon the source. Unfortunately, for all decision-makers, inaccurate information can spread as fast as or faster than accurate information.

Three parents reported that they formed negative opinions about the public system in Durham while watching a local channel that broadcasts school board meetings. They admitted that they were appalled to see parents and officials of the board argue about school related issues and to see both parents and officials removed from meetings. One parent, Mrs.B15 at HC, reported that the information she has had access to through the local television news stations paints a bleak picture of the Durham Public School System. In her opinion:

It's so much stuff going on in public schools. They're having problems with their school board. Just a whole lot of stuff that's in the news media—especially for a parent. You're sitting there looking at the news or flipping through one of the public access stations and you see the school board and you see police escorting parents out and the school board members out so you can only imagine what's actually going on in the schools; and these are the leaders of the schools. As a parent I feel as though – okay – I don't think I want my child at a public school because of that. I don't like that and I don't want that for my child.

Another parent, Mrs. B10 seemed skeptical about some information she received while watching a local television station touting Durham Public schools. She brought the infomercial up during our interview and seemed to want to refute positive claims that were being made about Durham traditional public schools because her children were not well served in the Durham system and neither were some of her friend's children. She said, "I was looking at Channel 8 the other day and they were advertising Durham Public Schools and they were telling about so many different *good* things that's going on in the school system." Asked if she thought they were true, she replied. "No, not to me. Because I hear so many parents have trouble with their children. I have a girlfriend, her son's in a TPS and he's been in an out of 2 or 3 different public schools and they're labeling him as

BD [behavior disordered] and they end up sending him to a psychiatrist that he didn't even need.”

Nearly half of the parents (48 %) in this study reported that before they enrolled their children in their present charter school, they took the initiative to investigate their children's educational options. They went to the schools to meet the principals, to talk to the teachers, and to sit in on classes. Mrs.B10, who has three school age children and is in her fourth year at HC, said “not only did I sit in on the classes, I made visits randomly just to look in to see how [the teachers] were interacting with the children.” None of the parents in this study reported visiting a TPS before enrolling one of their children.

More than half, 66.6%, of the parents in this study reported that they acquired information about charter schools from relatives, friends, neighbors, charter and public school teachers and/or co-workers. The earliest information seekers, who were curious about charters or interested in the charter school concept before the first one opened, heard about them on television, went to local meetings, and/or read about them in local newspapers. Three of the 33 parents in the study enrolled their children in a charter school in 1997, the first year they were available in NC. Both MC and HC along with 23 other charters opened that first year. Twenty-five per cent of the parents in this study are new to charter schools, having enrolled their children for the first time in 2004. Twenty-five per cent have had children enrolled in charter schools for at least two years; and the remaining 50% have had children in charters for 5 to 8 years.

According to both of the principals in this study, parents and families of the students presently enrolled or who have attended their schools in the past, are their best recruiters, and the best source of information and advertising that they have – if they are happy. They admit that both satisfied and dissatisfied parents spread the word – good and bad. Both principals were aware that their schools exist because people have a choice. They both reported that they strive to maintain the integrity of their school's mission, that they do not acquiesce to parental demands; but they also said that communicating and working with their “customers” is mandatory. They know that the children are there because their parents have chosen that particular charter school. As Mr. Peek, the principal at MC, said, “They can take them [their children] out *yesterday*.”



The parents in this study seemed to value the information they get from relatives, friends, co-workers and teachers and not to value the information they get from the media, neighbors and acquaintances. Some reported hearing negative opinions/information about charter schools but denied that they were true. Mrs. B10 did not value one of her friend's opinions of charters because she had decided that her friend was "against charter schools." Her friend "feels that charter schools are not giving children the education that they need." Mrs. B10 disagreed. Weiss (1995) argues that people attend to information if it matches their ideology and that they adjust their ideology to fit their self-interests. Ultimately, she posits, people make decisions dependent on the benefits they will receive. When faced with a choice between TPS and charters, the over whelming majority of parents in this study seemed to perceive that charter schools offer more positive benefits than do traditional public schools.

#### *The Institutions – Charters and Traditional Public Schools*

Weiss' "3-I's" (1983) analysis of decision-making -- interest, ideology, and information -- became "4-I's" when she added "the institution" in 1995. She explains that the "institutional domain" of schools "involves the structure, culture, standard operating procedures, and the decision rules of the organization within which decisions are made" (p. 576). In Weiss' study, she explains how the institution affects those who work within them. Here, I try to explain how the institution affects those who are outside looking in and trying to decide which institution best suits their quest for optimum educational opportunities for their children. To this end, I look at the real and the perceived size, academic performance, safety records, and teacher qualifications of both TPS and charter schools.

It seems that the AA parents in this study are at odds with TPS because they perceive them to have failed their children or in the case of those whose children have never experienced them – to have the potential to fail them. Thirty-one of the 33 parents interviewed reported that they had either already enrolled their children/grandchildren in charter schools for the coming year or planned to enroll them. They seemed to be

frustrated by what they reported is the huge, insensitive, impersonal, bureaucratic structure of traditional public schools that they perceive are more dangerous, have low expectations, discriminate against, and label their children. Consequently, they are opting for charters that they know are smaller and believe are safer, more caring, and accepting. They seemed to believe that charter schools set high academic goals for their children and work harder to make sure that they achieve them.

TPS in the Durham area are considerably larger than charter schools. As reported earlier, the average enrollment in traditional public elementary schools (K-5) in Durham is 518 students. Traditional public middle schools (6th-8th) enroll, on average, 784 students and traditional public high schools average 1,330 (NCDPI, 2004-2005). Both of the charter schools in this study are considerably smaller than their TPS counterparts. MC has 221 students and HC has 290. The average number of children in classrooms at MC is less than the average number reported to be in classrooms in the state and in the Durham County system; however, four of the eight grades at HC report larger average size classes than those reported by the traditional public schools in both Durham County and in the state. The table below presents the average number of students enrolled in a “typical” K-8 classroom for the 2004-2005 school year at Montana Charter, Haven Charter, the Durham Public School District, and in the state of NC.

Table 4.1

*Average Enrollment – 2004-2005 – Typical K-8 Classrooms in Durham County, the State of NC, and the Two Charters in this Study: Montana Charter & Haven Charter*

	MC	HC	Durham	State
Kindergarten	14	17	21	19
Grade 1	16	24	18	19
Grade 2	14	23	20	19
Grade 3	14	21	20	19
Grade 4	17	16	19	21
Grade 5	17	22	20	21
Grade 6	17	16	22	21
Grade 7	NA	12	23	21

Source: Education First NC School Report Cards – NC Office of the Governor, 2005

Parents in this study seemed concerned about their children’s academic achievement and performance on tests. They know that their children take End of Grade (EOG) tests in May, which are important, and they seem concerned about the results. They also are aware of the consequences if their children do not perform satisfactorily on their EOG’s: they may have to attend summer school and/or may be retained. It is doubtful, however, that they know how the charter schools their children attend perform as compared to the TPS in the county; or that the ABCs End of Grade Tests for 2005 reports a 28-point academic achievement gap between White and Black students in the Durham district. This information is available on the internet from the NC Department of Public Education.

Schools in NC receive designations based on their performance on the state’s “ABC End-of-Grade Tests” (tests designed by the state of NC and given to all students in traditional public schools and charter schools). Chart 2A reports the seven designations that are awarded to schools based on the percentage of students performing at grade level,

and on whether students have learned as much as they are expected to learn in one year. The designations range from Honor School of Excellence to Low Performing. An Honor School of Excellence is one in which 90% of students are at grade level and the school meets the Adequate Yearly Progress goals set by the state. If less than 50% of the students in a school are at grade level and students did not make expected growth, the school is identified as Low Performing. Fourteen percent of the elementary schools in Durham and 29% in the state were identified as Honor Schools of Excellence. One percent of the high schools in the state were Low Performing but there were no Low Performing schools in the Durham district in 2004-2005. (Please see Chart 2A).

Montana Charter's designation for 2004-2005, along with 36% of the elementary schools in Durham County, was "No Recognition" because 40% of its students are below grade level and the students did not make expected growth for the year. Haven Charter's designation was "Priority School" because 50% of its students were below grade level but students made expected growth. All of the traditional public elementary schools in Durham County performed at a higher level on NC's ABCs End of Grade Tests and earned a higher designation than Haven Charter for 2004-2005.

In addition to the accountability measures set by NC's "ABCs End of Grade Tests", the state also sets target goals in the area of academic achievement that each school must meet in order to be recognized as schools that have made Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Following those guidelines and goals, 36% of the Durham Public Elementary Schools met their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for 2004-2005. Middle Schools fared worse with only 13% meeting their goals. Not one single high school in the Durham County system met their AYP goals. The state of NC set 13 target goals, each, for Montana Charter and Haven Charter. Neither school managed to achieve their AYP goals for 2004-2005. MC met 10 of its 13 goals and Haven Charter met seven. Schools must meet all of their goals in order to be recognized as having achieved adequate yearly progress. The Durham District met 40 of its 69 AYP targets according to a report from Education First NC - School Report Cards (NCSRC, 2005).

Table 4.2

*State of North Carolina and Durham Public School District Performance on ABC, End of Grade Tests – 2004 – 2005.*

		Percent of Schools					
		Elementary		Middle		High School	
		District	State	District	State	District	State
Honor School of Excellence	At least 90% of students at grade level & school made adequate yearly progress (AYP)	14	29	0	17	0	3
School of Excellence	At least 90% of students at grade level & students made expected growth or more	0	2	0	5	0	0
School of Distinction	80 to 89% of students at grade level & students made expected growth or more	21	31	13	20	0	34
School of Progress	At least 60 to 79% of students at grade level & students made expected growth or more	29	9	13	1	67	44
No Recognition	60 to 100% of students at grade level but students did not make expected growth	36	30	75	55	0	6
Priority School	50 to 59% of students at grade level or less than 50% of students at grade level but students made expected growth	0	1	0	1	33	12
Low Performing	Less than 50% of students at grade level students did not make expected growth	0	0	0	0	0	1

Source: Education First NC School Report Cards – NC Office of the Governor - 2005

Table 4.3

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Results for the State of North Carolina*

	% of Schools That Made AYP			% of Schools That Did Not Make AYP			% of Schools In School Improvement Status		
	Elem.	Middle	High	Elem.	Middle	High	Elem.	Middle	High
District	36%	13%	0%	64%	84%	100%	21%	0%	0%
State	71%	34%	40%	29%	66%	60%	9%	12%	2%

Source: Education First NC School Report Cards – NC Office of the Governor – 2005

Table 4.4 illustrates the End of Grade Test performance of HC, MC, and seven traditional public elementary schools in Durham County. The seven TPS were chosen for comparison because their student populations were from 91% to 99% minority. White populations at all seven TPS ranged from zero to 6%. HC and MC had student bodies that were 99.9% and 100% minority, respectively. Four (4) of the TPS achieved at the School of Progress level and three (3) were identified as Priority Schools. Four of the seven TPS met all of the target goals set for them by the state of North Carolina and were identified as having met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Haven Charter was recognized as a Priority School but did not perform as well as the TPS that received the same designation because it did not achieve its annual yearly progress goals. Montana Charter was out performed by all of the seven TPS.

Table 4.4

*Comparison of Montana Charter and Haven Charter with Seven Traditional Public Elementary Schools in the Durham Public School District—Performance on North Carolina’s ABC, End of Grade Tests for 2004 – 2005*

<b>SCHOOLS</b>	<b>DESIGNATION</b>	<b>ACHIEVED AYP</b>
Montana Charter	No Recognition	No
Haven Charter	Priority School	No
C. C. Spaulding	School of Progress	Yes
W. G. Pierson	School of Progress	Yes
R. N. Harris	School of Progress	Yes
Glenn	School of Progress	No
Y. E. Smith	Priority School	No
Fayetteville Street	Priority School	No
Lakewood	Priority School	Yes

Parents in this study seemed concerned that their children would not be as safe in a TPS as they would be in a charter. Word of mouth information from relatives, friends, acquaintances, and TPS and charter teachers, and information from the media helped form the basis for their opinions. In its annual School Safety report, NC Public Schools provide the number of acts of crime or violence per 100 students, which includes “all acts occurring in school, at a bus stop, on school grounds, or during off-campus, school-sponsored activities.” Chart 3A reports school safety in NC for 2004-2005.

Table 4.5

*School Safety—“Safe, Orderly & Caring Schools” Report for the State of North Carolina, the Durham Public School District, Montana Charter, and Haven Charter 2004-2005*

	Elementary	Middle	High
State of North Carolina	0	1	2
Durham District	0	1	2
Montana Charter	1	NA	NA
Haven Charter	2	NA	NA

Source: Education First - NC School Report Cards - Office of the Governor – 2005

At first glance, it appears that the two charter schools in this study have more acts of violence than do their traditional public school counterparts in Durham County and in the state. However, when reports from individual traditional public schools in the Durham County system were examined the numbers presented a different picture. The 27 traditional public elementary schools in Durham reported 34 acts of violence; the eight traditional public middle schools reported 84; and the six traditional public high schools reported 235 acts of violence. The total acts of violence in Durham County Traditional Public Schools for 2004-2005 was 353. The total for the eight charter schools in Durham

County was three. The annual county report appears to skew the results by presenting them as “the number of acts of crime or violence per 100 students.”

The parents in this study seemed to value the quality of the teachers at their children’s charter schools and to be less than pleased with the teachers their children had experienced, or feared their children might experience at a TPS. They reported that charter teachers were dedicated and caring, had high expectations, provided individual attention, “loved” their children, and wanted them to succeed. They seemed to feel that their children’s charter teachers were competent and that they would make sure that their children performed well academically.

An annual report, Education First – NC School Report Cards (NC Report Cards, 2005) provides information concerning teacher and administrator quality in each school in the state, and collective information about the schools in each district. The Durham District report compares Durham schools to schools of similar size and grade levels in the state. Under the heading “Quality Teachers and Administrators” five measurable areas are identified that the state believes could determine the quality of the teachers in a school and which, ultimately, could affect student achievement. The report also identifies three areas under “Qualifications of Principals” that the state considers significant to the management and leadership of a school and which could affect the school’s overall performance. The three areas that address principals are percentage of principals who have completed an advanced college degree beyond a master’s, years of experience, and turnover rate (the percentage of principals employed last year who are no longer employed in the same school this year).

Under “Qualifications of Teachers” the report lists: the years of teaching experience, the percentage of fully licensed teachers, the percentage of classes taught by “Highly Qualified Teachers,” the number of teachers with advanced degrees, the number of National Board Certified Teachers and the teacher turnover rate. The report does not report any principal qualifications for charter schools and addresses only two teacher categories for charter schools: percentage of fully licensed teachers, and percentage of classes taught by “Highly Qualified Teachers.” The average number of classroom teachers in each traditional public school and each charter school is also reported. In



North Carolina, teachers are considered fully licensed if they have a full state certification or licensure, not lateral entry, alternative or emergency licenses. To be recognized as “Highly Qualified,” as defined by the NCLB law, teachers must have: 1.) a bachelor’s degree, 2.) full state certification or licensure, and 3.) prove that they know each subject they teach (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Haven Charter and Montana Charter report that 46% and 85% of their teachers, respectively, were fully licensed for the 2004-2005 school year. Haven Charter reports that 47% of their classes were taught by “Highly Qualified Teachers” while Montana Charter reports that “Highly Qualified Teachers” taught in 79% of their classrooms. Tables 4.6 and 4.7 provide information about teachers in the state of NC, in the Durham Public School District, and in Montana and Haven Charter schools. Table 4.6 reports the percentage of fully licensed teachers and Table 4.6 reports highly qualified teachers.

Table 4.6

*Percentage of Fully Licensed Teachers 2004-2005*

Percentage of Fully Licensed Teachers 2004-2005			
	Elementary	Middle	High
State NC	93%	84%	85%
Durham District	90%	78%	84%
Montana Charter	85%	NA	NA
Haven Charter	46%	NA	NA

Source: Education First - NC School Report Cards – Office of the Governor, 2005

Table 4.7

*Percentage of Highly Qualified Teachers 2004-2005*

Percentage of Highly Qualified Teachers 2004-2005			
	Elementary	Middle	High
State NC	92%	81%	88%
Durham District	87%	86%	93%
Montana Charter	79%	NA	NA
Haven Charter	47%	NA	NA

Source: Education First - NC School Report Cards – Office of the Governor, 2005

As shown by this analysis, parents’ perceptions of the charter schools their children attend, as compared to the traditional public schools in Durham County, were found to be valid in some instances but invalid in others. The data support their perception of how charters compare in size and safety to traditional public schools. Both charter schools in this study are smaller than the traditional public schools in the Durham County public school system, and offer smaller class size in every grade at MC and all but four grades at HC. In addition, both charters have dramatically lower instances of violence than do their traditional public school counterparts.

However, if measured by EOG test scores and designations assigned by the state of NC that report each school’s academic progress, the two charter schools in this study are not performing as well as parents might perceive. One hundred percent of the traditional public elementary schools in Durham are outperforming Haven Charter academically according to NC’s ABC, End of Grade Test scores and 64% are outperforming Montana Charter. Not one elementary school in the Durham public system performed as poorly academically as Haven Charter in 2004-2005.

The parents in this study praised the teachers and administrators in their children’s charter schools. Almost 100% of them were more than satisfied. The parents described them as caring, loving people who accepted and valued their children, and who worked

hard to educate them and to build their confidence and self-esteem. Admittedly, these are admirable attributes to ascribe to administrators and teachers, but because they are subjective, they are exceedingly difficult to measure objectively.

As reported in this chapter, NC does measure teacher qualifications in five areas at traditional public schools but reports on only two areas for teachers at charters. In the two areas that can be compared, percentage of fully licensed and percentage of Highly Qualified Teachers (HQT), charter teachers at HC and MC fell short of teachers in traditional public schools in both categories for 2004-2005. Ninety-three percent of traditional public school teachers in NC and 90% in Durham County were fully licensed as compared to 85% at Montana Charter and only 46% at Haven Charter. Only 47% of the teachers at Haven Charter were recognized as HQT, which was considerably fewer than Montana Charter with 79%. The data revealed that both charter schools in this study had fewer HQT than Durham County and the state, which reported that 87% and 92% of their teachers, respectively, were HQT. Qualifications of traditional public school and charter school principals cannot be compared because the state of NC does not report principal qualifications for charter schools.

### *Conclusions*

Perhaps what we are experiencing in education in NC, fifty years after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*, is a grassroots movement by African American parents to leave behind the promise of equality of opportunity in integrated, traditional, public schools which they perceive have not afforded their children equal treatment or success and opt, instead, for segregated charter schools that they believe focus on *their* children, and promise true acceptance and recognition of *them, their* history, and *their* culture.

The parents in this study are cognizant of the role they play in their children's eventual success or failure. They recognize the power of choice that charter schools offer and seem determined to exercise their new rights as consumers of educational services in order to find a school that will support them as they try to lead their children to academic

success. Their interest in their children's treatment and education are the impetus for their actions.

This study sought to determine why and how AA parents arrived at their decision to choose charter schools and the respondents were more than willing to provide their reasons. Many of them first became dissatisfied with TPS and chose to exit them because of negative experiences they and their children had had – information about TPS they gleaned first hand. Other parents, whose children had never attended a TPS, chose charters because of what they feared would happen to their children if they were to enroll them in a TPS. Negative information about TPS abounds in their community from multiple trusted sources. The ideology of the majority of the parents was that their children would be better served in charter schools.

The parents in this study were drawn to charter schools—the institution—for multiple reasons. They valued the fact that charters were smaller and that the classrooms had fewer children. In addition, they perceived that the teachers truly cared about and loved their children; that administrators were involved and committed, and knew their children personally; that both teachers and administrators had high expectations of their children and worked toward keeping the lines of communication open. The parents were also drawn to charters by what they perceived to be the promise of charter schools—that their children were children with potential, who could and would succeed. The fact that the charters they have chosen are lacking in diversity, with regard to race, was of little concern, according to the parents, as long as their children were valued as people and succeeded academically. All but one of the parents in this study believed that their children were better served in charters. A detailed summary of the findings of this study will appear in the final chapter.

## Chapter V

### Summary of Dissertation: Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

#### *Summary*

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze African American parents' decision-making in an attempt to determine the factors affecting their choice of charter schools over traditional public schools. To understand the many themes and patterns that stem from the problems of choice and decision-making, two questions were addressed in this study:

1. Why are African American parents in unexpected numbers choosing to leave traditional, integrated public schools to attend largely segregated charters?
2. How did they arrive at their decision?

Propositions that were examined during the course of the study in order to answer the how and why questions are:

1. Parents may be choosing charter schools because of their particular *interests* – self-interests and incentives.
2. Parents may be choosing charters because of their *ideologies*; perhaps a change in ideologies, the renewal of old ideologies, or the development of new ones.
3. New information may be affecting parents' decisions.
4. Parents' perception of the *institutional* setting of the charter school they have chosen in comparison to the traditional public schools they have left may be affecting their decisions.

The influences of their self-interests, their ideology about schooling, the information they acquired and used, and their perception of two institutions—traditional public schools and charter schools—were considered and analyzed. Through a data collection process that combined document analysis, observations, and interviews in two charter schools in Durham, NC, it was learned that the parents in this study share multiple reasons for exiting traditional public schools and for choosing charters.

Weiss' (1995) "4 I's" framework for understanding decision-making was used to analyze the effect parents' interest, ideology, information, and the two institutions - traditional public schools and charters - had on their choices. I proposed that such a study would illuminate African American parents' perception of traditional public schools and charters. Essentially, the study could explain what AA parents feel charter schools offer that they have not found or perceive they cannot find in traditional public schools. This study is significant because it may improve our understanding of the factors that are encouraging AA parents to exit traditional public schools for charters. In addition, it may enable educators, researchers, policy makers, politician and others, who are concerned with education, to improve educational opportunities for all children and, perhaps, make some progress toward closing the academic achievement gap that exists between the races.

Choice is at the heart of the charter school controversy. Proponents of choice, who believe in the power of markets to improve efficiency and performance, contend that competition from charters will make all schools better. Further, they argue, it is every parent's right to select schools that are the best match for their children. Prior to charters, low-income parents in NC had little if any choice; they were locked into the public school monolith. Choice advocates insist that affluent parents of all races have always had options; they can choose to move into an area that has excellent traditional public schools or pay for private education. Only the disadvantaged are forced to attend the poorest and often the worst schools in the country.

Conversely, critics of choice argue that because many parents are less than capable consumers in the education marketplace, who may not select schools on educationally sound dimensions, charters can lead to increased segregation and perhaps even less pressure on traditional public schools to improve. Low-income, less educated, minority parents are seen as especially susceptible to making wrong choices. Further, it is feared that if parents who are more affluent choose schools that value academics and less affluent parents choose schools based on ancillary or irrelevant characteristics, inequality will be further fueled by choice and charters.

As discussed in previous chapters, when state legislators in NC were negotiating the positive and negative ramifications of choice in the form of charter schools, some

opponents argued that charters would “open the doors for whites to create private schools at taxpayers expense” (“Charter Schools,” 1998, p. A16); others feared charters would spawn “white-flight academies that had sprouted in the South generations earlier in response to school desegregation” (Dent, 1998, p. B8) and become havens for White students. In response to these arguments, legislators passed a law (Amend Charter School Laws, 1997) that requires that charters reflect the racial and ethnic composition of their communities after their first year. In 1997, the first year that charters opened in NC, 13 of the 34 charters in the state were “disproportionately black compared to their districts” (Dent, 1998, p.B8) and were in danger of being closed. As of 2005, eight years after the law passed, the law has yet to be enforced by the State Board of Education because African Americans in surprisingly larger numbers than expected have chosen to enroll their children in charter schools (see Footnote 1) and state educators have not wanted to impose integration guidelines on schools designed around choice. If the statute had been enforced for the 2004-2005 school year, 86 of the 97 charters in the state would have had to close their doors because they were in violation of the diversity clause of the law. Fifty-two of the offending 86 charters were in violation because they were predominately White; 34 were in violation because they were predominately Black (NCDPI, 2005).

### *Design and Method of the Study*

This qualitative case study went inside two charter schools to explore the educational choices AA parents were making for their children. There was no exact way to determine which charter schools in NC would produce the richest sources of data so schools were screened for suitability from the 2004-2005 charter school list provided by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) using the schools’ demographics as the primary criterion (NCDPI, 2004). Since the goal of the study was to attempt to understand the decisions made by AA parents who were choosing to enroll their children in predominately-segregated charter schools, a purposeful sample was used to select administrators and parents/guardians from two schools whose populations were 99.9% to

100% AA. In addition, it seemed essential to choose schools that were readily recognized in the community; schools that had established reputations and histories. Parents had to have had time to develop opinions and experiences with a charter school in order to be able to verbalize their impressions of them. Both of the schools chosen for this study opened in 1997, thus they had been in operation for at least eight years.

The two charter schools in the study are in the city/county of Durham for logistic reasons; but in an attempt to reach a more diverse population, they are situated in very different types of neighborhoods. One school, Montana Charter (MC), is located in the inner city, in an AA neighborhood; and the other, Haven Charter (HC), is located in an affluent, suburban, White neighborhood. The inner city charter, HC, is located in a former Baptist Church; the suburban charter, MC, makes its home in a former Jewish Synagogue; both were purchased from their former owners by the charters. Both buildings have classrooms formerly used for religious education classes; the former church building has many classrooms on multiple levels; the synagogue is a smaller, one story structure.

Some parents transport their children at both of the charters; but the majority of the students at both charters arrive via the bus service provided by the charters to all children who choose to attend. Both principals said that if parents want their children to attend their charter school, the schools find a way to get them there. Students come to both schools from all corners of the Durham city/county area thus the student population is not limited to nor does it necessarily reflect the neighborhoods wherein the schools are physically located. The student population at MC certainly does not represent the White neighborhood where it is located and HC's population, is representative of, but not limited to, its neighborhood. Pick-up spots for enrolled students are identified by both schools at the beginning of each year and bus routes are designed accordingly. One assistant administrator reported that she and another assistant administrator pick up and deliver students home whenever their help is needed. As was reported in previous chapters, both principals seem dedicated to their students and to the families they are trying to serve. The principal at MC has many years of experience while his counterpart



at HC is only in his second year as an administrator in an elementary school, but they both seemed deeply committed to trying to make a difference in the lives of their students

Following initial visits to both charters and conversations with both principals to explain the study, a letter they approved was sent home to the parents of every child inviting each of them to participate in an hour long interview as part of a study. Of the over 500 letters sent home, nine signed letters from parents agreeing to be interviewed were returned at MC. Not one signed letter was returned at HC. Mrs. Hall, at HC, using a Parent Teacher Association list and Mrs. Bennett at MC, using the school directory, called parents until they secured 20 interviewees from both schools who were willing to take part in the study and participate in an interview. Both Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Bennett reported that they went down their lists, without prejudice, when selecting whom to contact. Interviewees, parents and administrators, were offered \$10.00 in cash to participate in a one-hour interview and were told that an additional ten-dollar donation would be made in their names to their charter school's library fund.

Interviews were scheduled with both principals, 1 assistant principal, and 40 parents. Two principals, 1 assistant principal and 33 parents/guardians were interviewed at their respective charter schools in a conference room, office or other private area. Thirty-four interviews were conducted in person and two via the telephone for a total of 36. Three parents from MC and four from HC did not come to their scheduled interviews and attempts to re-schedule failed. Of the parent/guardian participants, 15 were married, 12 were single parents, 2 were divorced, 3 were widows, and 1 was separated. Four respondents had four-year college degrees, two had associate degrees and two were college students. Thirty of the 33 of the parent/guardian participants worked full time, 2 were full time college students who work part time, and one was retired.

Even though it was not the intent of this study to collect data concerning the personal characteristics of each interviewee, they frequently volunteered information during the course of our conversations. According to both principals, the over whelming majority of the parents of the children in both of the charters in this study were working parents so the interviewees could be considered relatively typical from that perspective. However, since this study did not pursue the income or educational level, or marital

status of the rest of the parents in the two schools, it cannot be assumed that the respondents were typical of the parents in the two charter schools or typical of parents in other charters.

Both of the charter schools in this study seemed to be child friendly; the climate at both schools was positive; adults, from the lunchroom ladies and men to the administrators, were focused on the students and spoke kindly to them; students seemed relaxed, comfortable, and engaged. The children worked in their classrooms and moved around the buildings in a well-behaved, orderly fashion. Mr. Peek, the principal at MC, and Mr. Denver, the principal at HC, seemed confident and proud of what they were endeavoring to accomplish at their schools and more than willing to report information about their respective schools. They both explained their mission with enthusiasm and communicated that their schools were open for inspection; essentially they communicated that the researcher was free to explore the building as she wished for the sake of this study. It was an impressive experience.

In addition to interviews and observations, documents and reports were examined and related back to observation and interview data. The documents enabled the researcher to triangulate the data derived from observations and interviews with parent/guardians and administrators. Documents included newsletters, newspaper articles, individual charter school reports, brochures, flyers, reports from the North Carolina Education Alliance, reports from the NC Office of the Governor – Department of Public Instruction; NC Department of Education School Profiles; and NC Department of Education Charter Schools report.

In the following sections, I summarize the major findings and implications that developed from the study propositions and questions.

### *Summary of Findings*

#### *Finding One: Parents' perception of charter schools – the institutional setting.*

Charter schools afforded the parents in this study specific qualities that they felt traditional public schools did not. They were as much opposed to traditional public

schools as they were in favor of charters. The overwhelming majority of the parents (87.8%) in this study seemed to find small charter schools much more attractive. They repeatedly addressed the value of smaller schools and smaller class size. They wanted their children to have the individual attention and instruction that they needed, and felt that can best be accomplished in a smaller setting. Again, an overwhelming majority (78.7%) reported that they believed that their children received significantly more individual attention and instruction and had a greater chance of succeeding at their charter schools because the classrooms had fewer students. They spoke of the time teachers were able to give to their children in smaller charter schools and of the love and caring charter teachers provided, not just to the children in their classrooms but to all of the children in the school. Twenty-two of the 33 respondents (66.6%) spoke of how important the teachers' nurturing was to the success of their children.

The parents viewed the climate/environment of their charter school as accepting, positive, safe, and nurturing – essential qualities that foster the confidence that they feel their children need. Twenty (60.6%) of the parents said, charter school administrators and teachers had high expectations of their students; they really knew them, knew their names, truly wanted them to succeed, and expected them to succeed in their studies and in life. Because their children's charter schools had done an excellent job of communicating, both good and not so good news, 48.4% of the parents felt that their input and opinions mattered, that they were respected, welcomed to get involved, and accepted as part of the educational team. If there were a problem of any kind at their charter school that involved their children, parents were confident that they would be notified, that the problem would be attended to promptly, and that the remedy would, in some way, benefit their children. Parents believed that the people who worked at their charter schools sincerely wanted their children to be there, valued them as important people, and expected them to learn.

When asked about the lack of diversity in their children's school populations, the parents (100%) at both schools seemed to be very accepting of it, two parents suggested that the schools would be more diverse if more people knew how great the schools were. Three parents remarked that the world is neither all Black nor all White and even though

they would like their children to have a more diverse experience, they did not think that the lack of diversity negatively affected them. In fact, five parents viewed the lack of diversity in their charter schools as a positive attribute. These parents referred to it as the “Black Experience.” Parents explained that the “Black Experience” afforded their children an environment in which AA culture and heritage could more readily be explored and taught. The same parents believed that it had enabled their children to develop pride in themselves and their ancestors. One parent who sent his daughter to MC for the “Black Experience” was slightly disappointed that the curriculum was not as Afro-centric as he had hoped. The remaining 27 parents said that the race of the student population in their charter school was insignificant as long as their children learned and were successful.

*Finding Two: Parents’ perception of traditional public schools – the institutional setting.*

The 33 parents in this study spoke of traditional public schools (TPS) in extremes. All 33 of them reported that they had attended a TPS and none of them mentioned any negative experiences during their own public school years as students. Three of them remembered their teachers being firm but caring; and seven of them expressed compassion for the difficult job current TPS teachers have. Thirty-one of the parent respondents attended integrated schools; all 33 of them remembered being accepted and treated fairly in their TPS. None of them spoke of there having been gangs in their schools or of children being labeled when they were students. Two parents spoke of the negative experiences that their siblings had. They both felt that a smaller environment would have benefited their siblings because they felt that they needed more attention and were lost in their large public school classrooms.

Except for one parent, they all agreed that public schools had changed considerably since they were students, and not for the better. Parents’ opinions varied as to the cause of the changes. Some parents attributed the changes to multiple causes, 87.8% percent believed that public schools were too big; 21.2% felt that there was too much violence in the schools; and 15% felt that many of the problems were caused by the

unruly students themselves. Twenty-four percent said that the biggest problem was the teachers. These parents insisted that there is a lack of discipline in the schools and that the teachers have given up trying to teach the children, partially because of undisciplined behavior on the part of some of the children. One parent said that she thought that perhaps the teachers were afraid to discipline the students. Eighteen percent of the parents said that the teachers do not care about the children and do not love them; 12% said that the teachers were just there for the money. From the media they heard about gangs in the schools, schools being locked down, and about multiple police officers assigned to schools to keep order and to protect the children who wanted to learn. Twenty-four percent of parents believed that TPS had become dangerous because of the inability or unwillingness of teachers and school officials to enforce discipline and 18% believed it was because of the lack of discipline children get at home.

Some parents (27%), whose children attended traditional public schools before coming to charters, reported that they were surprised when they discovered that their children were having difficulties in TPS. Their surprise turned to disappointment, frustration, and then anger. In several instances, parents (12%) said they were not informed of their children's difficulties or potential failure until late in the year. These same parents felt that neither the teachers nor the administrators listened to them when they tried to assist in solving the problems their children were having. Some problems were never addressed to their satisfaction and by the time something was done to remedy other problems, the school year was almost over. Affected parents felt that a whole year (in some cases, years) of their children's lives were wasted because of lack of communication, lack of attention to their pleas for help, improper diagnoses, the lethargic pace of the huge public school system, and/or all of the above. They were angry because they felt that their children were ignored, misdiagnosed, labeled, or failed by the teachers and administrators whom they thought they could trust.

Twelve percent of the parents in this study, whose older children attended traditional public schools before charters were available were not unhappy with their older children's educational experiences; but felt that they could have had better experiences if they had had the opportunity to attend a small charter school like the one

their younger children presently attend. Eighteen percent of the parents felt that the years their children spent in traditional public schools were destructive to their self-esteem and wasted valuable learning time. Twenty-seven percent of the parents whose children have never attended a TPS had little confidence that their children would have a positive experience if they were to ever attend one. Because there are no secondary charter schools in the Durham area as of the 2004-2005 school year, and because their parents cannot afford private education, the children of the parents in this study who are aging out of charters will have to attend a TPS in the coming years. Some of the parents spoke with dread of the prospect.

*Finding Three: Parents' view themselves as citizen consumers – new ideology*

The parents in this study were delighted and grateful that they finally had affordable choices in the educational marketplace outside of traditional public schools; and they were confident that they were competent to select the schools best suited for their children. Although almost every one of them reported that they were pleased with the charter schools their children presently attended, four parents did have complaints. One parent at MC said that she felt the principal was off campus too frequently and that she was not happy with one of the assistant administrators (she did not want to explain why); one mother at HC felt that her son's learning problems had not been identified as quickly as she had hoped; and one father would have liked for his daughter's experience at MC to have been more Afro-centric. All three parents had already re-enrolled their children for the coming year at MC because they felt that the problems were not major. The fourth parent, a father, had decided not to re-enroll his son, a rising 7<sup>th</sup> grader, at HC because he felt he was not being challenged academically and he explained that he really wanted him to go to the TPS he had attended for middle school because he was well known there, had had a positive experience as a student, and felt it would be a good experience for his son.

Ultimately, the parents made it clear that their loyalties lay with their children. If they determined in the future that their present charter school was not serving their children well, they would seek another school. Thirty-one of the 33 parents in this study

(94%) had re-enrolled their children for the coming year at their present charter school, and even if provided with a voucher, a charter school would still be the first choice of 39% of all of the parents. Another 39% admitted that their first choice would be to send their children to a private school if they were provided with at voucher; 12% said they would choose either a private or a charter school; one mother who attended parochial school as a child said her first choice would be a Catholic school; the father, who is returning his son to public school next year said, even if given a voucher, his first choice would be a traditional public school; and one mother was undecided.

The parents in this study saw themselves as citizen consumers in the educational marketplace empowered by choice. They were on a quest for educational opportunities for their children and seemed determined to achieve their mission even though they knew that their options were limited by many things including income, location, and by the people who make the laws. A few parents (9%) seemed to know very little about vouchers or about how they could benefit from them. The rest of the parents knew that other states offered vouchers to eligible parents and that vouchers could provide them with more options. One mother, Mrs. B12 at HC, made it clear that she thought it was unfair that some of the politicians who made the laws, and whose children attended private schools, were instrumental in preventing her children from attending private schools by voting against vouchers. She said, “If you could take their kids out [of private schools] and put them where our kids go, they would be devastated. *They* couldn’t make it!”

*Finding Four: Who, ultimately, deserves the credit for our children’s success or the blame for their failure? More ideology.*

Even though the questions posed by the study did not address parental responsibility, parents frequently volunteered, specifically, what they do to ensure their children’s school success and what they feel other parents needed to do. Essentially, they explained their philosophy, principles, and values—their ideology—with regard to child rearing as it relates to schooling. Since the intent of this study was to explore parents’ ideology, as it relates to school choice, their views are presented here.

Forty-eight percent of the parents in this study unabashedly volunteered that they felt that, as parents, they are ultimately responsible for their children's educational success and their success in life. They insisted that all parents must be vigilant if they are going to protect their children from situations, places, and people that might harm them and that included peers, schools, and school personnel. They recognized that their children would not succeed in any school without support from them, and, they asserted, if their children failed academically – parents *and* the schools they attend must share the blame. They seemed to agree at least partially with Boyer (1992) who argues, “schools are failing...from the pathologies that surround them - neglected children, troubled families, and neighborhoods in decay” (p. xvii).

Twenty-seven percent of the parents in this study insisted that parents can help solve the problems in all schools – traditional public or charter – if they disciplined their children at home, expected them to behave at school, set high academic goals for them to strive for, and took a real, involved interest in them and their schoolwork. It is their belief that many of the problems children have at school are problems that begin in the home and therefore parents can help solve them. They acknowledged that schools play a large part in their children's education, but they felt that they, the parents, are the ones who must make sure that their children get to school, that they behave at school, that homework is being done, that learning is taking place, and that tests and grades are being passed. Unfortunately, according to some of parents (27%) in this study, it was their opinion that some parents did not attend to their children properly. They seemed to echo Cosby's sentiments when he addressed what he believes is the root cause of the huge dropout rate of Black students. In Cosby's view, it is a direct result of African American parents' lack of responsibility. He said, “In the neighborhood that most of us grew up in, parenting is not going on” (Jones, 2006, p. D2). Nine (27%) of the parents in this study seemed to agree with Cosby, that many African American parents were not being as responsible for their children as they could or should.

The parents in this study, who felt that they acted responsibly before they had a choice, now had the additional responsibility of shopping for the best available schools, with the best teachers. You could sense the frustration and desperation in their voices as



they recounted the problems encountered in their search. They wanted their children enrolled in schools that reflected their expectations and goals. They felt that they were doing their part at home and wanted to find a school that would at least meet them half way. They were adamant that they could not and would not sit back and let their children be ignored, labeled, mistreated, given up on, or lost in a huge insensitive school, which, 87.8% of them reported, was one of the biggest drawbacks to traditional public schools – size. They saw TPS as too big, too impersonal, and too busy to care. In addition, 39% of the parents did not view TPS as a place where they or their children were welcomed, accepted, or safe. Further, even though, as one parent admitted, she did not want “to play the race card,” she and 12 other parents (39% of the parents in the study) did not think that traditional public schools saw African American children as children with potential. According to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, being “underestimated” is not a new problem for Black children. She reported to Katie Couric during an interview on 60 Minutes that it was one of the biggest obstacles Black children in Alabama faced back in the 60s when she was a child (Fager, 2006). Thirteen of the parents (39%) in this study seemed to think that because their children are Black, they too, are underestimated.

Parents spoke of their dreams, their full intentions, to see their children succeed academically, but they also admitted that they feared for their children. Unequivocally, the parents in this study want their children to be successful in life and some worried that their children would fail to achieve, would get lost in the system. Two mothers tearfully worried aloud that they did not want their sons to end up in gangs hanging out on the corner. One mother angrily asserted that that would not happen to her sons. Three mothers spoke of the larger than average numbers of AA children, boys especially, who have a history of failure and incarceration. They, at least partially, blame the huge public school system.

The AA parents in this study did not seem to have a laissez-faire attitude with regard to their children’s educational opportunities. Forty-eight percent of them visited their children’s charter schools before they made the final decision to enroll them. Another 18% consulted friends, 21% consulted charter schoolteachers in whom they had confidence, 27% consulted relatives, and 33% of the parents consulted multiple sources.

Many of the parents seemed to have made it their mission to do whatever was necessary to ensure that their children were educated in a school that believed in the potential of all children – especially theirs.

*Finding Five: Administrators in this study understood what parents were seeking*

The two principals in this study were aware that they were operating “businesses” and that the students in their schools, along their parents, were “customers” who had options. They both recognized that parents’ disenchantment with and alienation from traditional public schools, at least partially, enabled charter schools to become established. Their comments about what they believed their schools needed to offer in order to attract and keep students echoed what parents said they wanted. They both seemed to realize that parents were choosing their schools for something more than just an equal opportunity to learn. The principals believed that parents chose their schools because of their size and climate, which is one that welcomed, invited them to participate, and embraced them and their children. Both principals recognized that parents wanted their children in a smaller, more caring environment where they had a voice in what happened to their children, where their children were known and valued, and, most important, where African American children were seen as children with potential.

Mr. Peek, principal at MC, and Mr. Denver, principal at HC, are separated in age by 25 years, Mr. Peek being the senior of the two. Both principals are African American and both taught at the college level early in their careers, Mr. Peek at his alma mater South Dakota State University for two years and Mr. Denver, at his alma mater, NC Central University (NCCU) in Durham for seven years.

Mr. Peek, who completed three years in the US Air Force, and then taught at ND, began his career with the Durham city/county public school system after successfully securing a grant for and implementing a Self-esteem Building/Delinquency Diversion Program he designed while working for Juvenile Services in Durham. Mr. Peek worked for Durham public schools for 25 years as an assistant principal and then as an assistant to the superintendent prior to assuming the role of principal at Montana Charter for the

2004-2005 school year; the school's 7<sup>th</sup> year in operation. Members of MC's board of directors recruited him.

At NCCU, in his ten years of service, Mr. Denver served as a Student Affairs administrator, directed the Teaching Fellows and NC Teach Programs, and taught in both the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Education. While still employed at NCCU, he was contacted by the Chair of the HC Board of Directors for an interview.

He was subsequently recruited by the board and became principal of HC for the 2003-2004 school year.

Both HC and MC opened in 1997, the first year charters were permitted to open in NC. Both schools have had multiple principals and both have had their share of good and not so good years with regard to test scores. HC has enjoyed the most positive attention, having been recognized nationally in 2000 for achieving in the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading and the 91<sup>st</sup> percentile in math on the Iowa Test for Basic Skills (Billups, 2000) despite an 80% low-income, inner city, student population that was 100% AA. Three years later, in 2002-03, scores had dropped and 60% and 55% of HC students were performing at or above grade level in math and reading respectively. In 2003-04, Mr. Denver's first year as principal, scores rose to 70% in math and 60% in reading. In 2004-05, scores in both areas dropped to 55% in math and 48% in reading (NCDPI, 2005). Scores for 2005-2006 were not available.

MC, out scored HC in 2002-2003; 73% of students performed at or above grade level in math and 67% performed above grade level in reading. In 2003-2004, grades dropped at MC but were still higher than at HC; math dropped to 69% and reading to 60%. The first year Mr. Peek was principal, 2004-2005, reading scores rose to 63% but math scores sank to 59%. Again, however, MC outperformed HC.

Neither MC or HC performed as well in 2004-2005 as the Durham Public School District which posted scores of 81.1% in math and 78.2% in reading, or as well as the state of NC which reported 87.3% above grade level in math and 84.6% in reading.

Both principals spoke of the importance of employing experienced qualified teachers and of their concern for raising test scores, but they also said that the numbers of children who come to them after having had unsuccessful experiences in TPS made the

job of charter schools very difficult. In addition to making academic strides, both principals spoke of the need to build confidence and self-esteem in their students. They both recognized and addressed the important role they felt they played in guiding their students to becoming successful people in school and in life.

Just as the parents spoke of the need for love, confidence building, and personal relationships, both administrators addressed the need for those same qualities in their schools. They reported that they tried to connect with their students on a daily basis, to know them by name, and to personally encourage them to strive for excellence. They were cognizant of the need to let parents and students know that they care and they reported that if the teachers do not espouse the values that they and their schools promote, they can be and are replaced. Because teachers do not have tenure in charter schools, contracts are re-negotiated at the end of each year and both the teacher and the principal have a choice as to whether or not s/he will choose to return and/or be asked to return. Both principals worked to achieve a match between what the students needed and what their schools offered. They recognized, as did the parents in this study, that caring teachers are a huge component of that match.

Both principals knew that many of their older students had had failed experiences in TPS and that many parents of younger students were intimidated by what they had heard about traditional public schools, thus they felt parents needed reassurance that the learning experiences their children would have at charter schools would be appropriate, positive, and successful. In an effort to accomplish this task, the principals worked toward keeping the lines of communication open. They did not hesitate to call parents, to send notes, to speak with them when they were on campus, or to meet with them for conferences. They encouraged their teachers to keep in touch with parents, to share all types of news. Both administrators tried to ensure that parents felt comfortable when they came to school or when they called to speak with them or with the teachers.

The principals argued, as did the parents in this study, that it is very difficult for schools to successfully educate children without support from parents. Learning, after all, should not begin when a child enters school said Mr. Peek, principal at MC. He insisted, "School is not where learning starts. It starts at conception." Both principals

agreed with the parents who insisted that if children are going to be successful at school and in their lives, there must be a partnership between parents and schools. Both principals emphasized that they made a concerted effort to get and keep parents involved. Mr. Denver admitted that he and his faculty and staff had to be creative when they schedule events in order to make them accessible to parents, the overwhelming majority of whom work.

Mr. Peek said that charters are a “Godsend” for AA parents who were not being well served in traditional public schools, who were seeking a better opportunity for their children, and who, heretofore, did not have a choice. Mr. Denver concurred with the parents in this study and with Mr. Peek when he said that having the right to choose is “the greatest thing ever!” Along with the parents, Mr. Denver believes that parents “have a right to choose schools that they feel their children can be educated in.”

As to the inequities experienced by African American children in traditional public schools, referred to by several parents in this study, HC’s principal, Mr. Denver, explained, “I have problems when I constantly see African American children on the bottom – especially the males – in reading. I have problems seeing African American children on the bottom in math. I explain it by saying that I don’t believe that we [educators] have given every ounce of energy to educate *all* children. Children of color have always struggled. I believe it goes back to the civil rights movement. We [Americans] have never been able to embrace integration in a way that it should have been embraced.”

### *Conclusion*

The researcher attempted to tell the story that the data revealed not the story a priori the researcher wanted told. It was not surprising to discover that almost all of the parents were pleased, if not elated, to finally have a choice in their children’s education – especially one that all of them could afford. The greatest surprise was finding out that 48% of the parents felt that they played a huge role in their children’s school success - that they were the “key” to that success and that they believed that schools could not

succeed without parental support. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents said that parents could help solve the problems in all schools – public or charter – if they disciplined their children at home; expected them to behave when they were at school; took a real, involved interest in them and their school work; and set high academic goals for them to strive for. According to the parents (27%), the solution to the problems in all schools begins at home with the parents, whether their children are in public or charter schools. Those same parents are seeking support from responsible, dedicated educators who recognize their children’s potential. The parents (48%) in this study acknowledged that educating children requires co-operation and teamwork between home and school.

Perhaps because of the relaxed, conversational atmosphere created during the interviews, parents spoke candidly and enabled me to achieve an understanding of their feelings about: school choice; the qualities they are seeking in schools; the kind of schools they think their children need; the forces that are driving the decisions they are making; their view of the role they play in their children’s lives; and, their feelings about the lack of diversity in their charter schools. In addition, I discovered that both of the administrators at the two charters in the study knew and understood why African American parents had chosen their charter schools, agreed that the parents’ reasons were valid, and were striving to ensure that the parents’ expectations would be met.

It became obvious early on that because of *choice*, the parents in this study were simultaneously grateful and determined. They were grateful to have had a choice; grateful to have had some control over this important aspect of their children’s lives; grateful that they had an option outside of the traditional public system; and, grateful to have found a school that they perceived recognized that their children had potential and cared for them individually. They seemed determined to take advantage of the opportunity for choice that charter schools had offered, determined to find the best school for their children considering the options at their disposal, and determined to help them develop confidence and the academic skills that they believed were the keys to their success in life.

The parents in this study spoke candidly and were eager to express how they felt about charters, to explain why they had chosen to exit the traditional public school

system, and/or to explain why they had chosen not to enroll their children in a TPS in the first place. Prior to charters, it was difficult for them to opt out of traditional public schools because they could not afford to pay for private or parochial education. As of the fall of 1997, however, when the first charter schools opened in North Carolina, many parents, for the first time, found themselves in an “option demand” (Elmore, 1991) system of choice where they were able to choose a new schooling alternative, charter schools, or remain in their traditional public schooling arrangement.

Option demand is a two-stage choice process that involves, first, the decision to leave traditional public schools, and second, a choosing from among the possible alternatives (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). None of the parents reported having had difficulty making the decision to leave traditional public schools. Twenty-seven percent, whose children had never attended a TPS admitted that they had decided before their children were even old enough to enroll in school, that they would never let them ever attend a TPS. Twelve percent of the parents pointed out that they had considered more than one charter before making their final decision, 12% admitted that their children had attended more than one charter school before enrolling in their present charter, and another 12% reported that their children had attended private schools before coming to their present charter.

Only one parent expressed ambivalence about the task of choosing a school for her children. She was concerned that she might make the wrong choice and that she and her children would then have to suffer the consequences. The rest of the parents seemed not to be overly concerned. They seemed confident that they were best suited to determine where their children should go to school because they felt that they knew their children’s abilities and potential better than anyone else. Moreover, they were not resigned to remaining at a school that was not a good match. In fact, parents frankly admitted that they had placed their children in other charter schools and then moved them because they did not think they were the best place for them. Because the parents had choices and believed that finding the right school was important, some (21%) said that they were determined to move their children until they were able to find the school they deemed the best match for their children.

Parents (73%) in this study whose children attended a traditional public school prior to enrolling in a charter based their decision to remove their children primarily on their experiences and those of their children. Many were disappointed with traditional public schools and felt disenfranchised before the first charter school opened, but could not remove their children because they did not have an alternative they could afford. Some parents (18%) believed that when their children were in traditional public schools, they were misdiagnosed, labeled, ignored and as a result, some subsequently failed. The same parents felt that the years their children spend in TPS were wasted years.

Twenty-seven percent of the parents in the study were surprised when they found out that their children were having difficulty in TPS. Twelve percent reported that they did not know about the academic problems that their children were having until it was too late in the school year to do anything about them. Fifteen percent of the parents felt that the traditional public schools their children attended did not communicate with them, include them, or listen to them when they tried to ask for help for their children.

An overwhelming majority of the parents (84%) in this study believed that public schools were overcrowded, 15% believed that many of the students who attended them were undisciplined, and 24% believed that TPS teachers were too afraid or too overwhelmed to maintain control of their classrooms. While a few parents felt compassion for TPS teachers because they believed that public schools had changed for the worse and were not at all like the schools they attended as children, many (24%) felt that the teachers were a major part of the problem. Eighteen percent of the parents said that their children's teachers were not conscientious, did not extend themselves as they remembered their teachers doing, and seemed not to care about or love their students. Worst of all, some of the parents (15%) felt that their children were not valued as children with potential because they are African American.

Johnson, Arumi, & Ott (2006) found similar complaints when they interviewed Black students and parents in their study. Black students reported that few of their teachers treated them with respect, that few of them provided extra help when needed, and that they would have liked their schools to have been a learning environment but that they were a hostile environment. Black parents, interviewed by Johnson et al during the



same study, reported worrying about equity. They complained that superintendents were not doing a good job of ensuring that minority children were getting an equal opportunity to succeed and they were more concerned and dissatisfied than White parents about low standards, high dropout rates, and a shortage of resources. Black parents complained that teachers had unfairly disciplined their children and that their children were underserved by local public schools.

The parents in this study contended that the sheer size of traditional public schools affected the teachers' ability to provide the individual attention that they wanted for their children and that they thought their children needed. Those parents (73 %) whose children attended a traditional public school prior to entering a charter school based their opinions about traditional public schools primarily on their own experiences. In addition, they and the rest of the parents admitted that they relied on reports from the media and on a mélange of word-of-mouth information from family and friends, most of which was negative. Parents (18%) who reported that they had seen public service announcements touting the positive attributes of Durham County public schools did not believe them, because they or their children had had negative experiences in traditional public schools, and/or they believed the considerable unfavorable stories they had heard from people they knew and trusted. The overwhelming majority (94%) of the parents in this study seemed to have negative opinions about traditional public schools in Durham County and the few parents who reported seeing positive public service announcements touting TPS were not dissuaded.

While some (21%) of the parents believed that traditional public schools were dangerous places, not one of children of the parents in this study had ever been physically hurt while attending a traditional public school. Their fears, however, were reinforced by the stories they had heard from others and by what they had seen, heard, and/or read in the media about gangs and violence in Durham public schools. None of the parents in this study had ever visited a traditional public school prior to enrolling his/her children, and parents whose children had never attended a traditional public school admitted that they have never visited one either.

Even though the parents in this study seemed to rely on word of mouth information from family and friends and information from the media about traditional public schools, they seemed to have taken a more direct approach when investigating charters. Nearly half of the parents (48%) in this study said that they had visited their children's present charter school before deciding to enroll them. They spoke with the principal, the teachers, and observed classes before committing. Twelve percent reported visiting other charters, too, before making their final decision. When asked how they found out about charter schools none of the parents in this study reported going on line to check the NC Department of Education web site or any other internet source that offered facts and information about schools.

Betts et al. (2006) found that academic criteria such as test scores only moderately influenced parents' decisions to opt out of their TPS and apply to an alternative school in San Diego's school choice program. Even though forty-two percent of the parents in this study spoke of the importance of End of Grade test scores, none of them reported going on line to compare how their charter school compared with other charters or with traditional public schools in Durham County. Eighteen percent of the parents said that they had been confronted with negative information and opinions about charters from other parents but rationalized that those parents had not visited charters, did not know the truth about them, and reasoned that if they had known the truth, they would have enrolled their own children in a charter school. In fact, one hundred percent of the traditional public elementary schools in Durham are outperforming Haven Charter academically according to NC's ABC, End of Grade Test scores and 64% are outperforming Montana Charter. Not one elementary school in the Durham public school system performed as poorly academically as Haven Charter in 2004-2005 (NCDPI, 2005). Betts et al. (2006) concluded, as have I, that perhaps improving reading and math scores might not be the most important parental goal when choosing a school for their children.

The parents in this study seemed to have chosen charters for all of the qualities they found sorely missing in traditional public schools. The two charters in this study were small and were organized somewhat like partnerships wherein everyone felt as though s/he had a significant contribution to make; thus, parents seemed to perceive that

they were valued. Both MC and HC presented parents with contracts that asked them to come to school, to get involved, and to contribute. Nearly half (48%) of the parents spoke of the significance of the role they played in their children's lives and the two charters in this study seemed to actually treat parents as if they and their input really mattered. Both charters were small enough to keep parents informed and both conveyed a welcoming atmosphere of inclusion. It is a truism that parents are valuable assets to schools, and the parents in this study believed that their children's charters treated them as if they really were.

The majority (66.6%) of the parents in this study reported believing that their children were known, loved, and cared for individually at their charter schools and that the administrators, teachers, and the staff were building caring relationships with them. Mr. Peek, principal at MC, insisted that the development of relationships between children and their teachers was critical to a child's success and argued that the small size of charter schools contributed to that process. He said,

The best part [about this charter school] is the relationship that they [the children] have with the facilitators of learning and the folks that have their care and custody. If you want to reach children, whether they are academically gifted or whether they are struggling academically, you must have a relationship with them.

Parents (48%) reported that if their children were having trouble with a subject, the teachers knew about it, reported it to them, and together they took action to remedy it in a timely fashion. The parents of children who had failed or had had negative experiences in traditional public schools believed that their children's strengths were being recognized at their charter school, that their weaknesses had been correctly identified, and that they were achieving at an appropriate level for them individually. Some (18%) were cognizant of and admitted that their children were not where they need to be academically, but they could see their children learning and making progress and they believed that their children's teachers had confidence that they were capable of

learning, and that they would learn if they worked hard toward that end. Those parents whose children had had a difficult time and who had had to struggle in traditional public school had been given hope. Those parents (27%) whose children had never attended a traditional public school seemed confident that they had made the best choice for their children. Twenty-one percent of the parents made it clear that they intended to be vigilant, to stay involved, and would not hesitate to look for a different school if they decided that their present charter was not living up to their expectations.

As Weiss (1995) contends, people have certain beliefs because of information they have acquired and they make decisions because of their interest in the outcome. The parents in this study have chosen not to enroll their children in traditional public schools or to leave them because of information they have acquired both about traditional public schools and about charters. They have chosen charters because they believe charter schools best serve their interests, which are their children. They truly believe that the teachers and the administrators in the charter schools they have chosen care about their children, love each child individually, believe that each child can learn and succeed, and are determined to help build their confidence and develop their academic skills so that they can be successful in life. The parents' decision-making is driven by their quest for equal educational opportunities for their children, provided by caring teachers, in a positive, loving environment.

The attributes that the parents ascribe to administrators and teachers are admirable but subjective and difficult to measure objectively. In the two areas that NC measures teacher qualifications percentage of fully licensed and percentage of Highly Qualified Teachers (HQT), both charter schools in this study fall short when compared to the teachers in Durham TPS and when compared to the state average. Ninety-three percent of TPS teachers in NC and 90% in Durham County were fully licensed as compared to 85% in MC and only 46% at HC. Only 47% of the teachers at HC were recognized as HQT, which was considerably fewer than MC with 79%. The data revealed that both charter schools in this study had fewer HQT than Durham County and the state, which reported that 87% and 92% of their teachers, respectively, were HQT.

I found that parents were not so much against traditional public schools nor committed to the concept of charter schools as they were determined to find a safe, rich, positive, caring learning environment for each of their children that offer individualized instruction, positive reinforcement, and the promise of academic achievement. Whether a school was integrated or not was not the most important criterion for the AA parents in this study. They were more interested in their children being safe and successful and they were committed to seeking out the school that they felt would accomplish that. Perhaps they agreed with Justice Clarence Thomas, who rejected the idea that integrated schooling was educationally preferable when he wrote, “Black schools can function as the center and symbol of Black communities, and provide examples of independent Black leadership, success, and achievement” (Missouri v. Jenkins, 1995).

One parent who had four children, three of whom were in grades 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> (one child in a traditional public school and two in two different charters) made it clear that her goal was to find a school for each of her children that was a good match because her children were all different and had different needs. Her second child, who was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade at a TPS, had had good experiences in traditional public schools every year. Her two younger children were not well served in TPS so she had looked for an alternative. She could not afford a private school so she began investigating charters. The first charter she chose was a good match for her daughter but not for her son. She continued to search and found MC. She felt she presently had all three of her youngest children in schools that were very good for them, individually. Her comments to me were, “Children need to be placed in a school that is going to benefit them individually, because they’re all different. They learn differently. They think differently. They act differently. And depending on how the teacher is – what the child is going to get out of it.” She admitted that it took considerable time and energy to have three children in three different schools but she felt it was definitely worth it. Like many of the parents in this study, this mother was taking advantage of the new options at her disposal in her search for educational services; and she seemed dedicated to finding a match between each of her children and a school that would serve their individual needs.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

This section of the case study focuses on the implications of the findings that may be of interest to legislators, school officials, and school board members who can affect schooling policy, be instrumental in school reform, determine the size of school buildings, and/or select school personnel. It may also be of interest to those who are responsible for instructing and preparing administrators and teachers in schools of education; and school administrators, teachers, and support personnel in all types of schools who are interested in gaining additional skills that could be useful in connecting with African American parents and their children in order to build more effective, working partnerships. Armed with the insights provided by the respondents in this study, perhaps schools can be improved for all children.

School board members, county commissioners, and voters who approve multi-million dollar expenditures to build huge public schools that house several hundred children from all corners of counties and parishes need to understand one of the reasons why the parents in this study are exiting traditional public schools. They want their children educated in a smaller, more personal setting. They want their children to be a significant part of a school and of a class where they are known and valued as individuals. Parents speak of End of Grade tests and know that passing those tests is important, but even more important to them is a school that is small enough to know their children and to care about them personally.

Small schools may not seem as efficient in the eyes of county commissioners yet small school advocates recognize, as do the parents in this study, that small schools are better for children, parents, teachers, and administrators. Many children survive in large traditional public schools and some flourish, but if we have learned anything from research and history we have to admit that minority children, especially Black children are not flourishing in large schools. They are lagging behind, failing, and dropping out at unacceptable rates.

With the advent of charter schools, the AA parents in this study have become citizen consumers of educational services. Empowered by the choices afforded them by

multiple charter schools in their area, they now have the means to possibly secure better schools for their children. If provided with vouchers, many of the parents in this study admit that they would choose to leave both traditional public schools and charters, and enroll their children in schools outside the public domain. If they were to join forces with other parents who are dissatisfied, they could possibly be effective in influencing the mood that is gaining momentum in the country, to let the money truly follow the child in the form of vouchers. Armed with vouchers, parents could and might exit TPS in even greater numbers.

The African American parents in this study know that there is an achievement gap between AA children and White children in the United States and they believe charter schools may have a better chance of closing the gap than traditional public schools because charters *treat* their children differently. Other countries have the same achievement gap problem between White children and children of other races and cultures. In New Zealand, for example, the Māori<sup>2</sup> children have continued to flounder despite national efforts to raise their achievement levels since the 1960s. In 2001, when researchers in New Zealand decided to try to find out why the schools in their country have not been able to close the achievement gap between native Māori children and children of British descent, they chose to interview Māori adolescents in hopes of finding some answers (Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, Rewiti & Walker, 2001). The feedback they got from interviews with 14 and 15-year-old students was somewhat similar to the explanations I was able to glean from charter school administrators and AA parents in Durham County. Māori students offered examples of being picked on, expected to be dumb, spoken to in a hurtful way, and wrongfully accused of stealing, all at the hands of their teachers and administrators who are largely of British descent. When the New Zealand educators were interviewed, they blamed the achievement problems of the Māori children on their home lives, and offered no solutions. The students, however, had some specific ideas about what might help their academic performance. They suggested that New Zealand educators *treat* them differently than they had in the past. They suggested

---

<sup>2</sup> Māori are members of tribes that inhabited New Zealand's islands hundreds of years before Captain Cook put them on the map in the 1700s.

that New Zealand teachers act as if they were pleased to see them; that they talk to them quietly when they are displeased; and that they listen to their input (Bishop et al, 2001).

Armed with the Māori students' suggestions, the New Zealand researchers (Bishop et al, 2001) developed an effective teaching profile that focused on building relationships, interactive teaching techniques, and other strategies. Specifically, teachers in 12 schools in the country were coached as to how they could make their classrooms more welcoming to Māori students. Some teachers resisted the changes but by the end of 2005, the researchers reported that teachers were changing their teaching styles, student absences were decreasing, and test scores were up for both Māori students and non-Māori students. In one school, Māori students who would generally sit at the back of the classroom were slowly integrating themselves into the rest of the class. Perhaps American policymakers, administrators, and teachers need to attend to what the Black parents in this study are telling them, just as the researchers and educators listened to the Māori children in New Zealand.

American educators at all levels could possibly learn a lesson from the New Zealand researchers (Bishop et al, 2001) and take a hard look at how African American children are typically treated in traditional public schools. Schools of education and teacher development programs within school systems might consider providing teachers with new information and new strategies that could enable them to reach more of the children in their classes if they can create more inclusive, compassionate environments. White teachers who have never taught Black children (and many who have taught them for years) may not know how to relate to them, may not understand their culture, and may have a negative mind set about the capabilities of Black children. Teacher development courses could be designed to provide insight into Black culture, teachers could be made aware that perhaps their Black students have difficulty relating to White teachers and that they need to be more sensitive in their methods of dealing with AA children. Certainly, all teachers need to recognize that all children have potential and need to be treated with respect.

If well served in charters, AA parents may encourage other parents to follow their example. Perhaps traditional public school advocates need, at least, to consider what is



attracting parents to charters and at the same time take a look at their reasons for exiting traditional public schools. Policy makers need to look at equity and define it in terms broader than materials and buildings. Individual schools need to look at how they treat their “customers” and ask themselves, “Would I come back if I were treated this way?” This is an especially important question now that parents have a choice. Superintendents and principals need to consider the environment of many of the traditional public schools that minority children attend and recognize as Johnson et al (2006, p. 3) point out, “If an adult had to work in an environment where disrespect, bad language, fighting and drug and alcohol abuse were practiced by a relative few, but tolerated or winked at by management, it might be considered a ‘hostile workplace.’” There is little excuse for rowdy, unsettled schools and the Black parents in this study are not going to subject their children to them if they can find an alternative.

Some of the parents in this study are choosing charters because they feel that AA children are mistreated in traditional public schools. They insist that some teachers have low expectations of their children and view them as not having potential because they are Black. They report that some teachers ignore them and their children. They did not mention that the schools they are choosing to leave employ predominately-White teachers, but they do. Of the 2305 teachers in Durham County Public Schools there are 1,535 White teachers (66.59%), 721 Black teachers (31.28%), 18 Hispanic/Latino teachers (.78%), 16 teachers (.69%) who identify themselves as “Other,” 12 Asian teachers (.52%), and 3 American Indian teachers (.13%) (C. Johnson, Durham Public Schools, personal communication, September 14, 2006). At Haven Charter, one of the two charter schools in this study, 98% of the teachers are African American (A. Hill, personal communication, April 26, 2005), and 93 % are African American at Montana Charter, the second school in the study (M. Barbee, personal communication, April 26, 2005).

The African American parents in this study see themselves as citizen consumers of educational services. Parents have become part (whether knowingly or unknowingly) of the consumership coalition, which Cookson (1992, p. 91) argues, is “so powerful...it has institutionalized itself, both inside and outside of government”. In 1987, Boyd

warned educational reformers that, “as the educational level of families rises they tend to become more sophisticated, discerning, and demanding consumers of educational services.” Apparently, this is at least part of the impetus behind AA parents’ departure from TPS in the Durham area. The parents in this study are all at least high school graduates. Several are college graduates and at least two are college students. They know that education is the key to their children’s ability to “successfully compete and advance in society” (Cooper, 2005, p. 184). Their educational decision-making is not driven by the competitive forces of the educational market as much as by their quest for equal educational opportunities, which they do not believe are available to their children in traditional public schools.

The parents in this study who have chosen charter schools have made what Cooper (2005, p. 175) describes as “positioned choices” which she says are “emotional, value-laden, and culturally relevant.” Parents no longer find value in schools simply because they are integrated. Boyd’s (1987) warning of the potential endangering of American public schools because of “fundamental demographic and value shifts” has come to pass (p. 85). Educators who are wedded to their old ideas as to what parents expect from schools and the power of the educational monopoly need to attend to the choices that parents are making if they want traditional public schools, as they know them, to survive.

As Americans, we have a history of pursuing liberty and, as free people, we like making our own choices. One such freedom, freedom of choice in education has long been out of reach for those who are not affluent or are discriminated against. Publicly funded charter schools, freely chosen, are a welcome change particularly for some African American parents because they have been locked in to traditional public schools that they feel have not provided their children with an equitable education. Because of their disappointment and dissatisfaction, many African American parents in Durham County, North Carolina are choosing to enroll their children in charter schools (See Footnote 1).

State legislators, local school board members, and public school officials need to understand that many African American parents, who have had a taste of choice, will no

longer be content to settle for assigned traditional public schools in which they have little confidence. Critics of school choice need to recognize that this is a grass-roots effort and not a politically motivated right-wing attack on public education. Individually, and as a group, AA parents simply want more for their children than they are getting in traditional public schools. If the number of parents in NC who want to opt out of traditional public schools increases, TPS advocates, who want to maintain some control over the educational choices that parents make, are going to have to remove or raise the cap of 100 on charter schools that was met in 2005. Lawmakers, teachers unions, and other advocates of traditional public schools need to recognize that either there will have to be an increase in the number of publicly funded charter schools (to help curtail public dissatisfaction), or they may have to face the ever-increasing demand for vouchers. Vouchers would afford true choice to AA parents.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

This study used a purposive sampling procedure and confined itself to interviewing and observing administrators and parents/guardians at only two charter schools in Durham, North Carolina, whose populations were 99% to 100% African American. This purposive sampling procedure decreased the generalizability of the findings so it cannot be said that the two charter schools in this study represent all charter schools serving African American children in North Carolina.

According to Tashakkori and Teddlie using interviews as a method of data collection has disadvantages. They posit that the interviewer can unknowingly affect the responses of the interviewees through “gestures, mannerism, or verbal feedback” (1998, p.102). Further they contend that when the researcher and the interviewer are one and the same, there is a possibility that the interviewees can detect “subtle signs of agreement with statements and/or responses that are anticipated” (1998, p.102). Creswell (2003) concurs and suggests the researcher’s presence may bias responses.

Observations and/or participant observations (see p. 186 Creswell) can present problems if the researcher is seen as intrusive. “The influence of the researcher on the

setting or individuals studied” (Maxwell, 1996, p.91) generally known as reactivity, can also be a problem. Boglan and Biklan (1982, p. 138) warn that it is sometimes difficult to “counteract subjects’ potentially stereotypical views of you” and that, “race, sex, age, and other characteristics may influence the rapport you establish.” It is important to be aware of this influence and, since it cannot be eliminated, to use it productively. Maxwell suggests using open-ended questions and avoiding the use of leading questions.

I was very much aware of the effect I could have on each of the respondents by the personal characteristics I brought to the interview. With each new respondent I tried to create a relaxed, safe, non-judgmental environment in which s/he was assured of anonymity and felt free to answer open-ended questions from his/her own perspective and experience without fear of criticism or reprisal.

This study did not attempt to verify or refute the research conclusions of previous studies of choice by minority parents; however, it did attempt to expand the information that has been found. In some instances, the findings that developed supported the existing literature, but in other areas, the findings diverged considerably from the results of other studies.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Considering the limited numbers of respondents in this study, and the relatively new phenomenon of charter schools, many potential avenues for further research exist. It would be interesting to interview parents who could have chosen to enroll their children in a charter schools as early as 1997 in North Carolina, but who chose, instead, to enroll or re-enroll their children in a traditional public school. Their perception of their children’s accomplishments (as well as their actual grades) in TPS as compared to what they perceive their children might or might not have accomplish in a charter school could be explored.

Some AA parents, who are opting out of traditional public schools to enroll their children in charters for the first time because their children were not well served, have not had sufficient time to evaluate what will be the long term result of their decision. After

their children have been enrolled in charter schools for another three or four years, they will be better able to make a comparison and report their view as to the advantages of one type of school over the other. The continued growth of the charter school movement in NC could well be determined, at least partially, by the perceived success of African American students, especially if satisfied parents actively spread the good news.

Younger AA parents, who are becoming consumers of educational services for the first time, exploring the options that are available to them and making decisions, need time to determine if the charter schools they have chosen are going to be as effective, safe, and committed to their children, as they would have hoped. Many of the parents in this study have not experienced charter schools or traditional public schools from a parent's perspective. They have enrolled their children in a charter school based on positive information from respected others and from their own investigations. Some have enrolled their children in a charter because of negative information they have heard from others or from the media about traditional public schools. They, too, need time to acquire information based on the actual experiences they and their children will have had in charter schools over a period of years. Evaluating whether the high levels of parent satisfaction revealed in this study will hold up over time would be interesting to explore.

In this study, parents and administrators spoke frequently of the need for relationship building between school personnel and the students and their families. Both charter school principals in this study understood the need to know their students and their families and to encourage them to believe in themselves. Parents complained that traditional public school teachers and administrators did not communicate well with parents and just did not care about the children. Parents insisted that the lack of caring was reflected in the way their children were treated in traditional public schools. They believe that public school teachers and administrators have low expectations of Black children; that they ignore them, misdiagnose them and label them. The way minority children and their parents perceive they are mistreated in traditional public schools deserves further attention. Several studies (Bishop et al, 2001; Cooper, 2005; and Johnson, Arumi, & Ott, 2006) are a beginning, but much remains to be explored in this area.

## References

- Alexander, K., & Alexander, M. (2001). *American public school law* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). United States: West Thomson Learning.
- Alland, A., Jr. (1973). *Human diversity*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Allison, G. (1971). *Essence of decision*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Amend Charter School Law, NC Senate Bill 297 – S.L. 97-0430, Section 5. G.S. 115-238.29F (1997).
- Archer, J. (2004, January 7). Paige seeks to address thorny graduation data. *Education Week*, 23, 27 & 29.
- Armor, D., & Peiser, B. (1998). Interdistrict choice in Massachusetts. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Ascher, C., Fruchter, N., & Berne, R. (1996). *Hard lessons: Public schools and privatization*. New York: Twentieth Century School Fund.
- Auerbach, C., & Silverstein, L. (2003). *Qualitative data: An introduction to coding and analysis*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bakan, D. (1967). *On method: Toward a reconstruction of psychological investigation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bastian, A. (1995). Is public school “choice” a viable alternative? In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*. New York: The New Press.
- Betts, J., Rice, L., Zau, A., Tang, Y., Koedel, C. (2006). *Does school choice work? Effects on student integration and achievement*. California: Public Policy Institute of California
- Billups, A. (2000, May 26). Raising the bar: Charter school gives children “healthy start.” *The Washington Times*, p. B 10.
- Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Richardson, C., Rewiti, M. & Walker, R. (2001). *Te Kōtahitanga: The experiences of Maori students in mainstream classrooms*. An action research milestone report to the Ministry of Education on the first professional development workshop, Oraeroa and Kotahitanga Marae. Retrieved September 7, 2006 from: <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm>

- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bond, G. (1981). Social economic status and educational achievement: A review article. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 12(4), 227-257.
- Bond, H. (1970). *The education of the Negro in the American social order*. New York: Octagon Books.
- Bosk, C. (1979). *Forgive and remember: Managing medical failure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bowman, D. (2004, January 28). Latino optimism high on children's schools, national survey finds. *Education Week*, 18(42), 6.
- Boyd, W. (1976, May). The public, the professionals, and educational policy making: Who governs? *Teachers College Record*, 77(4).
- Boyd, W. (1987, Summer). Public education's last hurrah?: Schizophrenia, amnesia, and ignorance in school politics. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 9(2), 85-100.
- Boyd, W. (2000). The "r's of school reform" and the politics of reforming or replacing public schools. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1, 225-252.
- Boyd, W. & Kerchner, C. (1988). Introduction and overview: Education and the politics of excellence and choice. In W. Boyd & C. Kerchner (Eds.), *The politics of excellence and choice in education: Yearbook of the politics of education association*. New York: The Falmer Press.
- Boyer, E. (1992). Forward. In Carnegie Foundation (Eds.), *School choice: A special report*. Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Boykin, A. (1986). The triple quandary and the schooling of Afro-American children. In U. Neisser (Ed.), *The school achievement of minority children: New perspectives* (pp. 57-92). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brookings News Release. (2003, November). *First National Commission on Choice in K-12 education urges more funding For charters and vouchers, more autonomy to hire and fire*. Retrieved March 15, 2004 from: [www.brookings.edu/browncenter](http://www.brookings.edu/browncenter)
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct.686 (1954).

- Brown, P., & Haycock, K. (1984). *Excellence for whom? A report from the Planning Committee for the Achievement Council*. Oakland, CA: Achievement Council.
- Bullock, H. (1970). *A history of Negro education in the South: From 1619 to the present*. New York: Praeger.
- Burgess, R. (1985). *Field methods in the study of education*. London: Falmer Press.
- Carnegie Foundation (1992). *School choice: A special report*. Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Center for Education Reform (October, 2001). *Charter school highlights and statistics*. Retrieved January, 2005, from <http://www.edreform.com>
- Center for Education Reform. (January, 2005). *All about charter schools*. Retrieved October 27, 2005, from <http://www.edreform.com>
- Charter flight – The frustrations responsible for the flight to charter schools have been around for years. (1997, June 3). *Chapel Hill Herald* (NC), p. 4.
- Charter schools – Children first. (1998, October 11). *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC), A16.
- Children's Scholarship Fund-Charlotte (2005). Retrieved February 10, 2006 from: <http://www.csfcharlotte.org/about.asp>
- Chubb, J., & Moe, T. (1990). *Politics, markets and America's schools*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Closing charters. (1998, July 6). *The Wall Street Journal*, p. A 14.
- Coleman, J., Campbell, E., Hobson, C., McPartland, J., Mood, A., Weinfeld, F. & York, R., (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (Supplement), S95-S210.
- Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Cookson, P. (1992). The ideology of consumership and the coming deregulation of the public school system. In P. Cookson, Jr. (Ed.), *The choice controversy*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.



- Cookson, P. (1994). *School choice: The struggle for the soul of American education*. New York: Vail-Ballou Press.
- Cooper, C. (2003). The detrimental impact of teacher bias: Lessons learned from the standpoint of African American mothers. *Teachers Education Quarterly*, 30(2), 101-116.
- Cooper, C. (2005). School choice and the standpoint of African American mothers: Considering the power of positionality. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 74(2), 174-190.
- Cremin, L. (1970). *American education: The colonial experience: 1607-1783*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Crestwell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cummins, J. (1986, February). Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(1), 18-36.
- Dent, D. (1998, December 23). Diversity rules threaten North Carolina charter schools that aid blacks. *The New York Times*, B 8.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Derman-Sparks, L. (1995). How well are we nurturing racial and ethnic diversity? In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*: New York: The New Press.
- DuBois, W. (1965). The soul of black folk. In J. Franklin (Ed.), *Three Negro classics*. New York: Avon Books. (Original work published in 1903).
- Durham: The city with the “can-do” attitude. (2004, August 24). *The Herald Sun*, p. 8.
- Education Commission of the States (August, 2001). *Open enrollment*. Retrieved December 13, 2005, from <http://www.ecs.org>.
- Finn, E., Jr., Manno, B., Bierlein, L. (1996). *Charter schools in action: What have we learned?* Indianapolis, Indiana: Hudson Institute on Behalf of Educational Excellence Network.
- Franklin, J. (1965). *Three Negro classics*. New York: Avon Books.

- Freeman, E. (1999). *Purpose and perspective in the formation of charter schools*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University, Durham.
- Fuller, B. (2000). Introduction: Growing charter schools, decentering the state. In B. Fuller (Ed.), *Inside charter schools: The paradox of radical decentralization* (p. 2). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Elmore, R. (1991). Choice as an instrument of public policy: Evidence from education and health care. In W. H. Clune and Witte (Eds.), *Choice and control in American education* (Vol. 1., pp. 285-318). New York: Falmer Press.
- Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18, 335-356.
- Erickson, F. (1987). Conceptions of school culture: An overview. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 23(4), 11-24.
- Fagan, J. (Executive Producer). (2006, September 24). *60 minutes*. New York: CBS.
- Friedman, M. (1955). *Capitalism and freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gates, L. (1995). Multiculturalism: A conversation among different voices. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*. New York: The New Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of cultures* (pp. 3-33). New York: Basic Books.
- Gewertz, C. (2006, June 7). Black, Hispanic students cite problems in their schools. *Education Week*, 25(39), 7.
- Gewirtz, S., Ball, S. & Bowe, R. (1995) *Markets, choice, and equity in education*. Bristol, PA: Open University Press.
- Gilles, S. (1998). Why parents should choose. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice*. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Donnelley & Sons, Co.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Glesne, C. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers*. White Plains, New York: Longman Publishing Group.
- Green, J. (2000). *The effects of school choice: An evaluation of the Charlotte children's scholarship fund*. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Civic Report 12.

Retrieved January 17, 2004 from: [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/er\\_12.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/er_12.htm)

- Greene, J., Howell, W. & Peterson, P. (1998). Lessons from the Cleveland scholarship program. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principals in practice*. London: Tavistock
- Hassel, B. (1997). *Designed to fail? Charter school programs and the politics of structural choice*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University, 1997). (University Microfilms No. 9810741).
- Hassel, B. (1999). *The charter school challenge*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Hastie, R., & Dawes, R. (2001). *Rational choice in an uncertain world: The psychology of judgment and decision making*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Henig, J. (1994). *Rethinking school choice: Limits of the market metaphor*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Herrnstein, R., & Murray, C. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.
- Hochschild, J., & Scovronick, N. (2003). *The American dream and the public school*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holland, R. (2002). *Profiles in school choice: Vernon Robinson*. Retrieved October 27, 2005 from: <http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/profilesinschoolchoice/>
- Holstein, J., & Gubrium, J. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage
- Hornsby, A. (1996). *World book multimedia encyclopedia*. Chicago: World Book, Inc.
- Hoxby, C. (1998). Analyzing school choice reforms that use America's traditional forms of parental choice. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice*. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Donnelley & Sons, Co.
- Iannaccone, L., & Lutz, F. (1970). *Politics, power, and policy*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Company.

- Ingle, D. (1970). Possible genetic basis of social problems: A reply to Ashley Montague. *Midway, 10*, 105-121.
- Irving, J. (1991). *Black students and school failure: Policies, practices, and prescriptions*. Westport, NY: Praeger.
- Jenks, C., Smith, M., Acland, H., Band, M., Cohen, D., Gintis, H., Heyns, B., & Michelson, S. (1972). *Inequality: A reassessment of the effect of family and schooling in America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jensen, A. (1969). How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement? *Harvard Educational Review, 39*, 1-123.
- Jensen, A. (1973). *Educability and group differences*. New York: Harper.
- Johnson, J., Arumi, A., & Ott, A. (2006). *How Black and Hispanic families rate their schools*. Reality Check 2006, Issue 2. Retrieved September 25, 2006 from: [www.Publicagenda.org](http://www.Publicagenda.org)
- Jones, S. (2006, May 17). Cosby gives a 'call out.' *USA Today*, pp. D1, D2.
- Jost, K. (2004, April). How can the promise of equal education be fulfilled? *The CQ Researcher, 14*(15). Retrieved February 12, 2005 from: <http://library.cqpress.com>.
- Kaestle, C. (1983). *Pillars of the republic: Common schools and American society, 1780-1860*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Kantor, H., & Lowe, Robert (April, 1995). Class, race, and the emergence of federal education policy: From the new deal to the great society. *Educational Researcher, 24*(3), 4-21.
- Kaufman, P., & Chapman, C. (2004). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2001*. (NCES 20005-046). U. S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Kerber, A., & Bommarito, B. (1965). Preschool education for the developing cortex. In A. Kerber & B. Bommarito (Eds.), *The schools and the urban crisis* (pp. 345-349). New York: Holt.
- Kimbrough, R. (1964). *Political power and educational decision making*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Co.

- Kirkpatrick, C. (1998, July 23). House lifts race clause from charter school rules. *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC), p. C1.
- Kirkpatrick, C. (1998, October 5). Charter school bill still stalled on racial issue. *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC), p. B1.
- Kolderie, T. (1990a). *Beyond choice to new public schools: Withdrawing the exclusive franchise in public education*. Washington: Progressive Policy Institute.
- Koppich, J. (1997). Considering nontraditional alternatives: Charters, private contracts, and vouchers. In M. LeCompte, W. Millroy, & J. Preissle (Eds.), *The Handbook of qualitative research in education*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, Inc.
- Krathwohl, D. (1998). *Methods of educational and social science research: An integrated approach*. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lacireno-Pacquet, N., Holyoke, T., Moser, M., & Henig, J. (2002, Summer). Creaming versus cropping: Charter school enrollment practices in response to market incentives. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(2), 145-158.
- LeCompte, M., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Diego: Academic Press.
- LeCompte, M., & Schensul, J. (1999). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research*. New York: Altamira Press.
- LeFevre, A. (January, 2006). Law banning cyber charter schools may be harming education in rural Tennessee. *School Reform News*, 10(1), 11.
- Levin, H. (1990). The theory of choice applied to education. In W. Clune & J. Witte, (Eds.), *Choice and control in American education. The theory of choice and control in education* (Vol. I). New York: The Falmer Press.
- Levin, H. (1992). Market approaches to education: Vouchers and school choice. *Economics of Education Review*, 11(4), 279-285.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

- Lincoln, Y. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. In D. Williams (Ed.), *Naturalistic evaluation, New directions for program evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Lincoln, Y. (1995). Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(3), 275 -289.
- Locke, L., Spirduso, W. & Silverman, S. (1993). *Proposals that work: A guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Loury, G. (1977). A dynamic theory of racial income differences. In P. Wallace & A. LeMund (Eds.), *Women, minorities, and employment discrimination*. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books.
- Lowe, R. (1995). The perils of school vouchers. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*. New York: The New Press.
- Lutz, F., & Merz, C. (1992). *The politics of school/community relations*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- March, J., & Olsen, J. (1979). *Ambiguity and choice in organizations*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1995). *Designing qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Martin, G. (1894). *The evolution of the Massachusetts public school system*. New York.
- Maxwell, J. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McCracken, G. (1988). *The long interview*. London: Sage Publication.
- Mead, M. (1928). *Coming of age in Samoa: A psychological study of primitive youth for western civilization*. New York: William Morrow.
- Meier, T. (1995). Standardized tests: A clear and present danger. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*. New York: The New Press.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, L. (1995). *An American imperative: Accelerating minority educational advancement*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717. 94 S. Ct. 3112 (1974).
- Miner, B. (1995). Algebra for all: An equation for equity. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*. New York: The New Press.
- Missouri v. Jenkins*, (93-1823), 515 U.S. 70 (1995).
- Morris, C. (1997). *American Catholic: The saints and sinners who built America's most powerful church*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- National Catholic Educational Association. (2005). *Annual report on Catholic elementary and secondary school statistics 2004-2005*. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from <http://www.ncea.org/newinfo/catholicschooldata/annualreport.asp>
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (1991). *Digest of education statistics 1990*. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved September 10, 2005 from: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/results2003/stateachieve-race-g8.asp>
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2003). *Digest of education statistics 2004*. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved September 10, 2005 from: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/results2003/stateachieve-race-g8.asp>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *Parent survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES)*. Retrieved November 2, 2005 from: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2005/charts/chart03.asp>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). *The condition of education 2004*, NCES 2004-076. Retrieved January 23, 2006 from: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2004/2004077.pdf>
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education Printing Office.
- Noblit, G. & Archie, W. (April/May, 2000). Learning from the North Carolina charter school evaluation case studies: A cross-site analysis. *The High School Journal*, 83, 46-52.
- North Carolina Charter School Law, NCSG 115C.238.29A – 115C.238.29K*

- North Carolina General Assembly (2005-2006). *Session law search results: 2005-2006*. Retrieved February 11, 2006, <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts>
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2004). *North Carolina statistical profile – 2004*. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org>
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2005). *North Carolina statistical profile – 2005*. Retrieved February 15, 2006 from: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org>.
- North Carolina School of Arts (2005). Retrieved November 11, 2005, from <http://www.ncarts.edu>.
- North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (2005). Retrieved November 11, 2005 from: <http://www.ncssm.edu>.
- North Carolina School Report Cards (2005). *Education first - NC school report cards*. Retrieved July 15, 2006 from: <http://www.ncreportcards.org>
- North Carolina Statistical Profile (2004). *Department of public schools*. Retrieved January 11, 2005, from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org>
- Nowell, P. (2005, May 26). 'Academic genocide' fair call, super says. *The Herald-Sun*, p. D5.
- Olson, S. (2001, April). The genetic archaeology of race. *Atlantic Monthly*, 287, 69-75.
- Ouchi, W. (2003). *Making schools work: A revolutionary plan to get your children the education they need*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Palasak, K. (2003, September). *Choice in North Carolina education: 2003*. John Locke Foundation. Retrieved February 12, 2006 from: [http://www.johnlocke.org/policy\\_reports/display\\_story.html?id=39](http://www.johnlocke.org/policy_reports/display_story.html?id=39)
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research Methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). London: Sage.
- Payne, J., Betterman, J. & Johnson, E. (1993). *The adaptive decision maker*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pena, R. (1997). Cultural differences and the construction of meaning: Implications for the leadership and organizational context of schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 5(10). Retrieved January 17, 2004 from: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v5n10.html>



- Peterson, B. (1995). Which side are you on? The role of teachers unions in school reform. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*. New York: The New Press.
- Peterson, P. (1998). School choice: A report card. In P. Peterson and B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice* (pp. 17-19). Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation (January, 2004). *National survey of Latinos: Education*. Retrieved January 17, 2005 from [www.pewhispanic.org](http://www.pewhispanic.org)
- Pierce v. Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*, 268 U.S. 510, 45 S. Ct. 571 (1925)
- Pittman, M., & Maxwell, J. (1992). Qualitative approaches to evaluation: Models and methods. In *The handbook of qualitative research in education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 16 S. Ct. 1138 (1896).
- Popkewitz, T. (1991). *A political sociology of educational reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rallis, S., & Goldring, E. (2000). *Principals of dynamic schools: Taking charge of change*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Reale, R. (1998, September 12). Public school enrollment takes a hit – Opening of 3 new charter schools cited by officials. *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC), p. A6.
- Richard, A. (2005, January 11). Florida court: Vouchers unconstitutional. *Education Week*, 25(18), 1 & 13.
- Rist, R. (1970). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40, 411-451.
- Robinson, A. (1997, February). *The two nations of black America: An analysis: Percentage of Blacks and income groups*. Frontline. Retrieved January 17, 2004 from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/economics/analysis.html>.
- Rossmann, G., & Rallis, S. (1998). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.

- Samuels, C. (2004, December 8). Renewed IDEA targets minority overrepresentation. *Education Week*, 24(15), p. 24.
- Sanjek, R. (1990). On ethnographic validity. In R. Sanjek (Ed.), *Fieldnotes: The making of anthropology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Sarason, S. (1995). *Parental involvement and the political principle: Why the existing governance structure of schools should be abolished*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Schneider, M., Teske, P. & Marschall, M. (2000). *Choosing schools: Consumer choice and the quality of American schools*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schneider, M., & Buckley, J. (2002, Summer). What do parents want from schools: Evidence from the Internet. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(2), 133-144.
- Schneider, M., & Buckley, J. (2003, Summer). Making the grade: Comparing DC charter schools to other DC public schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(2), 203-215.
- Schultz, S. (1973). *The culture factory: Boston public schools, 1789-1860*. New York: Oxford Press.
- Schultz, T. (1960). Capital formation by education. *Journal of Political Economy*, 68, 571-572.
- Schuttloffel, M. (2000). The social construction of school failure: Leadership's limitations. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(45). Retrieved December 11, 2004, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n45.html>.
- Schwandt, T. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry: A dictionary of terms*. London: Sage Publications.
- Seidman, I. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Silberman, T. (2000). Popularity of charters offers some insights for public schools. *The News and Observer*, B1.
- Silverman, H. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text, and interaction*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage

- Simmons, T. (1998, July 9). Charters tap into public doubts. *The News & Observer*, A1.
- Smith, A. (1976 [1776]). *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talkin' and testifyin': The language of Black Americans*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Snell, L. (2005, May). School choice legislation is all the rage in 2005. *School Reform News*, 9(5), 1 & 15.
- Sniderman, P., Brody, R. & Tetlock, P. (1991). Introduction: Major themes. In P. Sniderman, R. Brody & P. Tetlock (Eds.), *Reasoning and choice: Explorations in political psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sniderman, P., Brody, R. & Tetlock, P. (1991). The role of heuristics in political reasoning: A theory sketch. In P. Sniderman, R. Brody & P. Tetlock (Eds.), *Reasoning about politics: Explorations in political psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sniderman, P., Hagen, M., Tetlock, P. & Brady, H. (October, 1986). Reasoning chains: Causal models of policy reasoning in mass publics. *British Journal of Political Science*, 16, 405-430.
- Spring, J. (1986). *The American school: 1642-1985*. New York: Longman.
- Spring, J. (1988). *Conflict of interests: The politics of American education*. New York: Longman, Inc.
- Spring, J. (1990). *The American school: 1642-1990: Varieties of historical interpretation of the foundations and development of American education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Longman.
- Stake, R. (1994). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stam, P. (2005). *Paul Stam articles*. Retrieved February 11, 2006 from: <http://www.paulstam.info/articles.php?a=2005leg>
- Steele, C. (1992, April). *Race and the schooling of Black Americans*. *Atlantic Monthly*, 68-75.
- Steele, C. (1999, August). Thin ice: "stereotype threat" and Black college students. *Atlantic Monthly*, 44-54.

- Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 402 U.S. 1, 91 S. Ct. 1267 (1971)
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Thernstrom, A., & Thernstrom, S. (2003). *No excuses: Closing the achievement gap in learning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Turnbull, A., & Turnbull, H. III (1990). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: A special partnership*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Tversky, A. (1972). Elimination by aspects: A theory of choice. *Psychological Review*, 79, 281-299.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). *United States census 2000*. Retrieved June 12, 2006, from [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).
- U.S. Charter Schools. (2005, August). *North Carolina state profile*. Retrieved October 27, 2005, from <http://uscharterschools.org>.
- U.S. Department of Education (March, 2004). *New no child left behind flexibility: Highly qualified teachers*. Retrieved August 17, 2006 from: <http://www.ed.gov/nclf/methods/teachers/hqtflexibility.html>
- Van Heemst, D. (2004). *Empowering the poor: Why justice requires school choice*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.
- Vanourek, G., Manno, B. & Finn, C. (1998). Charter schools as seen by students, teachers, and parents. In P. Peterson and B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press.
- Viadero, D. (2004, July 14). Dropout factories identified in Hopkins study. *Education Week*, 23(42), 14.
- Viadero, D. (2006, July 7). Project yields gains for New Zealand's Maori pupils. *Education Week*, 25(39), 10.
- Viteritti, J. (1998). School choice and state constitutional law. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice*. Harrisonburg, VA: Donnelley & Sons, Co.
- Walker, L. (2004, May). Brown decision got the law right, but not the facts. *School Reform News*, 8(5), 13.

- Washington, B. (1965). Up from slavery. In J. Franklin (Ed.), *Three Negro classics*. New York: Avon Books. (Original work published 1901).
- Weiss, C. (1983). Ideology, interests, and information: The basis of policy positions. In D. Callahan & B. Jennings (Eds.), *Ethics, the social sciences, and policy analysis*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Weiss, C. (1995, Winter). The four "I's" of school reform: How interests, ideology, information and institution affect teachers and principals. *Harvard Educational Review*; 65(4), 571-592.
- Weiss, R. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: The Free Press.
- Wells, A. (1993). The sociology of school choice: Why some win and others lose in the educational marketplace. In E. Rasell and R. Rothstein, (Eds.), *School choice: Examining the evidence*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.
- Williams, F. (1970). *Language and poverty: Perspectives on a theme*. Chicago: Markham.
- Williams, T. (1972). *Introduction to socialization: Human culture transmitted*. St. Louis, MO: Mosby.
- Witte, J. (1990). Choice and control in American education: An analytical overview. In W. Clune & J. Witte (Eds.), *Choice and control in American education: The theory of choice and control in education* (Vol. I, pp. 11-46). New York: Falmer.
- Witte, J., Bailey, A. & Thorn, C. (1992). *Second year report: Milwaukee parental choice program*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Robert M. LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs.
- Witte, J., Bailey, A. & Thorn, C. (1993). *Third year report: Milwaukee parental choice program*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Robert M. LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs.
- Wolcott, H. (1973). *The man in the principal's office: An ethnography*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

- Wolcott, H. (1992). Posturing in qualitative research. In D. LeCompte, W. Millroy & J. Preissle (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research in education*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, Inc.
- Wolcott, H. (2001). *Writing up qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Yoder, E. (2000). *Scientific methods in A & E education: Basis data analysis*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.
- Zinn, H. (1995). Why students should study history: An interview with Howard Zinn. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change*. New York: The New Press.

## Appendix A

### *Interview Questions for Parents*

Before any questions were asked, the respondents and I exchanged introductions, shared information, and spent some time getting acquainted. I answered all of the questions the participant(s) had about the study and about me. I explained the confidentiality of the interview, the purpose of the study, and had the respondents sign the interview form.

1. How many children do you have attending (name of school)? Boys or girls? How many years have they been here? How are they doing? Do they seem to be happy? Do they seem content with their teachers, the workload, their peers? How did you find out about the school? Was it recommended to you? By whom? (The goal of these questions was to establish rapport, to communicate interest in their children specifically, and to encourage the parents to relax and converse about their children and themselves.)
2. What do you like about (name of school)? Do you think there is a better match between this school and your child(ren) than the last school your child(ren) attended? Why is this school a better/ worst place for your child(ren)? What is the most important difference to you?
3. Do you think that there is more of a sense of community here at the charter school than there was at the previous school your child (ren) attended? What do you think the founders, administrators, teachers value here? Do you think that the values of this school are closer to your own? Will this school meet your child's

needs better than the school s/he previously attended? How would you describe the traditional public school your child attended?

4. How did you come to decide to place your child(ren) in a charter school? What/who influenced your decision? Whom did you talk to in order to learn about this charter school? What was the most important aspect/quality that attracted you to this charter? What were you hoping to find in a charter school?
5. Are you concerned about the lack of diversity in this school? Did the school your child(ren) previously attended have a more diverse student body? Would you rather have your child attend a school with a more diverse population? Are you happy with the choice you have made? Please explain.
6. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes called the nation's report card, reports that there is a gap in academic/learning achievement between White and Black students. Do you think this charter school will be successful at closing the achievement gap? How will they achieve that?
7. Do you think that this school sets high academic goals for every student? Please explain. Did your child's previous school? Does this school focus on the students? Please explain. How has your child benefited from attending this school?
8. Is this school a good size? Does the size of a school matter? How? Does this school encourage you to be actively involved? Are you? Were you at your child's previous school?
9. Was it important to you that you could choose this school among other schools? Do you believe that parents should be afforded the opportunity to choose the



school their children attend? What other choices did you have when you chose this charter? If provided with a voucher, would you choose a public, charter or private school for your child(ren)?

10. Will you re-enroll your child(ren) for next year? Why/why not?

## Appendix B

### *Interview Questions for Administrators*

Before any questions were asked, the Administrators and I exchanged introductions, shared information about our previous experiences, and spent some time getting acquainted. I answered all of the questions the respondents had about the study and about me. I explained the confidentiality of the interview, the purpose of the study, and had the respondents sign the interview form.

1. Please explain why you like working in a charter school? How is this charter school different from regular public schools? What are the best things about this charter school?
2. How do the parents who send their children to this charter school differ from the parents of the students in regular public schools?
3. Why do you think parents are choosing to leave traditional public schools to attend charter schools? What do you think they hope to find in charters that they have not found in public schools? What about parents who have never had a child enrolled in a traditional public school or a charter, why are they choosing charter schools for their young children? How do you get information out into the community about your school?
4. Is the size of a charter school significant? What is an ideal size? Would you like for your school to larger/smaller?
5. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes called the nation's report card, reports that there is a gap in learning/achievement between

White and Black students. Do you think charter schools will be successful in closing the gap? Why do you think so/not? If so, how will that be accomplished? If not, why not?

6. Is it important that the values, the culture, of the school a child attends match the values and culture of the children? Why do you think that this charter school is a good match for the children? How is it different from regular public schools? Does the culture of a school matter? What affect will the culture of this school have on its students?
7. Do you think the lack of diversity in this school affects the students? What affect does the lack of diversity have on the students and the learning that takes place in this school?
8. What is the focus of this school? Does this school have a core curriculum that is taught to all students? Does your school put emphasis on teaching and learning the fundamentals such as reading, math, and creative writing?
9. Do you think that parents should have the opportunity to choose their children's school? Please explain.

## Vita

Foy Matthews Crary

### Academic Preparation

- 2007 Ph.D. Educational Leadership. The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania  
Dissertation Title: “Why Are African American Parents Choosing Charter Schools? New Evidence from North Carolina”
- 1985 M. Ed. Curriculum and Instruction – Reading Clinician  
Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia
- 1978 B. S. Early Childhood Education, Magna Cum Laude  
Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia

### Professional Experience

- 1992-2004 Founder/Headmistress/Teacher – The Crary School, Shallotte, North Carolina
- 1989-1992 Teacher – Union School, Shallotte, North Carolina
- 1985-1987 Instructor – Brunswick Community College, Supply, North Carolina
- 1978-1984 Teacher – Eastside Elementary School, Marietta, Georgia
- 1970-1973 Teacher – East Lee Road Kindergarten, Smyrna, Georgia