FLEXIBILITY OPTIONS IN GEORGIA:

A CASE STUDY OF CHARTER SYSTEM GOVERNANCE

by

SUSAN ACKER VAUGHN

(Under the Direction of Elizabeth DeBray)

ABSTRACT

The General Assembly of the State of Georgia passed the Charter Schools Act of 1998 to increase student achievement through innovative educational flexibility. A feature of this Act provided local school systems the flexibility to operate as a Charter System. In 2009, to further increase flexibility from certain state laws, rules and regulations, the State Legislature required all Georgia school systems to determine under which operating system they will govern. The deadline for that decision is June 30, 2015. There are three principal operating systems, known as Flexibility Options: Investing in Educational Excellence School System (IE^2), Charter system and Status Quo School System.

Within the context of governance, this study examined district-level and school-level decision-making processes in a Georgia Charter District. The study investigated how significant decisions of budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation are decided, the means by which school governance council members learn their roles, and the challenges and benefits of operating as a charter system of governance. Multi-faceted data collection techniques were employed to answer the research questions posed by this study. These techniques included targeted in-depth interviews with district board members, the superintendent, principals and local

school governance council members in the Charter System. Document reviews, direct observation and researcher's journal contributed to the analysis of the data.

Evidence from this study revealed school governance councils take part in the decision-making process, especially in the areas of budget and personnel in the charter district studied for this investigation. Findings from the study indicated lesser involvement by school governance council members on the types of programs and/or innovation to support individual school improvement plans as local school governance council members tended to defer judgment to school leaders in these types of decisions. This study also examined how school governance council members learn their roles. On this question, the findings revealed two primary methods through which school governance council members learn to perform their tasks: orientation and training of members by the system, and the formation of Communities of Practice at the local school site. Awareness by constituents of the distinction between charter schools and charter systems, as well as a need for greater understanding by the public of locus of decision-making authority presented challenges for authority figures in the charter system. Two benefits of charter system governance consistently noted by stakeholders were flexibility and local school control over budget and hiring.

INDEX WORDS: Flexibility Options in Georgia, Charter System Governance, Local School Governance Councils, Community of Practice, Shared Governance

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DEDICATION

During the summer of 2013, my sister, Cindy Acker, my aunt, Rita Acker, and I traced our roots back to hills of lush, green forests located in western Pennsylvania. There, in Black's Corner, stands the farmhouse where my Grandmother and ten siblings were born, a strong and welcoming structure, a home still in use today. One hundred years ago, this Castner family was part of a farming community whose contributions included the construction St. Mary's Catholic Church. This deep faith became the legacy passed on to my Father, Larry Acker, who missed Sunday Mass only twice in his life.

In the summer of 2015, Cindy led us on a search for the first Courtney ancestors to reach American shores in Kinsale, Virginia in the mid-1600s. Located next to the winding Yeocomico River, whose tree-lined banks must still resemble the time when steamboats docked at the harbor before traveling on to Baltimore, vines and trees now cover the location of the General Store and cannery owned by the Courtneys which underscore our family's tenacity and hard work.

At a journey's end, it is natural to think of present-day support received to complete a task. Certainly, my sister, Cindy, who withstood my significant periods of intermittent anger and despair with grace and wisdom; Katie, my beautiful and spirited daughter, who listened patiently throughout my trials and whose encouragement was significant when I needed it most, and Alan, my son with whom I share the same soul, whose own life reflects an indefatigable spirit – all contributed greatly to the successful attainment of my doctoral degree.

However, it was the groundwork laid by my parents, Larry and Jo Acker, who instilled in their children – Judy, Sue, Cindy and Mike – that they could do and be anything they wanted, if only they tried their best, which made the first step possible for me.

So, for any future Courtney/Acker/Vaughn/Oakes generation that may read this paper and dedication, know that you come from good stock, the best in fact, and that like your Kinsale and western Pennsylvania ancestors, hard work, tenacity and faith in God will support you in fulfilling far-flung dreams, as they did mine.

Also, everyone should have friends like Ronnie and Pat Camp whose financial assistance permitted me to enroll in the program and whose care and devotion sustained me in difficult circumstances, including my stint in a wheelchair after a bicycling accident and Pat's offer to drive me anywhere to complete my research – friends like this are such a blessing!

Thank you – from the bottom of my heart – thank you for all you did, and I love each and every one of you!

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For the many professors who helped me to improve as a scholar, especially Bill Wraga whose "revise and resubmit" policy forced me to become a better academic writer and researcher; April Peters-Hawkins whose significant knowledge of charter schools helped frame my research; and Kathy Roulston, from whom I learned two supremely significant and critical skills – how to construct qualitative research, and the manner in which a topic is researched, studied, proposed and presented at a national conference of academic researchers.

The entire team of technology experts at the 2nd floor in Aderhold helped me in the most mundane yet mysterious malaises that infected my computers and electronic devices. Also, an unsung hero – Ms. Holly Ivy – who is equal parts graduation process expert and reassuring spirit.

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NATURE OF THE STUDY

Defining Charter Systems

The site of the investigation is a charter system in the state of Georgia. The state of Georgia Department of Education identifies a charter system as "a local school district that operates under the terms of a charter between the State Board of Education and the local school district" (Retrieved January 24, 2015 from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Pages/General-Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx). Also, in exchange for greater accountability, the charter system is able to request waivers from certain state rules and regulations. Although the local school district holds the ultimate position of authority and accountability, the law requires a transfer of certain aspects of decision-making to the local schools by means of a school governance council.

Currently, the State Board of Education has granted charter system status to 28 Georgia school districts. Within these 28 charter systems, there are over 700 elementary, middle and high schools in the state of Georgia, serving 231,873 students, or 12.46% of all Georgia students enrolled in public education in Georgia. Table 1, retrieved from the Georgia Department of Education website and whose original form lists the charter systems, has been adjusted to include a total for the number of schools and students served in districts with a current charter contract.

Table 1 (Retrieved January 24, 2015 from http://ccrpi.gadoe.org/2014/ccrpi2014.aspx with added data of total number of schools and students served in a charter system)

Column A # of students	Column B # of schools	Charter System	Charter Initially Approved	Charter Opened/ Converted	Term Expires
3,073	4	**Banks County**	November-12	July-13	6-30-18
14,250	15	**Barrow County Schools**	April-11	July-11	6-30-16
3,912	4	**Calhoun City Schools**	June-11	July-11	6-30-16
5,044	4	**Carrollton City Schools**	April-14	July-14	6-30-19
4,338	4	**Cartersville City Schools**	June-10	July-10	6-30-15
4,132	8	**City Schools of Decatur**	June-08	July-08	6-30-23
8,253	12	**Coffee County**	May-13	July-13	6-30-18
1,548	4	**Commerce City Schools**	May-14	July-14	6-30-19
3,749	7	**Dawson County Schools**	June-11	July-11	6-30-16
2,816	6	**Dublin City Schools**	June-11	July-11	6-30-16
10,556	19	**Floyd County Schools**	May-10	July-10	6-30-15
102,524	88	**Fulton County Schools**	May-12	July-12	6-30-17
8,120	8	**Gainesville City Schools**	June-08	July-08	6-30-23
4,457	6	**Gilmer County Schools**	January-14	July-14	6-30-19
622	1	**Glascock County Schools**	April-14	July-14	6-30-19
7,033	11	**Gordon County Schools**	April-11	July-11	6-30-16
3,805	6	**Haralson County**	February-13	July-13	6-30-18
3,683	5	**Hart County Schools**	May-14	July-14	6-30-19

4,079	5	**Lumpkin County School**	May-14	July-14	6-30-19
4,949	7	**Madison County Schools**	May-12	July-12	6-30-17
10,087	10	**Marietta City Schools**	June-08	July-08	6-30-23
3,369	3	**Morgan County Schools**	June-11	July-11	6-30-16
2,849	4	**Putnam County Schools**	May-10	July-10	6-30-15
4,236	6	**Stephens County Schools**	June-14	July-14	6-30-19
2,847	5	**Union County Schools**	February-14	July-14	6-30-19
2,699	4	**Vidalia City Schools**	May-14	July-14	6-30-19
694	3	**Warren County Schools**	June-08	July-08	6-30-23
4,149	6	**White County Schools**	June-10	July-10	06-30-15
231,873 (or 12.46% of all Georgia students)	**702**	**(Column A) Total number of students served within a charter system in Georgia (Column B) Total number of charter system schools**			

"American schools must educate children in a diverse and divided society, a society whose democratic institutions and traditions of local control render schools more vulnerable to political pressure than any other agency" (Cohen, 1982, p. 474). This opening quote, from a leading educational scholar who has authored or co-authored over 21 books spanning three decades on the topic of educational policy and practice, paints an accurate portrait of the forces that exert influence on our nation's schools. Dating back to its inception, education in the United States has been subjected to the governing policies of its particular era. This introduction describes historical and philosophical influences on educational governance in the United States, how decisions are made within these organizations, followed by a discussion why the passage of O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3 will create significant changes in Georgia educational governance.

History of Educational Governance Control

Title 20, Article 31, Charter Schools Act of 1998, defines "School level governance" as "decision-making authority in personnel decisions, financial decisions, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals, and school operations." Prior to the delineation of duties and roles, the partnership between school, families and communities was, at best, an uneasy alliance. Researchers have debated whether charter schools (and by way of implication, charter systems) have the capacity to improve governance within the public education system. In *School Governance* (Hunter, Brown, Donahoo, 2012), Vergari and Crawford come down on both sides of the issue, citing examples of improvement in governance under a charter structure of organization, as well as instances where public education, lacking "the governance flexibility enjoyed by charter schools … are limited in their capacity to implement governance changes in public education" (Crawford & Vergari, 2012, p. 145).

The history of educational governance in the United States may be divided into three general periods – nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the era leading up to World War II, and mid-twentieth century through current day. Two significant factors affect governance within these historical eras: distrust by the citizenry of institutional control over their schools, and public perception of schools' effectiveness. The Tenth Amendment places educational policy squarely in the hands of state policy makers, yet the federal government, over time, has legislated a growing footprint in how money is distributed, what is taught and how schools are evaluated. Major federal educational policies wield significant influence through states to local school levels. The three largest pieces of legislation – No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and

Common Core State Standards – affect every student whose state participates in federal programs to obtain educational funds.

Educational governance by the numbers – "In the United States, formal responsibility for school governance is distributed among a vast array of public agencies in the environments of schools, including federal education agencies, 50 state education agencies, approximately 15,000 local education agencies, 800 charter school authorizers, and others" (Peurach, 2012, p. 169). The state board of education budget in 2006 "was over one-third of the total annual state of Georgia budget" (Dglosh & Madhlangobe, 2012).

Educational governance exists within this dichotomy of citizens' fear of loss of local control and lack of confidence in local leaders, especially in today's era of real-time communication.

United States educational governance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Education governance in the United States of the nineteenth century mirrored the state of the republic. Citizens honored first their allegiance to their states of residence, and then to the nation. The best way to describe schooling during this time was the preeminence of local control. Tyack (1993) described it this way:

> In nineteenth-century America – a mostly rural nation – local lay trustees vastly outnumbered teachers and had powers unmatched in any other system of public education in the world. Even in cities, large lay boards actively participated in all phases of decision making and delegated many powers to ward school committees. The federal office of education had minimal powers and staff, and state departments of education were tiny and had meager means of enforcing regulations. Local control seemed to be the paradigm of democratic education. (p. 2)

In the 1800s, the United States was largely an agricultural nation, and its schools were often one-room institutions whose teachers were hired locally and curriculum reflected the largely Protestant values of the families (Tyack, 1993; Kirst, 2004). The common school movement began in the 1840s with the design to "protect and improve what the founding generation had created … [with the purpose of] molding morals and fostering cultural unity to teaching citizenship responsibilities, spreading prosperity, and ending poverty" (Kirst, 2004, p. 17). Further, Kirst (2004) described the goals of producing youth of that era who were "literate, numerate, and moral citizens [coming] from all classes, sects, and ethnic groups, they were to be 'the greater equalizer,' in [Horace] Mann's phrase" (p. 17).

Thomas Jefferson may be credited with seeing the need for larger (state) systems of education. In 1779, he submitted the "earliest such proposal in *A Bill for the more General Diffusion of Knowledge,* which he introduced into the Virginia Assembly" (Herrington & Fowler, 2003, p. 272). Despite the failure of this bill and one Jefferson submitted 38 years later, the idea took root and "by 1820 thirteen of the 20 states had included provisions for education in their constitutions" (Herrington & Fowler, 2003, p. 272). Interestingly, the rise of the power of the state systems of education matched increases in local authority. Herrington & Fowler (2003) noted "[s]chool districts, though structurally creations of the state, were routinely permitted considerable autonomy in the name of local control" (p. 271).

This nineteenth century model of schooling and educational policy would remain largely unchanged until the dawn of the twentieth century and the advent of modernization and urbanization. Public schools in the nineteenth century still remained, however, mostly rural institutions. Governance was a local affair where "[l]ocal trustees and parents selected the teachers, supervised their work, and sometimes boarded them in their homes" (Tyack, 1993, p.

8). The power of these local trustees was significant. Despite efforts by some states to exercise control over local schools in the nineteenth century, local seats of power retained their power (Tyack, 1993), due mainly to three reasons:

- the size of state departments of education – "[a]s late as 1890, the average size of a state department of education was two" (Tyack, 1993, p. 9)
- the rural nature of schooling across the United States
- citizens' disdain for strong government

Not surprisingly, the federal government's role in education shared a similar fate as that of the state control – minimal influence and impact.

City school systems in the nineteenth century, however, were a contrast to their rural counterparts. Tyack (1993) labeled city school systems as "anomalies" (p. 10) with "patterns of governance [which] were extremely heterogeneous" (p. 10). Most of the country shared a similar, standardized ideological philosophy of education – "train upright citizens by inculcating a common denominator of nonsectarian morality and non-partisan civic instruction" (Tyack, 1993, p. 7).

Education in the late nineteenth century was grounded in the history of the era, and the condition of the United States as it emerged from the Civil War. The South, still reeling from its defeat in the War Between the States, "was late in adopting the common school and had an impoverished and racially segregated system" (Tyack, 1993, p. 7). Although the origin of this war was the immense divide on the issue of states' rights, the conflict signified a shift in citizens' long-held belief of government as intrusive and evil. Pre-Civil War, the populace shared a common ideology about where states' rights ended and federal domain began. Post-Civil War, our nation shifted toward a union of connected ideals, purchased with the blood of 600,000

people, but this evolution of ideas did not occur quickly. In fact, some post-Civil War citizens still carried a wariness of potential democracy-turned-dictatorship and, within that political context, educational policy reflected that sentiment. Describing government during this time as crude with severely limited authority, Cohen (1982) wrote about the people's "great suspicion of government … [and their belief that all government was] evil, or potentially evil" (p. 476). Cohen (1982) described educational governance as splintered, reflecting the political reality of that era:

> The fragmented system of governance in education reflected deep skepticism about the exercise of public power and deliberate efforts to keep government weak by restricting and dividing it. (p. 476)

Organizational theorists have debated whether school institutions are centralized or bureaucratized in this atmosphere of fragmentation. Tyack (1993) cited a study by Meyer, Scott, Stang, and Creighton about connections/allegiances between federal and state departments of education and the local schools. Tyack (1993) described this study as one that

> … suggested that recent federal and state categorical programs and centralized mandates have produced bureaucratization but not centralization. Because the directors of the new programs often owe more loyalty to their specialized domains than to school districts as a whole, and because they report to bureaucrats at state or federal levels, the fragmented governance that results may destabilize normal lines of commands and turn accountability into accounting. (p. 6)

The ability for total local control was overshadowed with the expansion of federal powers in the early twentieth century. Evidence of the expansion of state and federal educational policies is the Smith Hughes Act of 1917 making vocational education a major federal policy concern,

along with education for the handicapped, gifted, and preschool children. Also, the number of districts across the United States decreased. For example, Cohen (1982) cites data from the *Digest of Educational Statistics,* (1980, p. 8) noting that "[a]s early as 1910 only a few states had made no effort at consolidation … [for example] six New England states decreased the number of school units from 13,214 in 1848 to 1,616 in 1920 … [while] during the same period, public school enrollment there increased from 464,000 to 1,242,221 pupils" (p. 487).

An interesting fact uncovered by Cohen (1982) was:

> The growth of state education agencies considerably predated the development of many other elements of state government. By 1902 state education aid to localities in the United States was already $45 million per year, compared with $2 million for highways and $5 million for general support. Because there was little state aid for other local functions, in 1902 education aid was 86 percent of all state aid to localities. (p. 477, Cohen citing Campbell, 1965, p. 101).

United States educational governance in the early to mid-twentieth century. Some educational observers might consider this period of time to be a "golden age of democratic participation" (Tyack, 1993, p. 3), with "parents and patrons call[ing] the shots, teachers were part of the community and met its needs, and bureaucracy and regulations were unnecessary" (Tyack, 1993, p. 3). Other observers, however, saw local control as benefiting those constituents whose skin tone, social status or wealth pre-determined their opportunities. In the eyes of the disenfranchised, Tyack (1993) described this era of schooling as "local control [which] resulted in schools that were grossly unequal in resources, [and] reproduced the 'dull parochialism and attenuated totalitarianism' of village life" (p. 3).

United States educational governance in late twentieth century through present day. The theme of this era might be best described as loss of control by local school districts. Over the last six decades, our nation, despite a warm feeling, some might say "reverence," for decision making to be in the hands of local authorities, the facts are that "local boards as well as local superintendents and individual schools have for some time been losing influence over education programs to state and federal officials and other interests … some analysts view local school boards as an endangered species" (Kirst, 2004, p. 14). A possible factor contributing to this loss of power may be due to the make-up of elected school boards. Hess and Meeks designed a study based on a national survey of school board members. Findings from this study revealed boards are characterized by a decided lack of "electoral accountability, are populated by members skeptical of systemic change, and are heavily reliant on superintendents for information and direction" (Hess & Meeks, 2013, p. 109).

Rooted in a sentiment of distrust, power transitioned from local districts to broader-ranging entities of state departments of education and the United States Department of Education. It is important to recognize that the word "power" in this context includes the powerful ingredient of funding. State educational spending is now the greatest source of local school funding. Kirst (2004) noted that "in 1930 states provided only 17.3 percent of school funding; in the early 1970s, about 40 percent; and by the late 1990s, their portion had climbed to 48 percent, exceeding the 45 percent local share" (p. 27). The federal government, however, owing to the Tenth Amendment and the deferment of control of schooling to the states, did not contribute funding to educational efforts. Kirst (2004) noted "[o]ver the course of a century, between 1862 and 1963, Congress had considered unrestricted general aid to schools thirty-six times and had rejected it thirty-six times" (p. 22).

Are there other reasons for this shift of the locus of power? Our country struggles with a nostalgia of yesteryear schooling – local control, decision making at a grass-roots level – yet our policies point toward centralization of governance and standardization of curriculum and assessment. Kirst (2004) questions whether this momentum away from local control toward greater involvement by state and federal governments may be the result of rivalry between states to lure businesses and employment to their communities. Three powerful factors – distrust, funding, and economic competition – appear to be driving our nation away from local governance and toward national control.

After World War II, the population of the United States increased exponentially. This period of time, known as the postwar baby boom, contributed to the growth of education for school-age children as well as adults, returning troops from the war, who enrolled in higher education by means of the federal GI Bill. The federal government deferred to states as the primary source of educational policy based on the Tenth Amendment which placed control of schooling with the states. State and Federal courts began to play a greater role in educational policy, beginning with segregation issues in schooling in the mid-twentieth century.

One hundred years after the signing of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing citizenship rights and equal protection of the laws, our country still seemed a nation of two people, divided by skin tone. *Brown v. Board of Education* sought to reverse the idea of "separate but equal" status of schooling, based on *Plessy v. Ferguson* endorsed by the United States Supreme Court in 1896. In 1954, the Supreme Court unanimously voted that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (retrieved from http://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/case.html on October 27, 2013).

One could argue that calls for educational choice in recent years were not always virtuously motivated, and at times were based on still-lingering desires to separate the races, especially in the southern parts of the United States. Most school choice research today, however, indicates that parents' motivation for schooling options in all parts of the United States centers on a desire for an open market where competition for enrollment would increase the quality of teaching and learning.

One could argue that another motive for increased governance at the school level might be labeled the "Failing School" headlines. Hannaway (2003) wrote of a crisis of confidence by the American public regarding our educational system noting "[p]oor performance of American students relative to students in other industrialized countries, fairly flat performance of U.S. students over time on NAEP scores, despite significant increases in expenditures…" (p. 20). Boyd (2003) labeled this condition, especially in terms of educational governance, a "double crisis … of both performance and legitimacy" (p. 1-2). Decision makers shaped policies anchored in trends formerly considered radical and on the edge of traditional schooling – vouchers, privatization, take overs by non-profit and for-profit educational management organizations. The institution of educational governance – who is in charge, upon what information are decisions made, and how leaders are held accountable – seemed to be at the root of this unstable era in education in the United States.

In 2003, Hill asked "Does governance matter?" (p. 57). Lockwood (as cited in Hill, 2003) stated that whether school boards are appointed or run by mayors, they "are not consistently different or better performing than districts run by elected school boards" (p. 57). Even "charter districts – districts nominally freed from many state rules – are not able to make all that many significant changes" (Lockwood, 2001 as cited in Hill, 2003, p. 57).

Others have found that the unanticipated challenges may outweigh the affordances of autonomy instituted by policies of local school governance. Policy decisions made without insight to anticipate future challenges, or training to resolve obstacles concerning substantial issues of budget, personnel, curriculum and innovation, may be undertaken "in the worst of all situations: when feelings are high and smoldering controversy is present" (Brouillette, 2002, p. 226).

Positionality Statement

Altheide and Johnson (1994) responded to criticism originating within qualitative research circles as well as outside of this body of scholars disputing the validity and objectivity of qualitative research. This criticism emerged in the 1970s (Altheide & Johnson, 1994) from efforts by qualitative researchers to explain their roles in the reports they produced, how they draw their conclusions, and how this type of unquantifiable research has meaning and validity. "Reflexive turn," as this response became known, caused qualitative researchers to examine closely how qualitative research is accomplished and how meanings are derived. Responding to critics of qualitative research stating these types of investigations lack rigor, Altheide and Johnson (1994) declared:

> As long as we strive to base our claims and interpretations of social life on data of any kind, we must have a logic for assessing and communicating the interactive process through which the investigator acquired the research experience and information (p. 486).

In my study, reflexivity will be a challenge, and I will constantly have to remind myself that while my previous professional experiences provide me with a unique perspective into the world of charter system governance, this study is about the participants' stories, not mine. At the same time, during my tenure as a private high school and elementary charter school Principal, I

have worked with and managed high functioning and low functioning boards – both of which afforded me significant learning opportunities. A possible benefit of having served in these shared governance capacities may be that I am able to do a better job of questioning were I a person who had no previous point of reference regarding charter system governance. Josselson, Lieblich, and McAdams (2007) addressed the topic of reflexivity stating:

> Whether an author is self-consciously and overtly self-reflexive or not, the manner of presentation of narrative material inevitably repackages stories in to the container of an author's sociocultural, ideological, intellectual, and (perhaps even) psychodynamic window on the world. As a narrative researcher moves from being listener (or reader) to storyteller, representational choices mark how the narrative is to be evaluated and interpreted. (p. 7)

The litmus test to determine my success of repackaging others' stories free from any predetermined conclusions on my part as researcher will rely on the member checks by the participants in my study. This consistency is perhaps better stated as trustworthiness, a broader concept than validity. Wells (2011) cites the framework by Hammersley (1992) concerning trustworthiness meeting standards of truth and relevance. Valid qualitative research depends on methods that are well described and free from error, and provide evidence that other rival explanations have been explored (Wells 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Our nation was founded on the premise of representation and on an individual's right to choose her/his own destiny. These two ideals will be put to the test as Georgia moves forward with O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3, requiring that all school districts in the state of Georgia select from five operational systems, known as Flexibility Options, by June 30, 2015.

Educational representation in Georgia, through the twenty-first century, relied on the election of local school board members to make district-level decisions on significant issues of budget, personnel, and curriculum. Choice programs such as magnet schools, charter schools, vouchers and intra-district transfers delivered options for Georgia families and are woven amongst the fabric of traditional schools in our state. These two facets of education are about to be joined in a very specific way. All Georgia school systems must select from among five Flexibility Options under which to operate, and four of these five options require or propose a change in governance that transitions decision making authority to the local schools.

Current Georgia law provides "[s]chool district level oversight and policy establishment are the primary functions of the local School Board" (Dayton, 2013, p. 4). Title 20 is the Education Code and states that the School Board "is charged with overseeing district level school operations including the review and approval of local school revenue sources, budgets, contracts, employment, and district policies on facilities, curriculum, extracurricular programs, personnel, student discipline, etc." (Dayton, 2013, p. 4). By June 30, 2015, all local school systems within the state of Georgia must choose a Flexibility Option (O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3). This choice, by school district decision makers, will be a dramatic departure for the local School Boards as their oversight of historically-held areas of budgets, programs, personnel and innovation will be completely or partially transferred to school sites, depending upon the Flexibility Option chosen by district decision-makers.

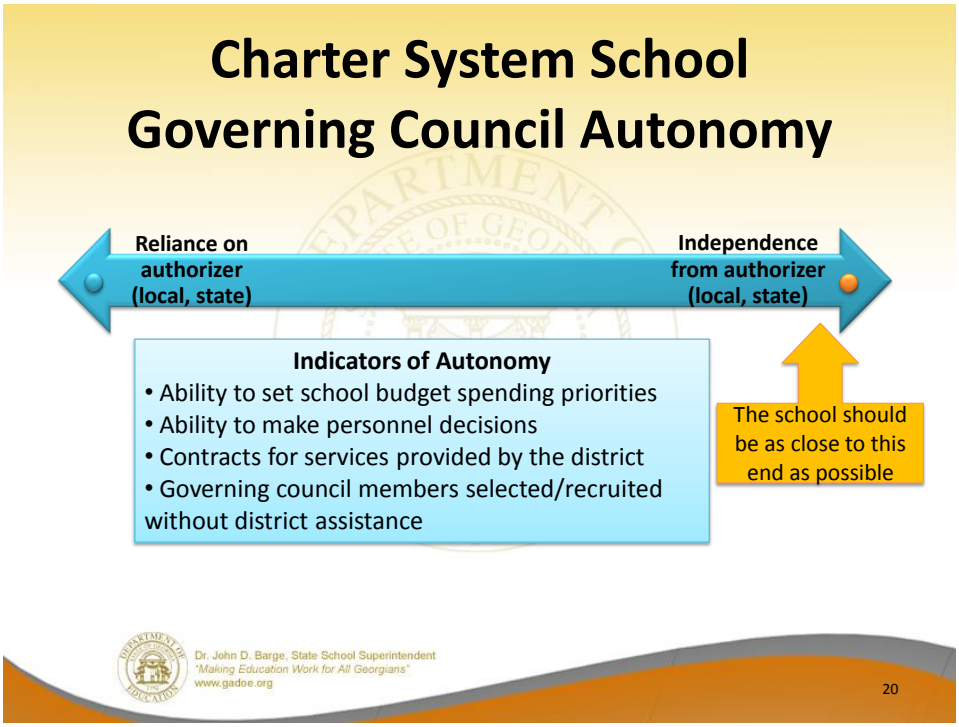
Flexibility Options are operational approaches designed to increase student achievement through innovation in exchange for greater accountability and flexibility. These five options* and their corresponding governance selections are:

- *Investing in Educational Excellence (IE²)* - the school system may maximize school level governance by granting local schools authority to determine how to reach goals
- *Charter System* – the school system must provide each school with school-level governance and decision making over budgets, programs, personnel and/or innovation
- *Status Quo School System* is a local district that has formally rejected all Flexibility Options, and the local board of education maintains governance.
- *System of Charter Schools* and *System of Charter Clusters* – Emphasis on parent/community involvement, including maximum school level governance *("School System Flexibility in Georgia: Overview and Comparison" by the Georgia Department of Education, retrieved from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Documents/School%20System%20Flexibility%20and%20Charter%20Schools%20in%20Georgia%20-%20September%2012%2c%202014%20-%20FINAL.pdf on November 13, 2013, entitled "A Comparison of IE2, Charter System, Strategic School system, & Status Quo, updated 1/22/13, and with additional update on July 18, 2014).

The policy is based on the premise that increased student achievement is attained through innovation, and that innovation rests on the ability of local school districts to be free from a variety of constraints. Waivers, the requests to be free from various constraints, may include state statute and state board rules and regulations, as well as release from Title 20 (Education Law). All five Flexibility Options center on two main principles: governance and fiscal flexibility. My study will focus on governance.

Depending upon the Flexibility Option selected, local school districts are required or may opt to relinquish partial or total autonomy of historically-controlled areas of budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation. Such widespread decentralization of educational decision-making

authority is unprecedented in the state of Georgia. A slide from the Georgia Department of Education presentation to school leaders distinguishes between current and future governance councils under a Charter system of governance. Notice the location of the arrow indicating where charter system school governing councils (at this time, the most numerously chosen Flexibility Option) should reside on the continuum after implementing this transition of decision-making authority. All systems within the state of Georgia are currently fixed at the far left side of the arrow.



As of July 2014, a total of 28 school systems have received approval for their petitions for Flexibility Option (Retrieved February 12, 2015 from http://www.gadoe.org/External-AffairsandPolicy/CharterSchools/Documents/4%20%20School%20System%20Flexibility%20in%20Georgia%20-%20July%2018,%202014%20-%20State%20Board%20of%20Education.pdf). Information from the above site also provides the status of all Georgia school districts in their choice of Flexibility Options in the table below:

School System Waivers after June 30, 2015

- Current status of 180 school systems

Total Number of Districts that have met the June 30, 2015 Deadline		
Approved Charter Systems	28	
Approved IE2 Systems	3	
LOI + Charter System Application promised for 2014	13	54
LOI + Charter System Application promised for 2015	1	
LOI + engaged in decision process	6	
Only Submitted LOI in 2010	3	
Engaged in decision process		95
Status is Unknown		31
Total Number of Districts in the State		**180**

Research Questions

The focus of this study is the governance practices of a charter system in the state of Georgia. Although Georgia law provides that ultimate authority is held by the district-level board and superintendent, school districts who operate as a charter system are required to transition decision-making on significant issues to the school level. As major decisions of finance, personnel, programs and school improvement rest in the hands of school governance council members, it is important to know how these individuals learn their roles. Also vital to the understanding of governance within a charter system structure are stakeholders' characterization of benefits and challenges in managing such an environment.

My Research Questions are:

In a Charter System deemed successfully performing by the state of Georgia,

1. How are significant issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation decided?
2. How do local school governance council members learn their roles?
3. How do selected district-level board members, the superintendent, principals and local school governance council members characterize the benefits and challenges of a charter system?

Significance of the Study

My study adds to the base of literature on school level governance, as well as informing decision makers and policy makers as Georgia implements O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3, requiring that all school districts in the state of Georgia select from five operational systems, known as Flexibility Options, by June 30, 2015. Decisions are currently being made to comply with this

directive, and it is critical that local decision makers have the necessary tools to make sound choices for their constituents.

Also, public perception of education in the United States has suffered in recent times. Advocacy masquerading as research present findings that our nation's students lag in comparison to other countries' pupils. Hannaway (2003) wrote of a crisis of confidence by the American public regarding our educational system noting "[p]oor performance of American students relative to students in other industrialized countries, fairly flat performance of U.S. students over time on NAEP scores, despite significant increases in expenditures…" (p. 20). Boyd (2003) labeled this condition, especially in terms of educational governance, a "double crisis … of both performance and legitimacy" (p. 1-2). Decision makers shaped policies anchored in trends formerly considered radical and on the edge of traditional schooling – vouchers, privatization, take overs by non-profit and for-profit educational management organizations. The institution of educational governance – who is in charge, upon what information are decisions made, and how leaders are held accountable – seemed to be at the root of this unstable era in education in the United States. Under these conditions, the state legislators have mandated a significant shift in the educational structure in Georgia, significantly based on devolving significant issues of decision-making to the school-level.

The findings of the study may create an opportunity for transferability of the knowledge to Georgia school system decision-makers. In other words, what if, in addition to the state Department of Education's recommended strategy for choosing a Flexibility Option, district-level decision makers could also utilize perspectives of a successfully-performing Charter System currently operating under the Flexibility Option chosen by their district leaders?

Design Overview

Chapter one of this study begins with a definition of charter systems and a review of the decision status of Georgia school districts for choosing a Flexibility Option by June 30, 2015. The chapter continues with an in-depth look into the history of educational governance in the United States and the role of school choice within that context. The author's positionality statement, the statement of the problem, research questions and the significance of the study are illuminated, followed by the limitations of the study and a list of key terms and their definitions.

As a former charter school administrator in the state of Georgia, and having served as principal at a private high school, local school governance played a role in how I performed my tasks as a school leader. During the time of leadership at these two schools, I worked with a high functioning board, a low-functioning board, and a "no" functioning board. From these experiences, I came to grasp how council effectiveness increased my capacity to perform my job, or deflected my attention as school leader to one of coping with one board member's attempt to micro-manage the school. In another instance, the local school governance council existed on paper but not did operate in any substantive manner, regardless of the task. It is with candor that I admit that a high functioning board filled the gap of my weaknesses as a school leader, and in the case of a low-functioning and no-functioning boards, the lack of support and the rise of conflict played a significant role in my career path.

Initially, I viewed, with a great deal of skepticism, the legislation for all Georgia school districts to choose a Flexibility Option as their operating system, especially since four of the five options required or recommended a transition of significant decision-making authority to local school governance councils. The greater body of recent research does not suggest a significant relationship between shared decision-making and improving student achievement (Malen &

Ogawa, 1988). Even in the most challenging of school environments, research does not provide much evidence that governance at the school level empowers the most fragile of our student populations (Beck & Murphy, 1999).

However, one aspect of shared decision-making – the effects of increased community involvement on student achievement – may not yet be fully realized in schools that have reformed their governance structures. Bryk, of the Consortium of Chicago School Reform, believed that the full impact of decentralized decision making had not yet yielded a true picture of its effectiveness in Chicago, an urban site of research on shared decision making (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow & Easton, 1998). Today, Bryk and a team of researchers continue to study the impact of governance reform on student achievement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton & Luppescu, 2010). Bryk et al. wrote of the shift of power relationships among "principals, teachers, parents, and local community leaders" (1998, p. 216) and that this "decentralization pushed everyone involved to revisit their expectations of one another and to reconsider their own sense of obligations toward one another" (1998, p. 216). While not all schools experienced a positive impact from governance reform, "there is ample evidence that this did happen in many schools, and many of these schools substantially improved student learning" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 216).

In their book *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools,* Mediratta, Shah and McAlister wrote of the findings of a core question for their research on the capacity of a community to collectively affect the effectiveness of its schools. Seeking to know whether "the process of leadership development in parents, students, and community members that occurs in school-reform organizing contributes to greater community capacity to support school success" (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister, 2009, p. 155), these researchers assert that "truly transformative

change in the educational futures of young people is unlikely to result from strategies focused on improving schools in isolation from communities" (p. 155).

Continued investigation by researchers about the outcomes of shared governance can significantly add to the conversation about the potential merits of converting a traditional, vertical governance structure to one that is more horizontal, as in the case of operating as a Charter System under the Flexibility Option legislation in Georgia.

Chapter two begins a discussion of the relevant literature on educational governance, shared decision making, and board behaviors, both effective and ineffective, to set the stage for the study. The review of relevant literature opens with a brief illustration of governance as incorporated into modern-day United States education policy, followed by research data on shared decision making. Literature on nonprofit and charter school boards complete the review of relevant studies, with research on ineffective and effective qualities of board behaviors concluding the review of literature in this chapter.

In chapter three, I include a discussion of the research methodology describing how this study was conducted and the procedure for gathering data. After approval was granted from the charter system, I reviewed its charter system application approved by the state of Georgia, observed district-level and school governance council meetings, and interviewed key stakeholders within the system. These interviews focused on three areas: the types of decisions made at the district and school levels, how school governance council members learn their roles, and how the interview participants characterize the benefits and challenges of operating within a charter system of governance. This chapter, too, describes the theoretical framework through which analyses were made of the processes of governance.

Chapter four shares the data and findings produced by this qualitative investigation using the case study approach. Profiles of the charter system and two of its studied schools begin the discussion of document analyses of agendas and minutes to confirm discussion topics; observations of district-level and school governance council meetings confirmed participants' perspectives which were further developed by individual interviews. The chapter concludes with a detailed review of the evidence and findings of each research question.

Chapter five relates the study back to the literature, interprets the findings, and also suggests future implications of the study.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are limited by the type of approach used for analysis of the data, the site selected for research, and only a partial ability to assess claims by interview participants.

First, while the use of qualitative inquiry in a case study approach is well suited to offer discoveries about the governance processes of one charter system in the state of Georgia, the results of these findings are not generalizable to all Flexibility Option settings. Secondly, the results of the study are limited in scope, size and time period to the governance practices studied at this one Georgia charter system, the research selection size of participants, and its operations under current Georgia laws. It is not reasonable to assert that all perspectives are representative of other current and future charter system organizations.

Lastly, the findings of this study are narrowed by the ability to verify claims by participants that, due to its unique design, charter system students experience equal or greater success than their traditional school system counterparts. An analysis was performed on statewide testing data for the studied school system pre- and post- charter system status. This

analysis compared Grades 4 and 8 reading and math scores from the statewide Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) spanning the year prior to Meadowlands School District becoming a charter system, 2007, through last year's data, 2014. The system scores reflect positive gains in reading, and losses in math for grades 4 and 8 during pre- and post- charter system status (see Appendix A). The potential, yet unknown, relevance of the information contained in Appendix A underscores the need for further exploration of examining charter *district* data to allow comparison with traditional systems to identify what does or does not make a charter district higher performing than a regular one. Findings have been published using scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006). These studies consistently indicate that student achievement for charter school students have not yet been shown to increase student achievement when compared with their traditional school counterparts. Researchers Lubienski and Lubienski found "the best current estimate of the performance of charter schools is that any academic advantage is negligible, isolated, or even negative relative to achievement in non-charter public schools" (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006, p. 55). However, these findings contrast with one recent report to the National Assessment Governing Board (Chudowsky & Ginsburg, 2012) which examined NAEP scores of charter schools and regular public schools. Although charter schools across the nation did not outperform regular public schools, a finding consistent with the majority of charter research, black and Hispanic subgroups attending charter schools located in large urban cities, showed "higher scores in charter schools" (Chudowsky & Ginsburg, 2012). The report by Chudowsky and Ginsburg (2012) recommended "making some changes to the NAEP Data Explorer interface and including data … that is representative of all charter schools located within each participating urban district" (p. 1). If this

suggestion is adopted by the national Assessment Governing Board in charge of NAEP data collection, then each district that is designated as a charter *district* may then be compared with other traditional districts, something that is lacking in current educational research which only compares charter *schools* with traditional schools.

Definitions of Key Terms

The purpose of this section is to clarify the operational definitions which were used in the research design and subsequent findings of this study. Definitions relating to the term *charter* are exact wording or paraphrased from Georgia Code Section 160-4-9-.04 "Charter Schools and Charter Systems Definitions" found at http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/State-Board-of-Education/SBOE%20Rules/160-4-9-.04.pdf.

Terms such as *site-based management, school-based management, shared basis decision making* and *shared decision making* all suggest a process by which local decisions are made collectively by stakeholders closest to the school site. For the purposes of this study, the term *shared decision making* (SDM) envelopes all variations to describe educational settings where decisions on budget, curriculum, and personnel have devolved to the school site level.

Annual Report – Submitted by each Charter System beginning October 1 of the year following approval from the State Board indicating the System's progress towards the stated goals and objectives approved in its charter contract, and includes scores for all state-mandated assessment and accountability instruments.

Assessment and Accountability – Each System Charter School is subject to all accountability and assessment requirements set forth within the official Educational Code of the State of Georgia and any corresponding State Board Rules.

Broad Flexibility Allowed by Law: In exchange for the Charter system's agreement to meet or exceed the performance-based goals and measurable objectives set forth in the charter contract, the State Board of Education grants broad flexibility to the charter system. Although no federal law may be waived, most state laws and State Board of Education rules, with the exception of those pertaining to health and safety, funding formulas and accountability provisions may be waived.

Charter School – Is a public school that is operating under the terms of a charter (contract).

Charter School Act of 1998: O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2060 *et seq.*, known as "Charter Schools Act," established the rules and procedures for establishing charter schools and systems.

Charter System – as defined in O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2062, is a local district that has an executed charter from the State of Georgia Department of Education, granting it freedom from almost all of Title 20 legislation (Education), State Board of Education rules, and Georgia Department of Education Guidelines.

Charter or Contract – Is a performance-based contract between the charter authorizer(s), e.g. local school boards, Charter School Commission, a Georgia nonprofit school or district governing board, and the state board of education.

Charter Term – The length of time granted by the State Board to operate as a Charter.

Flexibility Option – There are five types – Investing in Educational Excellence School system (IE^2), Charter System, Status Quo as well as schools located within a System of Charter Clusters, and a System of Charter Schools

Governance Structure **–**

a. Governing Body at the school level is known as School Governance Council (SGC)

b. School-Level Governance – decision-making authority in decisions of personnel, financial, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishment and monitoring of the achievement of school improvement goals, and school operations.

c. Decision-Making Authority – the authority of the principal of each System Charter School, the School Governing Council, and the Local Board in personnel decisions, including hiring school principals and teachers; financial decisions; curriculum and instruction; resource allocation; establishing and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals; and school operations shall be implemented.

Local Board of Education **–** Ultimately responsible for all duties to be performed by the Charter System and the schools within the Charter System, known as "System Charter Schools."

Performance-Based Goals and Measurable Objectives – Designed to result in the improvement of student achievement as set forth in the charter system contract and approved by the State Board of Education.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter begins with a review of relevant literature on governance as incorporated into modern-day United States education policy, followed by research data on shared decision making. Then, as most Georgia school district leaders seem to be choosing a Charter System of governance as their choice of Flexibility Option, this paper examines literature on nonprofit and charter school boards. Concluding this chapter is a discussion on ineffective and effective qualities of board behaviors. The theoretical framework for analyzing my study, Organizational Theory and Community of Practice theory, is well-suited to the review of relevant literature included in Chapter two, and is fully developed in this paper.

The literature review is anchored to the above-mentioned research for two reasons: 1) everything that is about to occur in Georgia is not new – governance by local district boards of education, while unique to our country versus the rest of the world, is a fundamental element of U.S. schooling, and 2) charters were constructed with local school governance as one of the main tenets of that reform, and, as of this writing, Charter System is the primary selection by district leaders as its chosen Flexibility Option operating system.

Educational Governance Policy

Public perception of education in the United States has suffered in recent times; advocacy masquerading as research has presented "studies" whose findings indicate that our nation's students lag in comparison to other countries' pupils. In the 1980s, the United States Department

of Education requested a review of then-current state of affairs in the nation's educational system. The report, *A nation at risk: The imperative for Educational reform* was published in 1983. The initial words of the report, "Our nation is at risk" set the tone for the message of the report – as a nation, our schooling is sub-par, especially when compared internationally. The "fix" was to reform education addressing the perceived mediocrity and a loss of purpose. It may be argued that the recommendation by this 1983 report for parents to maintain vigilance and to refuse to "be satisfied with less than the best" (retrieved December 23, 2013 from http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html) may have sparked the initial gravitation toward shared decision making in schools with parental participation on governance councils. The turn toward shared decision making in public schools began soon after the publication of *A nation at risk: The imperative for Educational reform*. Perhaps the public believed that greater access at the school level would diminish the number of decisions perceived to contribute to "failing" schools. What tended to happen, though, was that after the initial time period of shared decision making, apathy set in for a variety of reasons, and the result was low turnout to elect council members. This is why it is important for school districts in Georgia, most of whom will convert to some level of shared governance, to understand historically and currently, what characterizes effective shared decision making.

In 2003, Hill asked "Does governance matter?" (p. 57). Lockwood (as cited in Hill, 2003) stated that whether school boards are appointed or run by mayors, they "are not consistently different or better performing than districts run by elected school boards" (p. 57). Even "charter districts – districts nominally freed from many state rules – are not able to make all that many significant changes" (Lockwood, 2001 as cited in Hill, 2003, p. 57).

Others have found that the unanticipated challenges may outweigh the affordances of autonomy instituted by policies of local school governance. Policy decisions made without insight to anticipate future challenges, or training to resolve obstacles concerning substantial issues of budget, personnel, curriculum and innovation, may be undertaken "in the worst of all situations: when feelings are high and smoldering controversy is present" (Brouillette, 2002, p. 226).

Shared Decision Making in U.S. Education

Terms such as *site-based management, school-based management, shared basis decision making* and *shared decision making* are used interchangeably among researchers investigating school-level governance. The connotation of these words suggests a process by which local decisions are made collectively by stakeholders closest to the school site. For the purposes of this review, I will use the term *shared decision making* (SDM) to describe educational settings where decisions on budget, curriculum, and personnel have devolved to the school site level.

The body of literature on SDM has focused on a wide spectrum of approaches: the value of shared decision making, the roles and responsibilities of council members, and the effect of community involvement in creating positive student growth. For instance, in 1991, Comer and Hayes studied the impact of shared governance structures on student achievement, and found that a home-school partnership did have positive effectives on student achievement. The greater body of recent research, however, does not suggest a significant relationship between SDM and creating policies that improve student achievement (Malen & Ogawa, 1988). Even in the most fragile of school environments, research does not provide much evidence that governance at the school level empowers the most fragile of our student populations (Beck & Murphy, 199).

However, the effects of increased community involvement may not yet be fully realized in schools that use a shared decision making organization of governance. Bryk, of the Consortium of Chicago School Reform, believes that the full impact of decentralized decision making has not yet yielded a true picture of its effectiveness in Chicago, an urban site of research on shared decision making (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow & Easton, 1998). The purpose of the design of the Consortium study was to assess the overall impact of shared decision making by analyzing "the frequency of each activity type [patterns in local school governance, school reorganization, and instructional improvement] and how they were distributed across the city" (Bryk et al., 1998, p. 35). Analysis of these factors led these researchers, Bryk et al., (1998) and Bryk (2010) to conclude that one of the intended purposes of the Chicago School Reform Act – "enhanced parent, community and professional participation as a lever for school change" (Bryk et al., 1998, p. 33) required further study.

My study investigates how, despite the vast number of studies which fail to connect shared decision making and school effectiveness (Duttweiler & Mutchler, 1990; Malen, Ogawa & Kranz, 1989; Wagstaff, 1995; Rutherford, 1991 as cited in Beck & Murphy, 1999) one type of Flexibility Option, Charter System, has been successfully implemented in a charter system deemed successfully-performing by the state of Georgia.

Charter Governance

This section begins with a brief but relevant summary of the history of the charter school reform movement, its policies and a short list of significant findings on stakeholder perceptions to better understand charter school governance. It is important to note, too, that this study is based on charter *system* operations. Although the term charter *school* is well-recognized by the general public, the public's understanding of what constitutes charter *system* is limited. The

following discussion on charter system governance may add to the understanding of the distinction. Georgia Code § 20-2-85, regarding the role of local boards of education and school councils, states:

> (a) The General Assembly recognizes the need to improve communication and participation of parents and the community in the management and operation of local schools. The General Assembly believes that parent and community support is critical to the success of students and schools. The intent of this article is to bring communities and schools closer together in a spirit of cooperation to solve difficult education problems, improve academic achievement, provide support for teachers and administrators, and bring parents into the school-based decision-making process. The establishment of school councils is intended to help local boards of education develop and nurture participation, bring parents and the community together with teachers and school administrators to create a better understanding of and mutual respect for each other's concerns, and share ideas for school improvement. School councils shall be reflective of the school community.

A worthy discussion of charter systems must include charter schools as a piece of the conversation as charter *schools* were the first step of the "Charter" reform movement.

Charter schools originated as nontraditional public schools for three primary reasons: innovative instruction, parental choice, and parental involvement. Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method researchers have examined how charter schools are governed from several viewpoints – the perspectives of board members, effectiveness of the board, and the effect of local school governance on school improvement. Community-based and organically organized, charter schools appeal to state lawmakers as a solution to address public perception of failing

schools in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the school year 2010-11, 41 states have passed charter schools legislation, including Washington, D.C., and the number of charter school students in the United States, in a twelve-year enrollment period ending in 2010-11, increased to nearly seventeen percent, or a total of 1.8 million students nationally.

Statistics such as these point to the significance of charter schools in our nation's public schooling. Ted Kolderie, one of the founders of the charter school movement and instrumental in bringing charter schools to the state of Minnesota in 1991, wrote that the term "charter schools" is not about the schools themselves – it is about "system-reform … a way for the state to cause the district system to improve" (as cited in Hassel, 1998, p. 249). The idea of charter schools was premised upon parental choice and constructed upon the power of markets. Charter schools would seek to fill or create a niche in the schooling market that was not readily available to other public school students. Market accountability, according to charter proponents, would function as the separator of good versus bad schools, prompting closures of sub-par programs which would be "forced to close for lack of 'customers'" (Wohlstetter, Smith and Farrell, 2013, p. 37).

Parental choice, a tenet of this reform initiative, originally found its strength in the failure of the voucher movement to gain widespread support. Originally considered a "second-best" option, charters profited from this vacuum of choice once state policymakers on both sides of the aisle backed charters to provide schooling options for families. Additionally, charter schools were designed to function as laboratories of innovative practices. Whether this ideal translated into action is a matter of opinion. Christensen and Rainey (as cited in Wohlstetter et al., 2013) performed a content analysis of charter school applications and "found that charter schools approached the design of the education program by selecting from a 'menu of possibilities' based

on the needs they serve" (p. 41). According to the authors of this study, "charter schools were not developing new education programs so much as packaging existing programs and processes in new ways" (Wohlstetter et al., 2013, p. 41).

What remains of the principal reasons for charters is governance at the school level. Studies have examined shared decision making from a variety of perspectives – restructuring (Fullan, 1995; Wohlstetter, 1995; Sebring and Bryk, 2000, Bryk, 2010), the role of the principal (Ouchi, 2006; Ladd and Zelli, 2002) and outcomes (Smylie, Lazarus, Brownlee-Conyers, 1996; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Malen and Ogawa, 1988; Hill, 2003; Hess, 1999).

One such study, Sam, Smith and Wohlstetter (as cited in Wohlstetter at al., 2013) "conducted a legislative review of forty-one state laws and interviewed eighty state leaders to explore how charter schools nationwide involve teachers in school governance" (p. 77). The findings suggested that, with the exception of a few outliers, most charter school teachers do not actively participate in the decision making in their schools. On the other hand, in a survey of California school leaders in 2000-2001, Zimmer and Buddin (as cited in Wohlstetter et al., 2013) observed that "charter school principals reported having greater control over decision making than their counterparts in public schools" (p. 78), a finding also supported by a study by Adamowski, Therriault and Cavanna (as cited in Wohlstetter et al., 2013). In their book section about charter schools as seen through the eyes of students, teachers and parents, Vanourek, Manno, Finn and Bierlein (1998) reported that parents "ranked their child's charter school higher on every single indicator" (p. 193) compared to the school their child would have attended otherwise. This study, the Hudson Institute's Charter Schools in Action Project, also asked teachers to rate their satisfaction with the charter schools in which they were teachers, and seventy percent of the teachers responded that they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied

with the governing board of the school (as cited in Vanourek et al., 1998), and only six percent of these teachers indicated little or no success in participating in decisions at their charter schools.

A key objective of the charter school movement was the desire to free up public schools from constraints that were thought to impede their ability to design innovative education programs – chief among them was the strategy to transfer decision-making responsibilities to local schools. Wohlstetter et al. (2013) affirmed charter school advocates' reasoning that "local educators (rather than district, state, or federal administrators) who are closest to students and have the most knowledge about students' educational needs are expected to have more decision-making power in three key areas: curriculum, budget, and staffing" (p. 69). Of the five Flexibility Options presented to Georgia school district leaders, four of the five options require or propose greater school level governance in the strategic areas of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation.

Multi-level involvement in decision making is a hallmark of charter school governance. Parents, teachers, school leaders and community members make up a typical local school governance council. In a review of charter school legislation, Wohlstetter et al. (2013) found "fourteen charter laws cite increased school-level autonomy as a key driver behind the legislation" (p. 69).

This "school-level autonomy," or local school governance, "… is the aggregate of formal and informal influences and decisions that create and sustain the conditions for learning and the consistent focus on learning" (Cunningham, 2003, p. 159), or "[g]overnance is the set of processes, customs, policies, laws, and institutions by which an organization is controlled" (Hill & Lake, 2008, p. 114). These processes, centered on a set of formal and informal influences, are

best described as factors of external governance and internal governance. Hill and Lake (2008) described charter schools' external governance as "their relationships with government agencies that determine whether they may admit students and receive public funds" (p.113), and charter schools' internal governance as those determinations "which must be involved in making decisions about school policies and programs" (p. 113).

While external governance, usually created by state or district-level entities, offers rational arrangements for charter schools, it is the internal governance arrangements which are much less clear. Some examples of the conundrum encircling charter school internal governance (taken from Hill and Lake, 2008) are:

External Governance Intent	**Actual Outcome in Internal Governance**
Create organizational effectiveness	Some groups are abused or neglected
Freedom from bureaucratic barriers	Limited school heads' freedom of action
Governance by a nonprofit board	Internal friction, amplify conflicts

Hill and Lake (2008) stated "nobody had sufficiently thought through charter school's external and internal governance arrangements before they were enacted into law, and that the key parties have still not learned to play their roles well" (p. 114).

Effective and Ineffective Board Behaviors

Research on ineffective board governance points to several factors for lack of success. Wohlstetter (1995) claimed that the model fails when shared decision making is adopted "as an end in itself" (Wohlstetter, 1995, p. 23) with little understanding of the significance of centrally-controlled decision making underpinned by the local school improvement plan. Other factors common to ineffective shared governance are local school councils "bogged down in issues of

power – who can attend meetings, who can vote, and so on – and had no time or energy left to confront issues of school improvement" (Wohlstetter, 1995, p. 23). Also, "participation in local school board elections is generally low" (Rotherham in Hill, 2002, p. 3). The minor turnout of voters has the potential to assign decision-making power to an individual or group with a self-serving agenda, especially if regular meetings of local school governance councils "frequently do not meet quorum, meet for less than an hour, experience significant conflicts between role groups, and spend most of the time during meetings discussing procedural issues" (Bryk et al., 1997, in Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007, p. 601).

Charter school law requires that decisions are to be made closely to the student populations whom the schools serve. School-level boards should resemble a nonprofit board. Therefore, lessons and comparisons from nonprofit boards have relevance in my study as I examine how boards make decisions, what types of decisions are made, and how new knowledge is created and used in future judgments. If, as some researchers have found, local school governance does not effectively improve schools, then, what has gone wrong?

John Carver, who has written extensively on boards and board behavior, stated that "[i]t takes no scholar to find the problems" (1997, p. 8). Carver continued "The problem is not that a group or an individual *occasionally* slips into poor practice, but that intelligent, caring individuals regularly exhibit procedures of governance that are deeply flawed" (1997, p. 9). Carver listed conditions that create a drain on board effectiveness:

- *Time on the trivial* … items of trivial scope or import receive disproportionate attention compared with matters of greater scope or importance

- *Short-term bias* … the 'time horizon' about which a board should make decisions is more distant at the governing level … Yet we find boards dealing mainly with the near term and, even more dysfunctionally, with the past
- *Reactive stance* Boards consistently find themselves reacting to staff initiatives rather than acting proactively. (p. 9)

As noted by Hill and Lake (2008), policymakers have required that "every charter school be governed by a nonprofit board" (p. 114). The challenge is to "convert divergent views into a single official view" (Carver, 1997, p. 188). Carver (1997) provided the image that "it is [as] important for the board to have multiple minds as for it to have a single voice" and that to "weaken the multiplicity of viewpoints would be to rob the board of its richness of wisdom" (p. 189). While not impossible to accomplish this mission of combined, yet multiple, viewpoints, an ineffective board sets an agenda that does not focus on school improvement. Hochschild, in his 2005 book section "What school boards can and cannot (or will not) accomplish" stated:

> We know from other research and commentary that boards spend less than one-tenth of their time developing and overseeing policy; instead, they spend more than half of their time on administration and responding to particular citizens' concerns or problems. (p. 325)

Despite evidence that school boards dwell less on pedagogy and instructional issues and more on minor issues, "most citizens may be sufficiently satisfied with what they see in schools and therefore not feel impelled to try to overcome these structural barriers" (Hochschild, 2005, p. 326), and also that "whether correctly or not, almost half of parents of public school students give a 'grade' of A or B to schools in their community and over two-thirds give the same high grades to their own children's schools" (Hochschild, 2005, p. 326).

Whether focused on charter school or nonprofit boards, literature on these types of boards are consistent in several key characteristics: board members are difficult to recruit, the element of time to thoroughly engage a topic is fleeting, and few board members have the expertise to understand the distinction between the roles of boards and their management counterparts. Rainey and Harvey (as cited in Hill & Lake, 2008) wrote:

> Some nonprofit boards are agenda driven and wind up trying to micromanage the schools …. Many have weak governing boards; they have little capacity to oversee the school …. Most, even the nonprofits established by the profit-making vendors, have trouble distinguishing between the oversight function of a board and running the school. (p. 123-124)

Similar to other parent organizations within schools, PTA and Athletic Booster clubs as examples, "activist parents with extreme points of view [may] be over-represented on boards" (Hill & Lake, 2008, p. 124). All boards have a life cycle. They experience turnover, leadership changes, and alteration of organizational purpose. School board members' children graduate and acquired knowledge and experience are lost. Or, current members, not planning for resources beyond their children's tenure at school, spend improperly and fund future programs inadequately, and organizations themselves, especially charter schools, have initial needs in start-up, but later, requirements are altered as the school grows.

Ideally, local school governance boards would recruit members based on their expertise and aim to include "experts in legal, finance, personnel, real estate, and public relations issues" (Hill & Lake, 2008, p. 124). How can this be accomplished when citizens are reluctant to take on a task such as board membership, and low voter turnout occasionally permits a parent with an agenda to be elected and then optimize this opportunity to set policy that supports her/his plan?

A change in governance can strengthen public schools, and in this era of school reform, Hill (2003) proposed four criteria for establishing an effective school governance environment:

- Predictable funding and a stable regulatory environment
- Access to a variety of ideas, assistance, and materials
- Benign pressure to demonstrate performance
- Freedom to choose staff on the basis of fit with a defined approach to instruction (p. 17)

However, changing governance structures is not sufficient if old rules remain (Hill, 2003). Perhaps, especially in its initial stages, a new perspective might be that a board member considers her/his responsibilities as one of trusteeship (Middleton, 1987). Scott (2000) defines trusteeship as "a calling that embraces practices deeply rooted in history and tradition that are worth passing on" (p. 64) and a connection between the health and vitality of an organization cobbled with a "depth approach to board education which asks trustees to be fully conscious of their current actions and their potential effect on future outcomes" (p. 65-66).

As Georgia moves toward a systemic transition from centralized to decentralized governance, these are uncertain times for decision makers at the district level who are setting up school-level governing boards, and those citizens who will serve on the boards. During these times of transition, there will be a blending of new and old. Local schools will have greater autonomy on significant issues of budget, personnel, curriculum and innovation; however, the benefit of years of expertise lies with the district level board who, until the time of the new Flexibility Option, were in charge of these matters. That is why a Community of Practice, one of the two theoretical frameworks of my study, which sustains and honors previous knowledge, offers a way to adjust the "learning curve" of school board members in a more vertical fashion.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories are relevant in my study of systems currently operating under a Flexibility Option chosen by their school leaders – Organizational Theory and Community of Practice theory. In this study, specific types of decisions made by local school governing boards, were examined in light of how decisions are made within the organizational construct of the local school board whose membership spans a variety of, and sometimes conflicting, objectives – parents, teachers, principals and community leaders.

Also, my study's design is to investigate a successfully-performing charter system, so it is vital to understand how effective board members create, sustain and pass along their knowledge. The theory of Community of Practice, described more fully in the latter portion of this section, will assist in identifying how members of district level and school level governing bodies acquire and use knowledge as they learn their roles.

Some education policy makers believe that it is possible to transfer organizational structures of shared decision making by the private sector to public schools. In the private sector, Organizational Theory is a broad, complex field that encompasses many theories of institutional management. Max Weber, who wrote of his Bureaucratic ideal of efficiency in Economy and Society translated to English in 1963, along with Frederick Taylor, who generated the concept of a super-efficient rational system known as Scientific Management recorded in his book The Principles of Scientific Management published in 1914, are two well-known fathers of organizational theory. Current-day organizational theorists include Professor Nicolaj Siggelkow who is well recognized for research focusing "on the strategic and organizational implications of interactions among a firm's choices of activities and resources" (https://mgmt.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/1360/ retrieved September 19, 2013). His study of

centralized, decentralized, and reintegrated organizational approaches have significant application in understanding the effectiveness of an organizational structure. Briefly, Siggelkow (2003) describes decision-making in organizations as:

> a centralized organization, in which decisions are made only at the level of the firm as a whole; a decentralized organization, in which decisions are made independently in two divisions; and a temporarily decentralized firm, which starts out with a decentralized structure and later reintegrates. (p. 650).

As Georgia school districts transfer decision-making authority to local schools under their chosen Flexibility Option, it will be interesting to see how this transition takes place – how long does it take, what types of decisions transfer more easily than others, as well as any preparation undertaken by the district to make the change as seamless as possible. My study investigates a successfully-performing Charter System, one of the five Flexibility Option operating systems required by O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3, and seeks to understand how decisions are made on significant issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation at a Charter System of governance, how local school council members learn their roles, and assessments by the key stakeholders as to the benefits and challenges of operating as Charter System of governance.

Once a local school-level board is operational and, given the diverse backgrounds of the members, is it possible to examine how these board members learn their roles? Also, is it possible to explore how individuals, communities and organizations, all intertwined within a successfully-performing Charter System, form a Community of Practice to effectively fulfill their duties? Etienne Wenger developed a theory of Community of Practice in which participants, at a grass-roots level, navigate through a process of learning and knowing, to learn their roles.

In 1999, Etienne Wenger presented a theory of learning in which a "Community of Practice," informal and formal, is the fundamental process through which humans learn and operate. This type of learning pivots upon participation and enterprise – participation being the engagement of the individual (or community, or organization), and enterprise as the task at hand. Wenger (1999) asked "what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world" (p. 3). From Wenger's perspective, "learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon" (1999, p. 3).

As all Georgia school districts determine under which of the five Flexibility Options they will operate, it is appropriate to frame my study within the Community of Practice approach as its main tenets of *meaning, practice, community* and *identity* relate to each situation of the charter system stakeholders whom I will interview – district level board members, the superintendent, principals and school governance council members. Layers of bureaucracy are being peeled away to place decision making power in the hands of those closest to the students; however, to lose sight of the historical *and legal* oversight and expertise of the district level board members and officials, even in such a time of ambiguity as this authority is transferred, is possibly to the peril of the newly-formed local school councils. By law, ultimate control is held by the "local board of education [who] ultimately retains constitutional authority" (Retrieved February 16, 2015 from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/State-Board-of-Education/SBOE%20Rules/160-4-9-.04.pdf).

Wenger's Community of Practice theory touches on exactly this type of circumstance as he wrote about how we can rethink learning new roles. He wrote:

- For *individuals*, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities.

- For *communities,* it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members.
- For *organizations*, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization. (1999, p.7-8)

For my study, the *individual* is each stakeholder in her/his role as district or school level officials and board members. The *community* is the local school governance council as it learns to make decisions on budget, personnel, curriculum and innovation. The *organization* is the district level council as a whole as it transfers these significant areas of authority to the local school councils in accordance with O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3 requiring all public school districts within the state of Georgia to declare a Flexibility Option by 2015.

A Community of Practice develops from a common interest by members to build and exchange knowledge; it is formed by the members themselves and continues as long as, in the eyes of its members, there is interest and reason for existence by the community (Wenger, 1999; Wenger and Snyder, 2000; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

Chait, Holland and Taylor (1996) described a "learning organization" as one whose board has "ample opportunities and a strong appetite to acquire knowledge" (p. 85). A community of practice, one that focuses a laser-beam attention on orientation and continuing education assuage initial feelings of inadequacy expressed by some board members. The "learning curve" of initial board service "limits the board's potential" (Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1996, p. 90). Learning to what to attend does not have to be a factor of time-on-board duration. Through dedicated and

deliberate planning of preservice and service learning, as well as the sharing of experiences post-service, effective transitions are made as board rotation takes place.

Although "Community of Practice," as originated with Wenger, is the label my study applies to the theoretical approach of shared knowledge and growth as an outcome, other writers have acknowledged the potential of "community" as a source of board effectiveness. Cunningham (2003) wrote regarding an emergence of community that "an assumption is made that improvements in community governance of learning are not only warranted but achievable [and that it] is assumed that improvements are dependent on processes of community dialogue and reflection" (p. 155). Traditional roles and responsibilities may stand in the way of governance if these elements "predominate … and generally do not reflect an incorporation of community perspectives and dialogue about learning and its governance" (Cunningham, 2003, p. 161). Districts who choose the Flexibility Option operating system of Charter System will be challenged as they navigate from historically-held positions of decision-making authority to transitioning this control to the local school level.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of the design of this study, the procedures and the methodology used to conduct the investigation. The chapter begins by defining the research design and is followed by a discussion on how data were collected and analyzed, the selection procedures, both of participant and documents, and data sources. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the validity and reliability of this study along with my subjectivity statement as investigator.

The primary focus of this research is to investigate how, under a Flexibility Option of Charter System, significant decisions are made, both at the district and school levels; what are the ways school governance council members learn their roles; and finally, characterizations of the benefits and challenges of operating as a charter system viewed from the perspectives of key stakeholders.

Research Design

A qualitative inquiry was made using a case study approach to investigate governance practices within a successfully-performing Charter System as one of the five types of Flexibility Option operating systems legislated by the state of Georgia. It is the goal of my study to add to the research on local school governance operating under the Flexibility Option known as Charter System in the state of Georgia. The use of qualitative inquiry and a case study approach are best suited for the design of my study.

Qualitative research is conducted to provide a "complex, detailed understanding" of an issue (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). The objective of qualitative researchers is to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). A qualitative approach yields rich, thick descriptions (Merriam, 1988).

My study investigates local school governance and decision making as an act of policy. Rist (1994) wrote of the policy cycle and qualitative research stating:

> The emphasis here on policy making being a *process* is deliberate. It is a process that evolves through cycles, with each cycle more or less bounded, more or less constrained by time, funds, political support, and other events. It is also a process that circles back on itself, iterates the same decision issue time and again, and often does not come to closure. (p. 546)

In 1994, Rist wrote of the second phase of policy cycle as one of implementation, and "the degree to which a program is reaching its intended target audience" (p. 550). The third cycle of policy is accountability and the assessment of a program's impacts (Rist, 1994). It is the examination of these cycles that Rist (1994) finds qualitative research in a position to best evaluate a program, stating "[p]olicy makers have no equally grounded means of learning about program impacts and outcomes as they do with qualitative research findings" (p. 551).

In 2003, Yin wrote "[c]ase studies have been done about decisions, programs, the implementation process, and organizational change" (p. 21). My study seeks to understand local school governance within a Charter System from each of the above elements – how are significant decisions made concerning issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation within a Charter System of governance, how local school council members learn their roles, and

assessments by the key stakeholders of benefits and challenges of operating as a charter system of governance.

> Creswell (2007) defined case study research as a
>
> Qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving ***multiple sources of*** information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p.73)

Yin (2003) wrote that "[i]n general, case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed" (p. 1). Taking a case study approach provides an opportunity for my study to illustrate the decision making process by collecting data on shared decision making from a variety of sources – purposeful sampling of a Charter System and school level stakeholders, document analysis of system and school agendas and meeting minutes, observations of district-level and school-level governance meetings, and researcher memos. Yin (2003) cited Schramm (1971) and his view of the natural alignment of case study research on decision making, observing:

> The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a *decision* or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result. (Yin citing Schramm, 1971, emphasis added, p. 12).

The "blueprint" (Yin, 2003, p. 21) of my case study is mapped by the type of site – Charter System – and the participants examined – district-level and school-level stakeholders – what data are relevant, and the analysis of the data that are collected. Patton (1980) stated

"Today's evaluator must be sophisticated about matching research methods to the nuances of particular evaluation questions and the idiosyncrasies of specific decision maker needs" (p. 17).

Unit of Analysis

This study analyzed governance practices within a Charter System as defined by the state of Georgia. Additionally, two elementary schools within the Charter System agreed to participate and formal observations and meetings were set up. The system is designated Title I, which means that it is a system of poverty, and all schools within said system are also registered as Title I schools. The charter system for this school district has been renewed for additional years, and it is within that context that they are deemed "successful" due to approval by the state of Georgia of its charter system application.

Selection Procedures

This study used purposeful selection sites, individuals, and documents. This approach was adopted so as to identify a successfully-performing Georgia charter system, key stakeholders within that system and documents to best distinguish findings related to the research questions of this study. Over a period of five months, observations were made of district-level and school-level governance meetings, interviews of key stakeholders were recorded, transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes. Document analysis consisting of Georgia charter legislation, district-level policies, review of agendas and minutes of district and school governance meetings, and the researcher memos added to the data collected.

Data Sources

Four sources of data were collected – semi-structured interviews, document analysis, direct observations and researcher memos – with participant interviews and document analysis

providing the best source of mutually supportive information about governing within a charter system.

A total of nine participants participated in this study – two district-level board members, the superintendent, two principals and four school governance council members added to the scope of the investigation. Initial interviews were conducted beginning in late October 2014 and continued through early February 2015.

Study participants were one male and eight females; one was African-American, and the remainder were Caucasian. These participants were selected based on purposeful sampling and represented the best scope of individuals who were uniquely positioned within the charter system as they practiced decision-making within a charter system of governance. The data from these participants provided information that would confirm or deny State of Georgia guidelines concerning the transfer of significant decision-making authority to school governance council members – the central idea of research question one. The semi-structured interviews asked participants to characterize the benefits and challenges of operating as a charter system of governance. These responses informed the results of the study in that regard.

Relationships by these individuals to the charter system studied ranged from 40+ years beginning as a student and later district-level board member to first-year stints as governance council members. The range of these associations provided thick, rich descriptions of the practices of decision-making, roles, and benefits/challenges of managing within a charter system using shared governance as its operating structure. The participants' demographic and professional information are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographic and Professional Information

Participant Position	Tenure at Charter System	Current Employment
District-Level Board Member 1	7 years	Local Business Person
District-Level Board Member 2	5 years	Retired Educator 35+ years
Pine Grove Elementary Principal	17 years	Charter System
Rock Mill Academy Principal	8 years	Charter System
School Governance Council Member 1	1 year	Rock Mill Academy Teacher
School Governance Council Member 2	2 years	Rock Mill Academy Parent
School Governance Council Member 3	15 years	Pine Grove Academy Tchr
School Governance Council Member 4	3 years	Pine Grove Academy Tchr

A year's worth of agendas and meeting minutes, both from the district-level board and school governance councils, contributed another source for review and investigation.

Official documents, in addition to the above-mentioned agendas and meeting minutes, supplemented the analysis; documents studied were: the Georgia Charter School Act of 1998, the targeted district's approved charter system renewal application, the district's policy about school governance council member roles and responsibilities.

Since state and district level policy requires the training of school governance council members, in addition to specific questions during the interview process, it was possible to visually review the PowerPoint used for training purposes of school governance council members. This review provided data with which to examine research question two concerning how school governance councils learn their roles, and then compare this visual material with

school governance council members' reflections about how they were oriented to their roles and the authentic practice of governance for their particular schools.

Methods

Case study research is an all-encompassing method (Yin, 2003). In his extensive research on qualitative inquiry Patton (1980, 2002) wrote of the importance of using a research method consisting of "techniques of in-depth, open ended interviewing and personal observation" (1980, p.19) noting that this "alternative relies on qualitative data, holistic analysis, and detailed description derived from close contact with the targets of study" (p. 19). Creswell (2007) described the research process for qualitative researchers as "emergent" (p. 39). The word "emergent" describes information not ordinarily known at the beginning of a process, and so it was with my study. The design of my study was deliberately loosely-prescribed to allow for changes and shifts as data began to be collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2007).

Document Analysis

Four types of documents were used: the Georgia Charter School Act of 1998, the targeted district's approved charter system renewal application, charter and individual school websites, and the district's policy about school governance council member roles and responsibilities.

Title 20, Article 31, Charter Schools Act of 1998, defines "School level governance" as "decision-making authority in personnel decisions, financial decisions, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals, and school operations." Analysis of this document provided the basis for research question one – How are significant issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation decided. In order to be in compliance with the law, charter systems must implement a transition of decision-making authority to school governance councils on these types of

decisions, and file a legally required Annual Report that gives an account of the governance structure of the charter system.

Official proceedings of district-level and school level governance meetings are publically-available records. Official proceedings, in the form of agendas and minutes were obtained. Also, researcher memos, containing questions and reflections, were maintained and analyzed on a regular basis.

Observations

Direct observations of both district-level and school-level governance meetings were completed. Notes of the observed meetings were recorded and evaluated alongside agenda items and meeting minutes. Of primary importance during these observations were the interactions among all participants and the types of topics discussed. Data gleaned from these meetings produced a greater context with which to analyze the research questions for this study.

Data Analysis

Patton (1980) advised researchers to be flexible and described the role of an evaluator as one that is "active-reactive-adaptive" (p. 18). This investigation was a case study whose analysis of the data benefited from a two-step approach. First, based upon the detailed description of the Flexibility Option type known as Charter System, the researcher determined questions about the governance structure, organizational processes and legal expectations of this type of governance. As the study unfolded, uncovering these emergent themes within the selected sites of district level governance and local school governance – what Creswell called ***within-case analysis*** (2007, p. 75) – provided what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as the "lessons learned" from the study (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 75).

Data from the descriptions of the multiple sources of information (semi-structured interviews with district-level board members, the superintendent, two principals, four school governance council members, document analysis of agendas and minutes, observations of governance meetings, and researcher memos) were examined comparing differences and similarities in data.

Interviews and document analysis provided the largest source of data for the study. As interviews took place and documents were analyzed, possible themes were identified and added to a researcher's document entitled "Codes and Themes." Initial interviews, follow-up interviews, expansion of documents associated with the charter system, and a journal maintained over a five-month period, aided the discovering of emergent themes and findings.

To describe the findings, the study presented an analysis of the data "using words and pictures rather than numbers" (Merriam, 1988, p. 7), which are described in Chapter four. Stake (1995) wrote that "much of our gathering of data from other people [takes] the form of stories they [the participants] tell and much of what we can convey to our readers will preserve that form" (p. 1). Merriam (1988) best summed up why a case study approach was best when writing about the impact of case study design on understanding the nature of a process, and, in this study, there were two processes at work – decision-making and learning.

Validity and Reliability

The criteria to judge a research design are generally recognized as "trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, and data dependability (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1990, as cited in Yin, 2003, p. 33). The evidence of the validity of my study on local school governance within a high-performing Charter System lies in the access to multiple sources of evidence (interviews, document analysis, and observation, researcher memos) as well as following the

decision-making process from district level to school level to discover what constitutes decision-making in a school district using Charter System governance.

In his book *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis,* Rapley described the parameters upon which to base the credibility of analyses of these sorts of data sources. Rapley (2007) stated:

> In and through studying discourse you begin to see how there is not '*a* truth' but rather multiple and sometimes contradictory *truths* or *versions*. Also, language does not 'refer to a stable reality' but produces multiple possible understandings of the real….
>
> The point is to show, in and through your analysis and writing, how specific truths or versions of the world are produced. Your job is to convince others that your claims, your interpretations, are both credible and plausible, that you are not just making this up from thin air or this is just your vague hunch, but that your argument is based on the materials from your archive. (p. 128-129)

In his book, Rapley described pre-investigative steps he takes to gather data to inform his studies. Similarly, before this study began, this researcher read newspaper articles, talked to educational colleagues, and random staff members from the charter system with the hope of increasing her understanding of how this charter system has worked, was begun and how it is received in the community.

Internal validity, by means of member checks of interview transcripts, assisted in the establishment of accurate reporting of the stakeholders' perceptions as well as their reflections of the credibility of my findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Confirmation of my findings were supported via triangulation of the data. As this is a multiple source investigation, recurring themes of data from interview transcripts, document analysis of district-level and school-level governance agendas and minutes, along with observations from governance meetings are able to confirm my analyses (Denzin, 1978). Bassey (1999), wrote of generalization as a concept that, within social science research, may be "statistical … [or] fuzzy" (p. 12). This fuzzy generalization arises from "studies of singularities and typically claims that *it is possible, or likely, or unlikely that* what was found in the singularity will be found in similar situations elsewhere: it is a qualitative measure" (p. 12). This study was a descriptive case study with likely transferability to other Georgia school districts facing the June 2015 deadline for selecting an operation system, but not generalizable in all Flexibility Option settings.

Altheide and Johnson (1994) responded to criticism originating within qualitative research circles as well as outside of this body of scholars disputing the validity and objectivity of qualitative research. This criticism emerged in the 1970s (Altheide & Johnson, 1994) from efforts by qualitative researchers to explain their roles in the reports they produced, how they draw their conclusions, and how this type of unquantifiable research has meaning and validity. "Reflexive turn," as this response became known, caused qualitative researchers to examine closely how qualitative research is accomplished and how meanings are derived. Responding to critics of qualitative research stating these types of investigations lack rigor, Altheide and Johnson (1994) declared:

> As long as we strive to base our claims and interpretations of social life on data of any kind, we must have a logic for assessing and communicating the interactive process through which the investigator acquired the research experience and information. (p.486).

In my study, reflexivity will be a challenge, and I will constantly have to remind myself that while my previous professional experiences provide me with a unique perspective into the world of charter system governance, this study is about the participants' stories, not mine. Too, I believe that my tenures as Principal of a private high school and an elementary charter school working with and managing both high functioning and low functioning boards have afforded me significant learning opportunities. A possible benefit of having served in these shared governance capacities may be that I am able to do a better job of questioning were I a person who had no previous point of reference regarding charter school governance. Josselson, Lieblich, and McAdams (2007) addressed the topic of reflexivity with candor stating:

> Whether an author is self-consciously and overtly self-reflexive or not, the manner of presentation of narrative material inevitably repackages stories in to the container of an author's sociocultural, ideological, intellectual, and (perhaps even) psychodynamic window on the world. As a narrative researcher moves from being listener (or reader) to storyteller, representational choices mark how the narrative is to be evaluated and interpreted. (p. 7)

The litmus test to determine my success of repackaging others' stories free from any predetermined conclusions on my part as researcher was confirmed by consistently supported responses by interview participants as to the accuracy of the written record of their comments. This consistency is perhaps better stated as trustworthiness, a broader concept than validity. Wells (2011) cites the framework by Hammersley (1992) concerning trustworthiness meeting standards of truth and relevance. Valid qualitative research depends on methods that are well described and free from error, and provide evidence that other rival explanations have been explored (Wells 2011). Additionally, my research followed all stated protocol involving human

subjects; informed consents and permission from all participants were obtained prior to beginning the study.

When investigating a policy from legal perspectives of oversight and implementation, there is the potential for ethical issues. Creswell (2009) wrote "[r]esearchers need to protect their research participants; develop a trust with them; promote the integrity of research; guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organizations or institutions" (p. 87). These boundaries were respected during interview processes, direct observations and personal contact with all stakeholders.

In every aspect of human research, there is a possibility of producing a study with negative consequences for the participants. With my case study, this potential was at even greater risk as my study involved persons with significant positions of authority within their current organizations, and previous high-level positions held within the state department of education and other school systems. McDonald (1975) defined five problems which case study researchers may encounter:

- Problems of the researcher becoming involved in the issues, events or situations under study.
- Problems over confidentiality of data.
- Problems stemming from competition from different interest groups for access to and control over the data.
- Problems concerning publication, such as the need to preserve anonymity of subjects.
- Problems arising from the audience being unably to distinguish data from the researcher's interpretation of the data. (p.3)

The trust afforded me by my study's participants was not ill-founded and complete confidentiality was, and will continue to be, maintained at all times as I investigated Charter System governance.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter four contains a profile of the charter system and each school selected for the investigation and analysis of the collected data.

Three research questions guided this examination:

In a Charter System deemed successfully performing by the state of Georgia,

1) How are significant issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation decided?
2) How do local school governance council members learn their roles?
3) How do selected district-level board members, the superintendent, principals and local school governance council members characterize the benefits and challenges of a charter system?

The data were collected by way of semi-structured open-ended interviews with district-level board members, the superintendent, principals, local school governance council members, document analysis and direct observation. The documents analyzed were the charter system renewal application for Meadowlands, the executed charter system contract, district-level and school governance council agendas and minutes, the Charter School Act of 1998 (O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2060), and Georgia Law O.C.G.A. § 20-2-84.3 (School System Flexibility in Georgia). Direct observations of district level board and school governance council meetings aided the analysis.

Charter System Profile

The site of this study was Meadowlands School District (Meadowlands), a medium-sized school district located in the state of Georgia. The City of Meadowlands is a classic city of the South whose proud history includes rebirth after ravages of war and weather. To create an existence that attracts families and businesses, the City has established a successful record of seeking opportunities for innovation, evidenced by many "firsts" – transportation, electricity, buildings and recreation. State and national organizations and magazines recognize Meadowlands as a "City of Excellence" and a charming retirement site. An examination of the law that created Meadowlands School District indicated that this independent school system was organized over 100 years ago.

Located within a larger county district, Meadowlands School District serves 8,000 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through 12. In 2012, the school district contracted with a research institute to perform a case study on learning supports within the Meadowlands School District. The results of this case study informed school system decision-makers on the creation, modification or expansion of existing strategies, policies and practices with the goal of strengthening student support systems that enables learning. This study defined Meadowlands as a high-poverty district with a diverse population. Demographical information from this report indicated that in 2012, Hispanic students were the largest segment of student population (55%); black students and white students were equally represented within the remaining segment of schools around 20% for each group. The 20212 report also noted that three of the eight schools within the district have more than 90% of their students living in poverty. Today, all schools within the district qualify as Title I schools. The City of Meadowlands continues to grow significantly in population. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau anticipated a population growth

for a three-year period, 2010 – 2013, to be 5.1% (Retrieved April 18, 2015 from http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045214/1331908,00).

Meadowlands School District system as selected as the study site due its charter system status, and the fact that its charter contract has been renewed for an additional term indicates that the Georgia State Board of Education recognizes this district as an effective, successfully-performing charter system. The state of Georgia Board of Education requires that a charter system applicant justify its need for a charter – in other words, what will the system be able to do *with* a charter that it cannot do *without* a charter (paraphrased from State Department of Education application for charter status). Meadowlands' renewal application stated two primary reasons for gaining charter status: customized school offerings to transform traditional classrooms into deeper and more relative learning centers, and to improve its shared governance system already in place since its first approved charter system application.

Meadowlands chose its system balanced scorecard and Georgia's College and Career Readiness Performance Index as its metric to measure achievement of targeted goals during this contract period. According to the charter system application published by the Georgia Department of Education, a "key characteristic of charter systems is their decentralized decision-making structure," and further, that it is "imperative that local school governing councils demonstrate autonomy and decision-making authority."

In its application for charter system renewal, Meadowlands School District described specific memberships, roles and duties of various stakeholders within the organization. Required training of these members, too, was stated in its application.

Georgia school districts seek charter status to be granted flexibility in the form of waivers in exchange for greater accountability. In its approved application for charter status, Meadowlands School District requested and was granted waivers for

- seat time for high school students
- class size requirements for state programs and grade levels
- use of advanced content and innovative models for a variety of programs and curriculum
- use of highly qualified teachers in various staffing patterns based on student needs, especially in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) subjects.

Two unique characteristics of Meadowlands Charter System have an impact on its student populations at various elementary schools – within very wide parameters, students are transported to the elementary school of their choice, in effect negating any attendance zone requirements, and all schools, elementary middle and high schools, are designated as a Title I school.

Case Studies

Minutes and Observation of District-Level Board Meetings

Meadowlands School District utilizes a board governance system known as eBoard Solutions which posts agendas and minutes for all district-level board meetings. The site is accessible via any Internet Provider. School board meeting agendas are available at this site beginning in 2007.

Meadowlands district-level board follows a prescribed template presented in a repeating order month-to-month. The template includes 15 items ranging from citizens' comments, goal scorecard for Instruction, Learning Supports, Management, and business items – New, Old, and

Unfinished. This eBoard template serves as a platform for a monthly Superintendent Report, along with planning opportunities and comments and announcements from board members. Personnel matters are discussed in a pre-board Executive Session, and final decisions are included in the meeting minutes, posted on eBoard.

In an observed meeting, Meadowlands School District provided transportation in the form of school buses for students and parents who attended a board meeting recognizing the students' accomplishments. About 20-25 students and their families attended the board meeting, and nearly every individual was greeted by one member of the board who stopped and reached out to the families before the start of the meeting. The meeting agenda was displayed before the start of the proceedings. Community events, including student and teacher recognition, were highlighted in the opening segment of the meeting, followed by an adoption and approval of the minutes from the previous board monthly board meeting. Information about the ability to retrieve online test results for ACT, SAT, and AP were discussed along with initiatives such as dual-enrollment, which forms one of the tenets of the executed contract between the State Board and Meadowlands. The Superintendent's Report was personally presented to the board by the Superintendent. Policy items included in the report: student attendance, student wellness and healthy eating, District Improvement Plan Report (current and future items), and district-wide safety operations. Non-policy items shared were: transition of local school governance meeting notes to eBoard (which supports the contracted goal to improve local school governance), and a new phone system. During the board meeting, questions and comments were freely exchanged between the Superintendent and the board members. The meeting adjourned a little less than an hour from its call to order. The student participants and their families exited the meeting when

their part was finished, leaving 10 adults in the visitor section, two of which were local school administrators at Meadowlands.

Minutes and Observations of School Governance Councils

In its charter system renewal application, Meadowlands stated two reasons for seeking a continuation of charter status, the second of which stated:

> Secondly, we want to continue and further improve a shared governance system that includes the Board of Education and School Governance Councils with systematic input from parents, students, teachers, and the community-at-large.

In its Executed Charter System Contract, the State Board and Meadowlands agreed to an Operational Standard that the Charter System will foster individual school-level governance whose measures are: annual training for all school governance councils, that all school governance councils will meet monthly during the school year, and all school governance councils will have representation from a variety of stakeholders, such as teachers, parents and community leaders.

All Meadowlands schools are transitioning to the same eBoard Solutions format followed by the district-level board (see Appendix B). Within the website of the district, it is possible to access School Board information, including agendas and minutes for local schools.

A content analysis of minutes from the two elementary schools actively engaged in this study as well as the minutes posted online of a selected high school, a selected middle school and two additional schools within the Meadowlands School District was performed. Below are the findings of this analysis, based on information contained on the Meadowlands School District website and physical copies from the targeted schools. Given the public's widespread use of

websites as sources of information for the community, the following page contains a review of the School Board tab on the Meadowland School District website, along a review of individual school websites for Pine Grove Elementary School, Rock Mill Academy, two additional elementary schools, and selected middle and high schools. Below is the breakdown of information contained on these sites relative to by-laws, agenda/minutes, member contact and meeting topics. The online examination was limited by the conversion of local school governance councils to the district-level's eBoard website. The lack of postings should not, however, indicate that meetings were not taking place.

Meadowland School District

Website Analysis

Local School Governance Councils

School	By-Laws Posted?	Agenda/ Minutes Posted?	Mtg Dates Posted?	Member Contact Data Posted?	Meeting Topics
Pine Grove Elementary School	No	No	Yes	No	School Governance Council handbook, emergency preparedness plan, student behavior, technology at school
Rock Mill Academy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Short term Action plan, CCRPI results, student achievement goals, personal electronic devices, calendar, parent-teacher organization,
Additional Elementary School #1	No	Yes	No	No	CCRPI balanced scorecard, use of benchmarks as common assessment, Learning supports, technology upgrades, new staff members, newly formed class, emergency management plan, partners in education, parents' reception, grade level brochure, registration committee, celebration of school milestone, enrollment update, use of space in building, compliance for state regulations, upcoming meeting topics, partnerships with local non-profits
Additional Elementary School #2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	School By-laws, Learning supports, compliance for school governance council members

Selected Middle School	No	Yes (3 months from 2013-2014)	No	Yes	Teacher Evaluation instrument, Success academy, programs, assessment scores, request for new vision statement, grading policy
Selected High School	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Training for new council members, cafeteria plan, council member vacancy positions, after school transportation, parent portal usage data,

Two local school governance council meetings were observed – one at Pine Grove Elementary School and Rock Mill Academy, both located within the Meadowlands School District.

Pine Grove Elementary School

Within very wide parameters, Meadowlands Elementary school students may attend any elementary district school they wish, with transportation provided by the local school district. Families who have chosen Pine Grove Elementary School are quite diverse – there are students of affluence being educated alongside students of poverty. The most affluent families are Caucasian and the students of poverty are overwhelmingly Hispanic. Currently, nearly 1,000 students attend the school in grades Kindergarten through fifth. The setting of the school reflects a deep pride in its appearance with numerous gardens.

Pine Grove Elementary School Governance Council faced challenges to hold scheduled meeting dates. One meeting was canceled, according to its Principal, due to lack of agenda items. The following meeting was not held due to the illness of the Principal, and the next meeting was held, but not at its scheduled date, as noted by one school governance council member who did

not attend due to no known information about the scheduled meeting still being held despite school closure in inclement weather.

After three months, a meeting was held on the scheduled date. All members were present, with the exception of the Principal, who was at another meeting. The meeting was run by the chair, who was elected as a parent representative, but shared that he would also qualify as a community member. Altogether, the membership present for the meeting was four parents, and four teachers. Due to the absence of the Principal, no meeting agenda was available. In advance of the meeting, the Principal did provide the "Principal's Report" which included topics about personnel, registration and technology. Prior to the formal opening of the meeting, there was general interaction about traffic and safety issues, update on students' use of electronic devices, and the newly-hired Principal, currently serving as an Assistant Principal, stopped by to thank the governance council for their support in her selection as the new Principal. All members participated in the conversations, and the exchanges were friendly and open. The chair ran the meeting without the printed agenda, and began by asking if there were any Old Business to discuss. One of the teacher-members asked for an update on the students' permitted use of electronic devices in school. The chair and other teachers contributed that the district had not yet submitted a formal policy. A parent, concerned about the school's liability in case of theft or damage, shared that perhaps there could be a permission form for the parents to sign.

Dovetailing on the issue of technology, the chair shared information from the Principal's Report that indicated a donation by the PTA for iPads, hardware issues, and upcoming electronic purchases that the school hopes to achieve.

The chair responded to a question by one of the teachers, worried about the use of new standardized testing this year in Georgia, and the impact of the scores on students' future placements. The chair provided an answer that despite his association with the school as a parent and community member, was very much aligned with verifiable information about the purpose and use of this year's standardized test. The chair continued to lead the meeting, not relying too much on input from the teachers in the room. Open and respectful discussion followed on New Business topics of school governance council elections before the end of the school year, and the standardization of school governance council processes by the Superintendent, an aspect that received support and praise from various members of the Pine Grove Elementary School Governance Council. When addressing election policy issues, the chair referred the members to their by-laws, and updated members on the roll-offs of members that would occur in the upcoming year.

Rock Mill Academy

While not quite as large as its sister school, Pine Grove Elementary School, Rock Mill Academy serves a large student population of over 800 students in Kindergarten through Fifth Grades. The student population is predominantly Hispanic. The observed meeting took place at Noon and lunch was served, courtesy of the school. A quorum was present, and the chairperson opened the meeting. The agenda, in the eBoard Solutions format, was displayed and with a few exceptions as noted below, the Principal led the meeting. This scenario may be the result of the school governance council chairperson having only one year of experience on the council. The category, "Instruction," occupied the majority of the meeting as the principal explained the school improvement plan goals and the reports monitoring those goals. A representative from the Boys' and Girls' Club updated the governance council about the after school programs currently

serving the school. A parent on the school governance council initiated a discussion about the use of cell phones at school as learning devices, and her concerns were addressed by both the Principal and another governance council member who was also a teacher at the school. After the discussion, the parent seemed satisfied with the explanation about the school's policy about student use of electronic devices in the classroom. The atmosphere was friendly and cordial, and the meeting adjourned less than one hour from its inception.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with each of the two district-level board members, two principals and four school governance council members. Both interviews with the superintendent were conducted by phone. Although a base set of questions was furnished to interview participants, a semi-structured environment was utilized to provide spontaneous follow-up on pertinent information (Merriam, 1988). Interviews took place beginning October 2014 through February 2015.

Prior to beginning the initial interviews, each participant was provided a Consent Letter (see Appendix C) detailing the general purpose of the study, data collection procedures, and general confidentiality guidelines. At the conclusion of the first interview, all participants were provided a written transcript of the interview for member check confirmation, and a follow-up conversation was scheduled.

Each participant was interviewed separately, and the initial interview session began with a collection of demographic information from the participant. The interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participant. An interview guideline of questions, specific to the role of

the participant, guided the conversation, although spontaneous, unscripted discussion questions were appropriate at times to gain greater understanding (see Appendices D, E, F and G).

Participant responses ranged from lengthy and in-depth to succinct and to-the-point, but the sense is that all participants answered honestly and were comfortable to reply if they did not know the answer to a particular question, either posted as a formal inquiry or as reaction to a spontaneous request for amplified discussion. Reflections contained in the researcher's journal reveal a growth by the investigator in the management of interviews, from initial dominance of the conversation leading to off-track dialogue, to more pointed questioning that permitting a more complete explanation on the part of the interview participant.

An initial entry in the researcher's book of codes and themes indicated a strong sense of the importance of voice for the participants, both their own and that of their constituents. The broad scope of participants contributed to this sense of diverse representation and, from the perspectives of district-level board members, the superintendent, and the two principals, this broad coalition contributed to the success of their schools and their system.

District-level Board Member Interviews

District-level board members of the Meadowlands School District are elected to four-year terms by voters from five particular districts located within the boundaries of the school system. There is no limitation on how many terms a board member may serve; one current Meadowlands School District board member has served more than 22 years in the position. The two district-level board members interviewed for this study represent strong leadership and dedication to the Meadowlands School District. One of the interview participants, the board chair and starting a second term of service, is a former educator with more than 35 years of experience teaching high

school and college level classes who felt the need to remain involved in education and make a difference. This individual feels that there is a positive impact on doing the work of the board, and finds the challenging aspects of her/his duties very gratifying.

The second Meadowlands School District board member interviewed for this investigation is a long standing member of the local community. This board member grew up in the district and graduated from Meadowlands School District, and is serving a second term of office. Both interview participants pre-date the school district's move to a charter system.

Superintendent Interview

A superintendency and a superintendent are defined by the times and experiences presented during a tenure at the helm. Although the Superintendent at Meadowlands School district has posted less than a year in the position, substantial experience has contributed to a smooth transition. Building upon extensive work at the state level and prior duties as a charter system superintendent, this individual has established a relationship of trust and appreciation with district-level board members. Greater involvement by school governance council members in determining school leadership candidates, and a move toward deeper systemic processes to streamline standard operating procedures outline the vision of this individual. It is too early in the service of this individual to determine the future level of success; however, based upon positive comments by interview participants, it appears that the Superintendent has a network of wide support.

Principal Interviews

Pine Grove Elementary School is led by a seasoned educator, both in terms of administrative service and classroom teaching. The Principal at Pine Grove Elementary School

has also worked at the school as a teacher and an Assistant Principal, totaling over 20 years of service at this school site. During her/his application for principalship, the school district had transitioned to charter status, and the interview process for this principal included school governance members. Pine Grove's Principal will retire at the end of this year, and the applications for the new principal will be processed using school governance council members sitting in on the interview process and voting for the final candidate. As a sitting school governance council member, the Principal will have one vote to cast for the winning candidate for Principal. Most of this individual's work experience is for Meadowlands School District, with additional experience at a large Georgia school district. Her/His tenure as an employee of Meadowlands School district began before the district received charter system status, a similar situation for both Principals interviewed for this study. Significant growth has occurred at Pine Grove Elementary School, with its student enrollment reaching nearly 1,000 students.

The Principal at Rock Mill Academy has served as Principal and Assistant Principal for eight years at the school. Prior to that time, this individual also worked as a teacher at the school in various grade levels and in a specialized program for early intervention. Previous classroom experience took place while the school was still governed in a traditional manner, without input from teachers. The move to school leadership broadened her/his perspective in a significant manner. For this administrator, building relationships with teachers, community and other school leaders create opportunities for student success, and that working with a school governance council has a direct impact on the direction of the school. In this administrator's view, a key component for successful governance is the multi-perspectives of individuals who not only sit on the council and provide input, but the communication that occurs outside the school's doors by way of governance council members who bring perspectives of their neighbors.

School Governance Council Member Interviews

Formal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four school governance council members from the Meadowlands School District, two members from Pine Grove Elementary School and two governance council members from Rock Mill Academy. A set of questions guided the interview with each school governance council member. At times the interviews became unscripted based upon participant responses to add to, enhance, or clarify answers of the interviewees. Information gleaned from each interview provided insight into the decision-making process, types of decisions, and required training provided by the school district. Observations of school governance council meetings at the sites served by the members supplemented the study's findings.

A targeted selection of four school governance council members provided an opportunity for unique responses to the same set of questions. As required by Meadowlands School District policy, local school governance councils are to be made up of: the principal, two teachers, two parents, and two community members. The four individuals who volunteered to participate in this study represented teachers and parents.

Research Questions Analysis

This study posed three research questions:

In a Charter System deemed successfully-performing by the state of Georgia,

1. How are significant issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation decided?
2. How do local school governance council members learn their roles?

3. How do selected district-level board members, the superintendent, principals and local school governance council members characterize the benefits and challenges of a charter system?

In order to best explain the basis for choosing the research questions used for this study, it is critical to examine charter system governance legislation in Georgia and the state-approved renewal application of Meadowlands.

A requirement of O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3, School System Flexibility Option, mandates the devolution of significant issues of budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation to the school governance councils of the local schools. Information retrieved from the Georgia Department of Education website describes governance within a Charter System as one in which

> The school system must implement school level governance and grant decisionmaking authority in personnel decisions, financial decisions, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing the monitoring and the achievement of school improvement goals and school operations. (Retrieved February 8, 2015 from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Documents/4%20-%20School%20System%20Flexibility%20in%20Georgia%20-%20July%2018,%202014%20-%20State%20Board%20of%20Education.pdf)

The Meadowlands School District charter application, approved by the state of Georgia, indicated that decision-making roles had been assigned to the school governance councils. Page 26 of this document describes the make-up of the local school governance councils, election procedures and operations:

> **School Governance Council** members are elected for a two-year term. The council is composed of a minimum of seven members which include the principal, four parents, two of which will be businesspersons, and two teachers. Parents are nominated by parents and are elected by majority vote. Teachers are nominated by the school staff and are elected by a majority vote. Governance Councils stagger elections of both parents and teachers so that there is a seamless transition between school years. The School Governance Councils determines their by-laws and reviews them annually. Newly elected School Governance Council members receive an orientation and training. Any member of the School Governance Council may withdraw by providing a written resignation to the principal or secretary of their Council.

In this investigation, all interview participants described the decision-making process as a shared endeavor, with active participation by stakeholders. One district-level board member described the organizational structure of Meadowlands School District as a "flattened pyramid" –

> The pyramid is still there, starting at the top with the citizens and the board and the superintendent at the top of the pyramid. But it is then flattened with senior department heads who work at our central office and then school level leadership, which every school has a leadership team, and then school governance councils.

Document analysis of agendas and minutes from Pine Grove Elementary School, Rock Mill Academy and observation of two school council meetings provide evidence that Meadowlands School District has granted decisionmaking authority to school governance councils, following the requirements of the law, and the description put forth in the Meadowlands School District charter system application.

Meadowlands School District has demonstrated a concerted effort to "flatten the pyramid" as mentioned by one district-level board member, and the following sections describe how decisions on budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation are made within the context of the Meadowlands School district based on interviews with these stakeholders.

Research question one asked: How are significant issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation decided? Semi-structured interviews with district-level board members, the superintendent, principals and school governance council members provided insight into this question. Each participant was asked about the process of decision-making on these four types of decisions. These individuals confirmed that the expectation is for local schools to determine where to spend money, whom to hire as principal, and what programs and innovations best address that school's specific needs. Direct observations of district-level and school governance council meetings as well as document analysis of agendas and minutes of these meetings reflect a process of significant decision-making authority held by local school governance councils. During participant interviews, it became apparent that the best analysis of Research Question One would require the division of decision types – budget, personnel, programs and/or innovations – and, so, in the discussion of Research Question One, the findings of how these individual types of decisions are decided across Meadowlands School District are segregated by type.

The second research question focused on the training and development of local school governance council members. The question was posed: How do local school governance council members learn their roles? While the state of Georgia requires annual training for district-level board members, as of now there is no state-led training for local school governance council

members. Meadowlands School District designed its own standards and curriculum for training school governance council members.

Research question three asked interview participants to characterize the benefits and challenges of a charter system of governance.

Research Question One - Budget

Georgia school districts receive three types of funding: federal, state and local, with state and local funding being primary sources of funds for school districts. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed in 1965, was the first large entrée by the federal government into state educational systems via grants designed for specific activities or student populations. As one of 26 school systems across the state, Meadowlands School District is a Race to the Top school district, sharing in a $4 billion grant opportunity to United States' schools. In Georgia, state funding is determined by the Quality Basic Education formula known as QBE. Enacted in 1985 by the Georgia General Assembly, this legislation outlines the provisions for funding for grades Kindergarten through Twelfth (retrieved February 7, 2015 from http://archives.gadoe.org/_documents/fbo_financial/7-25-2011%20DOE%20QBE%20Overview.pdf). Tax digests fund local school districts, known as the Local Education Authority (LEA), whose board members determine allocations.

One Meadowlands School District board member described the budgeting process as follows:

> … as the budget season approaches, the leaders are asked to submit their budgets, and they don't all look alike. It is based strictly on their needs. You know, one elementary school may want to focus on math, and adopt a different set of materials or program,

> whatever, so they may need a big chunk more to go towards math. And another school might need it more toward language arts, whatever they choose, as long as it fits their program and supports that program. So, they [the school leaders] will submit their budgets, proposed budgets, with their needs enumerated, and the principals and they [the schools] will discuss them as a group and individually, and submit them to us. And we do go over them carefully to make sure that there's nothing out of the ordinary.

In the following statement concerning district-level board approval of school-level budget decisions, the same board member confirms the sense of *relational trust* necessary for effective schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), "But, generally, if it [the budget] comes through the superintendent, and the superintendent has approved it, we pretty much will approve it, unless something really stands out." This confidence resides on the process described by this board member about how budgets, and other important issues, are handled within the school system – "I think it has not been difficult because we have, I say 'we' – I'm not involved in it, but – our system has organization-leadership team meetings every week, and … principals come and the superintendent, and they discuss things like that." Budgetary decision-making at Meadowlands School District has "pretty much moved it [the instruction budget] all to the governance councils."

This process to transfer budget decisions to the school level is echoed by another district-level board member interviewed for this study. This individual stated: "We, as a board, approve the system budget, but we have some flexibility, we have some capability to intervene, interact. Once the spreadsheet is presented, but it is the schools, each, which fashions, or tailors, its own budget. Particularly in the category of instruction. Schools do that individually."

Budgets include big-ticket and small-ticket items. Big-ticket items are those described above – instruction, curriculum, programs – however, small-ticket items must also be approved. Small-ticket items such as fundraiser approvals, unlike previous years when Meadowlands followed a traditional governance approach, are now within each school's purview. The district-level board member stated: "The board no longer has to approve fundraisers, for example, for school, or for club, or for class. That's not the board's business; that's the school's business, but it's not the board's business."

In the Meadowlands School District, the role of the Superintendent in the budgetary process is one of input, oversight and approval. The effectiveness of this process reflects collaboration which, from the perspective of the Superintendent, is merely a matter of having people involved in the process. The Superintendent affirmed the role of the school governance council in decision-making processes:

> I think that when you've got teachers, administrators, parents, and students coming together to talk about the work, and to come up with plans that are going to be in the best of the students and staff, that that is what collaboration, true collaboration, is about. And I think that's what the governance, the charter governance, is about.

The tenure of one Meadowlands School District Principal pre-dates the district's move to a charter system of governance, noting that "before, we did all those things on our own … but now, it's official in how we get our input." Specifically, this Principal described the process:

> Here, now, we do our budgets, we have input from the governance council on how we spend our budget. We lay it out and we go over everything and they are right there

> helping give input into the budget. We had, last year, people from finance to come over and tell us what our allotments were, and members of the governance council were in on that also.

Not unexpectedly, school governance council members, while having authority to do so, are less involved in discussions and plans of where to spend instructional dollars. Meadowlands School District allocates money to each school whose task it is to decide, based on student achievement score data, where the money would best serve the needs of the students. This decision, in both Pine Grove Elementary School and Rock Mill Academy, was discussed and decided by school leadership teams, without the involvement of school governance council members, except in the case where one school governance council member additionally served on the school leadership team. All details of the plans were presented to the school governance council, but their role, mainly, was to formally "bless" the spending. Small-ticket items, fundraisers, are approved by local school governance councils. The Meadowlands Superintendent reported an incident she experienced in a prior position as the superintendent of a charter district where a local school governance council, discussing the pros and cons of continuing an annual event, decided to investigate whether this occasion produced the desired goals of earning money for the school, or, would it perhaps be time to see other avenues of fundraising. The superintendent noted that this discussion by all school governance council members contributed to a better decision moving forward.

Research Question One - Personnel

Information retrieved from the Georgia Department of Education website describes governance within a Charter System as one in which "The school system must

implement school level governance and grant decisionmaking authority in personnel decisions …." What exactly constitutes "personnel decisions" is not defined by the state of Georgia. However, the power to construct a process by which *personnel decisions* are made, and the boundaries of that process, lies with the Local Board of Education, according to the state Department of Education website – "The LBOE (Local Board of Education) controls the type of local governance and management their schools will have in a charter system, charter school, and charter cluster" (Retrieved February 12, 2015 from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/CharterSchools/Documents/4%20%20School%20System%20Flexibility%20in%20Georgia%20-%20July%2018,%202014%20-%20State%20Board%20of%20Education.pdf). In its early days as a charter system, the process of selecting principals at Meadowlands School District utilized input from school governance councils to select candidates for the position of principal. One school governance council member, interviewed for this study, was a sitting member during this initial entrée into school governance council members being integrated into the process of selecting a school principal. According to this individual, it was more of a system of collecting feedback from teachers rather than an analytical screening process.

Since the arrival of the current superintendent, this process involves a wider scope of participation. District-level board members, the superintendent, both principals and all school governance council members were asked about this process. A unified description amongst these stakeholders illustrate an all-inclusive procedure starting at its earliest point of job-posting through final candidate selection. When a principalship is vacated, the school surveys parents, teachers and community leaders for characteristics of their ideal school leader. These qualities form the basis of a job posting. Candidates are screened by the Central Office for education credentials and background checks. School governance council members select two things: 1)

the names of their final three candidates, and 2) who will represent them at the "paper screening" attended by a team of district-level board members, the superintendent, central office personnel, and the school governance council member. Interview participant representatives, with the exception of the district-level board members, sit in on the interview of the candidates. This team selects its final candidate, and the superintendent submits the name to the district-level board for approval. A couple of ancillary benefits arise from this process – first, the school governance council is able to explain to her/his peers and community members why this individual was selected as school leader, and secondly, the support for the new principal has already hurdled the need for acceptance by the local school since it was a grass roots and wide scope method that brought her/him to serve in the capacity of principal. Also, during the interview with the Pine Grove principal who was retiring at the end of the school year, it was revealed that as a sitting member of the school governance council, she/he will have one vote about the candidate selected to replace her/him. A significant portion of school governance council meetings at Pine Grove Elementary School during the 2014-2015 school year was devoted to the process of searching for a new school principal.

When school governance council members were asked about their involvement in the annual evaluation of principals, one school governance replied that although the administrators had received the results of their school's faculty responses about their evaluations, at this point, no sharing of results had occurred at the school governance council level. No Meadowland School District policy could be found to require or encourage the sharing of the principal evaluation results The desire for transparency appeared to depend upon the openness and willingness of the principal to share her/his results.

Personnel decisions about the hiring of teachers followed a traditional route – Central Office personnel checking references, and principals as the primary source of decision-making. The Superintendent, a proponent of collaboration and participation, offered a plan to have team teachers involved in the interviewing process for teacher positions on their own teams.

Research Question One - Programs

All interview participants were asked to rank the four areas of decision-making required by the state under charter system status – budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation. Both district-level board members, the superintendent, both principals and school governance council members ranked *program* decision-making as the most important under the umbrella of their charter, although at times it was difficult to untangle the meaning of *program* from the role of *innovation* since through innovation one can create programs based on needs assessment.

While the perception may not be the truth, it appeared that there was a consensus among respondents that the programs at their schools and district were ones exclusive to charter systems. When Meadowlands School District filed its application to renew its charter system status, the application contained the question "What will you [the school district] be able to do *with* a charter that you can't do *without* a charter?" Programs mentioned by participants as ones which the school or district follows due to the flexibility of charter status, include: Dual Enrollment, internships, online learning, blended learning, after-school programs through the local Parks and Recreation, Boys' and Girls' Club. All of these programs are available to students' use without a charter; however, as one Principal described it, "They [the programs] are available if you choose to do them;" the distinction for this individual is the scope of application which is greater due to less constraints such as class size that charter system status affords.

Research Question One - Innovation

A desire to create innovation in public education is the spark that ignited the birth of the reform movement known as chartering. In the 1970s, Dr. Ray Budde began a journey to seek interest in and support for a concept of chartering programs within individual schools where

teachers decided the curriculum, not administrators, superintendents or central office staff – no one "would stand between the school board and the teachers when it came to matters of instruction" (Budde, 1996, p. 72). The concept lay dormant until Dr. Budde wrote and then circulated a book *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*, published in 1988. In this book, Dr. Budde proposed that "teams of teachers could be 'chartered' directly by a school board for a period of three to five years" (Budde, 1996, p. 72). The idea of chartering leapt into the public education conversation when Albert Shanker in his *New York Times* column described an idea proposed at the 1988 national convention of the American Federation of Teachers in this manner:

> … local school boards and unions jointly develop a procedure that would enable teams of teachers and others to submit and implement proposals to setup their own autonomous public schools within their school buildings …. But what name would capture all this? … The best answer so far is 'charter schools,' a suggestion made by Ray Budde in *Education by Charter*.

Chartering evolved from a concept of hallway-type innovations to wide scale schools and now systems. The dream was not to just "simply to produce a few new and hopefully better schools [but rather] to create dynamics that will cause the main-line system to change so as to improve education for all students" (Budde, 1996, p. 72). What these new practices, or innovation looks like is as varied as the communities who are served by means of chartering.

Indeed, to describe or to isolate the type of decision that indicates *innovation*, or a process that is *innovative* presented a challenge in this study. The manner in which the state of Georgia describes this type of decision indicates one which may be tied to, or separate from the decision type *programs*. The state of Georgia website concerning governance structure under the

various Flexibility Options states "programs **and/or** innovation" (emphasis added) as types of decision-making authority to be devolved to school governance councils. When interview participants were asked to rank order these four types of decisions in terms of importance, or to describe their experiences with *innovation* decision-making, most participants struggled to disentangle *programs* from *innovation*. However, this was not a difficult task for both district-level board members, perhaps due to the larger scope of their perspective, who replied that *innovation* was the most valuable attribute of a charter system.

Research Question Two examined the methods by which school governance council members learn to do their jobs. Specifically, Research Question Two asked: How do local school governance council members learn their roles?

Two primary sources of data were collected for analysis of Research Question Two: interviews with four school governance council members from Pine Grove Elementary School and Rock Mill Academy, along with document analysis of the PowerPoint created by and used by Meadowlands School District to orient new members to school governance council work. In all endeavors, humans learn their roles by a variety of methods – e.g., formal training, observation, experience and intuition. All school governance council members discovered how to perform their duties with the training aspect being the most predominant practice of methods with which these individuals learned to perform their roles. The following section is divided into three parts: 1) state requirements and resources for school governance council members, 2) training designed for the purpose of orienting new members at Meadowlands School District, and 3) the use of observation, collaboration and job experience as tools to assist school governance council members' tuition.

Research Question Two - State Requirements and Resources for School Governance Council Members

It is important to understand what is required under the regulations of the state of Georgia as related to the training, both new and annual, of school governance council members in a charter system, and what resources are available to help with that tuition. All local boards of education must meet training requirements under O.C.G. A. 20-2-230, "Local School Board Governance." As the ultimate authority in the charter system, it is up to the local board of education to decide the type of training and frequency for Meadowland School District school governance councils. The Charter Division website of the state Department of Education does offer a PowerPoint to train school governance council members in the general topics of: Governance vs management, Role of Local Governance Teams, and Effective Development/Recruitment (Retrieved February 14, 2015 from http://archives.gadoe.org/DMGetDocument.aspx/gadoeChSysPetitioners2011mar18.pdf?p=6CC6799F8C1371F6915D82C6E0870F620B95E36B7D69C595D0FFD4A6C766D6E2&Type=D).

Resources from the state also include a survey of school governance council members to determine understanding of their roles. The results of the survey could provide training information to assist local boards of education within charter systems develop high impact training resources based on this "needs" assessment. (See Appendix I – Roles of School Governance Council Members – Survey, created by the state of Georgia Department of Education for training of school governance council members and their roles), although none of the school governance council members mentioned this resource as one that Meadowlands School District used to orient new members.

Research Question Two - Training designed for the Purpose of Orienting New Members at Meadowlands School District

Meadowlands School District created a PowerPoint Training Presentation used to orient new members about their roles and responsibilities. The PowerPoint was provided by the school district to the researcher for examination. It is entitled "School Governance Councils," contains a total of 16 slides, and is required for School Governance Certification by the school district. Beginning with Slide One, the presentation answers "What is a Charter System," and includes charter system definitions, the dates of charter status for Meadowlands School District, and the rationale for choosing charter system to organize its operations. Also included is information about state and district policies about the decision-making powers of school governance councils, the accountability of the Meadowlands School District Board of Education as the official governing body of the system, and the liability protection afforded school governance council members under state law.

The specific powers granted to school governance councils mentioned in the PowerPoint include input in the following principal areas:

- the school improvement plan and its oversight
- innovations that would traditionally require a waiver
- school budget priorities based the school and district improvement plans
- use of charter system funds
- approval of school fundraisers
- curriculum and accompanying materials
- selection of the school principal in the event of a vacancy
- feedback on school operations

Additionally, the presentation trained school governance council members on their responsibilities of stakeholder communication, required meeting times, and legal requirements of the Georgia Open Records and Open Meeting Laws. The make-up of the council, rules for election and term of service are also included on the slides. One particular responsibility, the participation in an annual self-assessment, was all but unknown to the interview participants who, when queried about this requirement, all responded that they were unaware of that feature and had never participated in an annual evaluation of their performance.

School governance council members who have viewed the presentation produced varied responses when asked how effective this presentation was to their overall understanding of how school governance councils operate within a charter system, and whether the presentation contributed to the understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

One member remarked that while viewing the presentation, the governance council members as a group discussed the information contained in the PowerPoint and that that conversation was helpful, but, overall, the training was "really more of a formality kind of thing; it wasn't really about how governance council works." This contrasted with a comment by another governance council member who remarked that the PowerPoint provided her/him with a deeper understanding of the roles and responsibilities, in other words, the boundaries of authority, provided to school governance councils by the Meadowlands School System.

Based on the interviews, completion of training by use of the district-designed PowerPoint presentation was sporadic; a condition which is being remedied by the current superintendent who, in the words of one interview participant is "trying to get all of the schools

on the same page … [by] looking at webinars together as a group just to re-acquaint the old ones [governance council members] with the rules and the new ones on the rules and the regulations."

Research Question Two - The Use of Observation, Collaboration and Job Experience as Tools to Assist School Governance Council Members

Four uniquely talented and diverse group of school governance council members participated in this investigation – two teachers from Pine Grove Elementary School, and one parent and one teacher from Rock Mill Academy where the teacher also functioned as a lead grade level teacher and school leadership.

All individuals commented on how positions outside of serving as school governance council members influence and support their roles on the school council. According to state and district-level regulations, all members must be voted onto the school governance council, and each individual affirmed their placement on the school governance council as an elected office. Tangible and intangible partnerships form the relationship between these individuals and the councils whom they serve. The teacher member from Rock Mill Academy expressed the result of wearing such a variety of hats as really helping her in

> … the faculty and staff capacity and [to] be more knowledgeable around my peers. And … I feel like I have a better head on my shoulders just knowing what's going on around in the school.

As this particular council member needed to come up to speed quickly to function as the chairperson, the school's Principal provided training on how to run the meeting, expectations and formalities. One council member shared that training is an ongoing process and when needed, she would "look to" herself to find out information required for her to perform her job:

> I kind of look to myself. I research. I don't know if it's that I don't trust people; probably, it's a little bit of that, but I like to be informed myself, so I don't really depend on people, or a person to tell me something, necessarily. If I want to know, I go through all the necessary policies, procedures and people that I have to, to get the knowledge that I need if I feel that it's pertinent to me.

Most of the school governance council interview participants currently held, or had been involved in, positions of responsibility in volunteer capacities. Some of these other positions included grade level team leader, school improvement team member, religious organization leadership, and department head in the private sector.

The words of a district-level board member, while speaking about the inclusion of school governance council members in the selection of a principal at a local school, sums up why school governance councils, if well-trained, provide a strong infrastructure to a system in an overall capacity. This board member stated:

> It's a part of the flattening of the pyramid, which I referred to you earlier whereby the pyramid is not so tall now with the board looming over every decision that is made in the system. The … It's the critical and important part now that we are a charter system to empower the governance councils for this and other roles with the philosophy being they being "hands on" to a particular school to which they serve, should be in the know, should be in the loop, should have full awareness of all students' needs, not just their own. And, then are thereby, through a process, become qualified to be a good governance council member. And that is a process; it takes training, it takes lots of work; it takes lots of involvement with school activities. So, it's a process that takes place in order to be a good governance council member. So this process that we now utilize sends the message

to the governance council and a school community that the board does empower you, and the board has confidence in your work, so long as you are trained.

Research Question Three explores the benefits and challenges of operating as a charter system as characterized by selected board members, the superintendent, school leaders and local school governance council members. The question was posed: How do the selected board members, the superintendent, school leaders and local school governance council members of a charter system characterize the benefits and challenges of a charter system? One question contained in the approved application for Meadowlands asked what the system will be able to do *with* a charter that it cannot do *without* a charter. The dividing line between traditional and charter status should be a distinct one. The descriptions provided by interview participants, as well as agendas and minutes at district-level and school governance council meetings highlight a system who operates within the letter and spirit of charter system status. Below is Table 1, *Interview Participants' Recurring Themes of Benefits and Challenges,* whose purpose is to provide a visual graphic of interview participant responses to explain frequently-repeated benefits and challenges of managing a charter system. It is important to note the variety of school governance council member responses.

Table 1 *Interview Participants' Recurring Themes of Benefits and Challenges*

PARTICIPANT	***BENEFITS***	***CHALLENGES***
DISTRICT-LEVEL BOARD MEMBER	➢ Flexibility/Waivers ➢ Special Funding ➢ Transfer of some decisions to schools	➢ Public understanding of charter system chain of command
SUPERINTENDENT	➢ Collaboration ➢ Broad Coalition of Participants	➢ Systemic processes that recognize the district as ultimately accountable for results
PRINCIPAL	➢ Parent Participation ➢ Use of Broad Flexibility Waiver of class size to increase effectiveness of learning programs	➢ Confidential information shared with Parents during principal hiring process
SCHOOL GOVERNANCE COUNCIL MEMBER	➢ Wide scope of vision within the school ➢ Participation in significant decision-making	➢ Parental involvement ➢ Depth of knowledge required to make significant decisions

Research Question Three - Benefits

While the entire cohort of participants could be described as enthusiastically supportive of the charter system concept, the role of the participant emphasized unique issues that influenced her/his perception of the benefits of operating under a charter.

The ultimate authority of any Georgia school district, charter system or otherwise, rests with the local board of education. In its application for Charter System status, the local board of education requests "flexibility in the form of waivers of certain state laws, rules and guidelines in exchange for greater accountability for increased student performance and an emphasis on school-based leadership and decisionmaking" (retrieved January 25, 2015, Charter System Application from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Pages/Charter-Petition-Application.aspx). Also, contained in the application for Charter System status, is the school district's description of the challenges, and their rank order priority, facing the district, as well as how the requested waivers will assist the school district to successfully implement actions to address these challenges. This is known as the "broad flexibility waiver." Although no federal law may be waived, "most state laws and State Board of Education rules, with the exception of those pertaining to health and safety, funding formulas and accountability provisions may be waived" (retrieved January 25, 2015 from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Pages/Frequently-Asked-Questions-for-New-Petitioners.aspx). Examples of commonly-utilized waivers are: seat time in courses, class size, teacher certification requirements, and requirements for course credit.

At Meadowland School District, although interviewed separately, both district-level board members participating in this investigation described the use of waivers as a key benefit of operating as a charter system. One district-level board member stated:

> One of the reasons that we became a charter system is that we could have waivers, flexibility. And [the] flexibility [options] that we have chosen are seat time, class size, among others … [which] enabled us to have programs like dual enrollment, internships for students, to do more online learning, blended learning, that kind of thing, that wasn't foreseen, you know, when all these rules at the state level were made…. So, in order to be exempt from those rules, we had to seek waivers, … and having certain flexibilities enables us to be more creative or innovative in how we achieve those goals. So, that's one thing that, I think, the parents and the students really like about our system – that we don't look like traditional high schools. We're not quite so structured that – it's not a one-size-fits-all of a situation.

The second district-level board member described waivers as a benefit stating:

> The benefits for becoming charter are essentially the flexibility in those things that we as a system might try, might enact, might decline. We have the flexibility to do all of those three and without any repercussions, without penalty. We can say, "Yes, we want to go that route," or "No, thank you." So, flexibility for us has been a major benefit.

Funding can be a significant factor in the decision to apply for charter status, either as a school or as a system, to meet the needs of the student population. The Meadowlands Charter System board member described funding to support innovation:

> A second major benefit, I must add, has been special funding for charter schools and charter systems. I'm not sure about the dollars, but I know the General Assembly has

> appropriated the past few years, special funds essentially for innovation. We are a peculiar school system with our demographics so we have to innovate. We have to reach students and families through innovative approaches and special funding from the General Assembly has been generally appreciated and an obvious benefit to being a charter system.

District-level board members are mainly volunteers, unpaid by the district whom they represent, and in large districts, these individuals average over 40 hours per month taking care of board business (Retrieved January 26, 2015 from http://www.nsba.org/about-us/frequently-asked-questions). When one Meadowland district-level board member was asked if she/he worked 8 hours, 16 hours, or 20 hours a month on school district business, this individual responded that although the time commitment varies, it is "at least" 20 hours a month, and that the time commitment is dependent upon the point in the school year. In the words of this district-level board member, "sometimes, a year is very intense, and the end of the year is insane with the things we have to do, places we have to go, visiting the schools, and doing programs and so on."

The purpose of including the level of time commitment experienced by district-level board members is to emphasize the value, in the eyes of these individuals, of transferring certain areas of decision-making to the local school level. Meadowlands' local school governance councils play an active role in policy-making at the district level, in the hiring of school principals, and approving their own fundraising activities which, on the surface, may not appear to devour significant amounts of time, but in reality, hundreds of these requests previously came to the board for approval, and now, with the exception of over-night trips, fundraising requests

are handled at the local school level, fulfilling the purpose of emphasizing school site decision-making in charter system governance.

The Principals at Pine Grove Elementary School and Rock Mill Academy singled out the Broad Flexibility Waiver of class size as a significant benefit to increase the effectiveness of their programs. At Pine Grove Elementary School, the Principal stated

> We have some flexibility in how we organize our classes. For instance, the previous two years, we were able to group students according to their learning needs in reading and math …. And that helped us out a lot because class sizes were smaller and we received approval to teach our ESOL and IMPACT students using the requirements for their programs for reading and math so that allowed us to have smaller class sizes all around for those core subjects which was a big help.

At Rock Mill Academy, the Principal is aware that while programs being used at the school are readily available across all school types – Charter, IE2, and traditional – it is the inclusion of school governance council members and their involvement that increase the success of their students. The Principal noted:

> Well, I think probably, a lot of what we do for school governance and as a charter works very well and should work very well for most system on an everyday basis. It's just building that relationship with your teachers and with your community and with the leaders outside of your school to make sure that everybody is on the same page. And everybody is working toward the same thing – student success.

Responses concerning the benefits of operating as a charter system were evident among three of the four participant types interviewed for this study. The one outlier was a teacher who described her/himself as new to the process and unsure of having enough information with which

to make an evaluation. While most responses were of a positive nature, there was a wide variation among school governance council members and their perceptions of what benefits and challenges may be attributed to operating as a charter system.

A teacher from Rock Mill Academy participated as a school governance council member in this study. A common saying is that "if you want something done, give it to a busy person," and this teacher fits that description. In addition to being a first year teacher, she is also the lead teacher of her grade level, and serves as chair of the Rock Mill Academy school governance council. In her view, the opportunity to serve in many and varied capacities increases her effectiveness in each of her roles. This teacher admits that due to her background as a private school graduate and few associations with teachers at traditional school settings, she does not have much knowledge of the benefits of operating as a charter system. The school council, led by an administrator who models respect and openness to new ideas and shared decision-making, will, this teacher believes, have an opportunity to gain further influence into agenda-setting and especially in the area of increasing parental involvement at the school.

Research Question Three - Challenges

In any governance model, there is a question as to where should proprietary decision-making begins and where should it end. Such uncertainty flourishes in the added layers of participants in governance. As several interview participants pointed out, the difference between a charter school and a charter system is that a charter school is its sole entity, having, ideally, total control over significant decision-making. A charter system, on the other hand, still must act as one unit, at the same time as individual schools manage decisions over budget, personnel, programs and/or innovations. Each school within a charter system has its own charter, thus creating a need for a balancing of authority, responsibilities and roles. Ultimately, it is the school

system that is held accountable for results, and that fact requires an examination of what helps and what hinders the success of the system as a whole.

The Meadowlands School District Superintendent noted the need for systemic processes, where applicable, to remove certain operational items from the workloads of instructional leaders in order to maximize their impact on schools:

> And so to me, it just solidifies for me that … we can honor the individuality of each school, but there has to be systemic processes in place. For example, HR [Human Resources]. Every principal acting as their own independent HR really is not very effective. It also, when you've got a district that is going to be held accountable, it's not very … it's not being very smart. Because you have a district that ultimately will be held accountable, but you've got individual schools that are making decisions and doing things without guidance from a central office that may have more in-depth knowledge of how to go about doing things in order to keep you out of trouble. And, so, I don't think that it is effective to have independent schools operating as though they have to know HR; they have to know all the facilities; they have to know all the school nutrition. That's not being effective with the people that are directly supporting the school.

For one district-level board member, it is the adaptation, or changing, of the locale of decision-making in the eyes of constituents that has presented a large challenge. Meadowlands School District, being a very community-based, neighborhood-type of setting, functioned, traditionally, as an open-door policy governance structure. Despite the evolution to a charter system-based organization, some constituents still follow a traditional path of contact – starting with the board for answers to most questions and help with problems.

New initiatives require new understandings from those affected by the changes. The adaptation of constituents to a charter system requires communication and education to the district's stakeholders. Deliberate plans to increase public awareness of charter system operations must accompany a change in status from traditional to charter district. One district-level board member shared:

> The conversion to a charter system essentially flattens the pyramid of authority …. The pyramid is still there starting at the top with the citizens and the board and the superintendent …. But it is then flattened with senior department heads who work at our Central Office and then school level leadership … and then school governance councils. That has been difficult and challenging for the public to understand that the, some of the decisions, some of the questions that might normally come to a board member in our routine service as a board member actually now go to a school level for answering or for disposition. And that has been a very slow learning curve for stakeholders, parents and the public to understand and that there has been a shift in terms of certain decisions away from the board and down, and I don't mean in a negative way, but out to the schools and their leadership teams and governance councils. It has been a very slow learning curve there. ….that has been a challenge.

Meadowlands Charter System, by nature a family-oriented district with a long-standing history of community pride in their education and sporting accomplishments, view district-level board members as neighbors. This neighborly type of relationship creates a push-back against the establishment of a flattened chain of command which is consistent with the underlying intent of charter school law to increase school-level leadership and decision-making. One district-level board member described a typical encounter with a parent requesting special consideration for

her granddaughter who was applying for a teaching position with the district. Rather than explain the established protocol of job application, the district-level board member replied, "I'll handle it." In no way was this response an affirmation of hiring the constituent's granddaughter. The district-level board member's statement merely conveyed the sense of intimacy between the public and the district bard, and the tradition by the community as seeing district board members as the "face" of the school system.

Finding that dividing line of responsibilities extends amongst the district level and local schools, too. There is no "play book" designating chain of command for all decisions. While the state of Georgia defines the types of decisions to be transitioned to local school governance councils, Meadowlands School District has experienced unique circumstances that require careful thought about current and future impacts of defining whose role and under whose authority an issue should lie. Similar to the Superintendent's description of a need for systemic processes in place for certain functions, one district-level board member agrees that at times the assigning of issues for district-level or school governance level action come with conflicts, namely:

> … defining where the line is. At what point is an issue systemic and at what point is it just, does it just pertain to one school. So, sometimes, we've had discussions over whose responsibility a particular issue is.

The Georgia A+ Education Reform Act of 2000 required that local school councils be established at every public school. The purpose of these school councils, known as Local School Advisory Committees (LSAC) was to unite a variety of stakeholders (parents, teachers, community members) to advise and make recommendations to school leaders (Retrieved

February 14, 2015 from http://www.gsci.org/councils/2009%20Section%205%20-%20School%20Councils.pdf). The design failed to produce any significant results due to a lack of authority and power granted to the members. The Principal at Rock Mill Academy served as a teacher member of one such local school council and described the frustration of sitting on a school council lacking the power to advance any new ideas. This principal recalled:

> I was on the school governance council back home … and I remember as a teacher going to those meetings and thinking …. I had no decision on that, so, "Why am I here?" I don't feel like my parents and my teachers feel like that. I hope that they know that they have a voice.

So, the challenge for current charter system school governance councils is to move away from the publically-held perception that school governance councils function in advisory capacities, and are without the authority to make decisions on significant issues.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored governance practices and decision-making issues held across various points of contact, bounded by a charter system of governance, and how a key population within this context, local school governance council members, learned to perform their roles. In this chapter, the research study is summarized, the findings are discussed, and the implications for future research, designed to increase understanding by both practitioners and educational researchers, are presented.

The purpose of the study was to examine governance within the context of a Charter System Flexibility Option, as designated by O.C.G.A. § 20-2-84.3. The investigation was guided by three research questions:

In a Charter System deemed successfully-performing by the state of Georgia,

1. How are significant issues of budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation decided?
2. How do local school governance council members learn their roles?
3. How do selected district-level board members, the superintendent, principals and local school governance council members characterize the benefits and challenges of a charter system?

The study was conducted in a charter system deemed successfully-performing in the state of Georgia and examined governance practices within that organization. The criteria "successfully-

performing" is defined, in this study, as approval of a charter system's renewal application by the state of Georgia, thereby affirming the "success" of the organization.

The research design was case study. Two district-level board members, the superintendent, two principals, and four school governance council members participated in in the study, and whose inclusion was purposeful selection. All interviews were face-to-face, with the exception of the superintendent whose interviews were conducted over the phone. The time period for the interviews was a total of five months, beginning in October 2014. Data sources included interviews, observations, documents and researcher's memos. Recurring themes in interviews and documents emerged and were identified and organized into categories and subcategories within a researcher's document of codes and themes.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section combines two discussions – an interpretation of the findings on governance processes within a successfully-performing charter system, and how the findings relate to the theoretical framework, Community of Practice, in understanding governance processes.

The study has established that Meadowlands Charter System, at the time of the investigation, followed both the spirit and the letter of O.C.G.A. § 20-2-84.3, Georgia's Flexibility Option legislation. The results of this study show that the system's governance structure provides processes for the transition of significant issues of decision-making – budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation, as designed by State guidelines – and these decisions are, in fact, actively decided at local schools. Further, the charter system's move to standardize the organization of both district-level and school-level governance meetings using eBoard Solutions,

will further synchronize the decision-making processes across the organization, and the information that guides these decisions.

There were indications that local school governance council meetings lacked consistency – one participant indicated a school governance council meeting was canceled due to lack of discussion items. Also, individual school websites, both those targeted for this study and others within the organization, posted agendas and minutes erratically, or not at all. The district-level website contained a tab for the community to inspect many items relative to the district-level board – news, calendar, meetings, policies, strategic plan, evaluation, documents, performance and legislation. Within this site, it is possible to review district-level board agendas and minutes spanning a period of January 2007 through the present time. Over time, as more local schools standardize their school governance council meetings using the eBoard Solutions software, agendas and minutes from all schools will be posted on this site. This feature has the potential to know, at a glance, what topics are being discussed at the school levels. If, too, school improvement plans were posted on the district-level school board website, it is conceivable that all schools would benefit from shared access of the content of each school's improvement plan, how it is being formed and followed. Under the leadership of the new superintendent, standardization of governance council functions is a priority. Two substantial elements of charter system governance affected by a focus on consistency are:

1) The training materials designed by the school system are adequate and address the requirements provided for in charter system governance legislation. However, statements by council members indicate that despite attending required orientation, a significant lack of knowledge exists concerning domains of authority, and rules regarding make-up of the school governance council. The cause may be due to lack of oversight by the district to

ensure that, more than just attending an orientation, there is evidence of council members' understanding of the roles and responsibilities, and reals of authority by all stakeholders (see Appendix I).

2) A school leader's view of the viability, necessity and utility of a school governance council cannot be overstated. One school in the study met consistently and framed the meetings as a "working lunch" for the members, with an agenda communicated beforehand. The other school in the study did not follow the published meeting schedule, and sometimes met without an agenda submitted to the members beforehand. In one meeting attended by the researcher, the principal did not attend the governance council meeting due to a conflict with another meeting. Strong leadership by this council's chairperson compensated for the absence of the principal, even to the point that this parent was the person communicating information about the new statewide testing about to take place in the school.

All governance measures contained in the Charter System Contract were being fulfilled with the exception of Goal 3, Measure 2, of the Charter System Contract which states that all school governance councils will meet monthly during the school year. Document analysis, online investigation of both the district and school level websites and conversations with various staff members from the school district indicate that full compliance of this measure was not met during the five-month term of the study.

Research question one sought to understand how significant issues of budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation are decided at the local school level, a requirement of Georgia law governing charter systems. Official Georgia Department of Education policy describes school governance within a charter system as one which

> means decisionmaking authority in personnel decisions, financial decisions, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals, and school operations. [§O.C.G.A. 20-2-2-62 (12.1)]

Personnel decisions, in the form of the hiring of a school principal, do occur, and, based on stakeholder interviews, this process is well-received. Comments from district-level board members, the superintendent, school governance council members and one principal who, in fact, was hired in this method, and now upon retirement, will use her one-person vote to help select her replacement, indicate a process that involves grass roots stakeholders at the earliest moments. Local schools survey the most desired characteristics for their school's leader, school governance council members participate in paper screening of candidates, and then, a selected member of the school governance council participates in the actual interviews. A residual benefit of this process is the wider acceptance gained by the new principal upon her/his earliest times as the school's leader. This acceptance is a direct result of school governance council members' participation. Also, when asked if school governance council members participating in such a significant area of decision-making would feel more confident in their decision-making abilities moving forward, one principal remarked that there would be a "bleed over" effect into the other areas of decision-making authority. A downside to this process is the potential that school governance council members, especially those not employed with the school system, might not respect the limits of confidentiality and, having access to principal candidates' personal information, might be tempted to share too much information with others, even though school governance council members are restricted by the same confidentiality laws that apply to all governing members of school systems. While the state of Georgia requires annual training for district-level board members, as of now there is no state-led training for local school governance

council members. Instead, a charter system's policy determines its own standard for training and the materials with which to train school governance council members. Further on in this section is a discussion of the findings of research question two exploring how school governance member training may help or hinder the ability of these stakeholders to be effective decision-makers.

Two other issues arose in this study about personnel decisions vis-à-vis charter systems: one, the role of school governance council members and evaluations of the principal, and two, how far-reaching should the boundaries of authority be in terms of "personnel decisions?"

Meadowlands School District, as previously noted, involved many stakeholders in the hiring of a principal. Principal evaluations are required annually by the state of Georgia; this assessment is known as Leader Keys Effectiveness System. The decision to share the results of a principal's evaluation with school governance council members depended on the individual her/himself. Current legislation nor district policy require this action on the part of any school leader; however, one interviewee responded affirmatively that she/he would like to know that information. Personnel decisions at the teacher level in Meadowlands are made without the involvement of school governance council members.

Of the remaining types of decisions required by Flexibility Option legislation to be located at the school governance level - financial decisions, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals, and school operations – evidence from the study revealed that these types of decisions were overlaid frequently with budgetary implications. So, a discussion on individual types of decisions to separate one decision from another without a discussion on budget proved impractical.

The transfer of fundraising approval/denial to the school governance councils saved a significant amount of time and focus for district-level board members. The involvement of local schools in the budgetary decisions was confirmed by all stakeholders. The process begins with the district-level board presenting schools with an amount of money with which to purchase items. The decision concerning where to spend the rests largely with each school's Leadership Team, which normally does not include school governance council members. The budget is presented to the school governance councils for information and feedback, but until this point, that is their first involvement in this type of decision. This lack of involvement by school governance council members at the earliest points of discussion on budget and programs, while most likely a common one across all charter systems and any shared governance structure, runs contrary to stated school governance roles according to Georgia law on charter systems.

Research question two asked how local school governance council members learn their roles. This question produced two layers of findings – explicit and implicit ways of learning. Flexibility Option legislation for charter system recognized the need for local school governance training but left the specifics of that training to the charter system boards. Intuitively understood as sound practices of any logically-oriented organization, Meadowlands School District recognized the worth of member training and fulfilled that obligation as required by law by designing and utilizing a district-created presentation for the training of school governance council members.

Evidence from the study links a less palpable but essential manner of learning of school governance council roles to the establishment of a Community of Practice, the theoretical framework of this investigation. Initial training in the roles and responsibilities of being a school governance council member was more than adequately accomplished by Meadowlands School

District orientation and training sessions. However, responses from school governance council members indicated additional need for education in their roles – what the school members were asking for was a way to improve their performance. Community of Practice theory may help to develop such a pathway.

In its purest form, a Community of Practice is one of sharing – common domain, mutual learning relationships, and, through shared practice, a building of a repertoire of resources over time (Wenger, 2011). Communities of Practice may be identified by activities such as problem solving, requests for information, seeking experience, reusing assets, discussing developments and visits (Wenger, 2011). Evidence from governance council member interviews, observations at local school meetings, and a review of agendas and minutes of targeted schools reveal a significant percentage of meeting time and planning revolved around activities such as those mentioned above. A specific occurrence, one which consumed the majority of one school site's school governance council, was hiring of a new school principal. Even though another elementary school had recently been through this process, the benefit of collaboration between school governance councils engaged in this process – having successfully recommended a candidate and one council yet to do so – may have aided the school governance council members as they entered this process for the first time, and also the sharing of knowledge may have produced an even more effective process.

Research question three investigated how selected district-level board members, the superintendent, principals and school governance council members characterize the benefits and challenges of operating within a charter system of governance. Each participant was asked to indicate her/his thoughts about the advantages and disadvantages of this type of governance structure. Participants described flexibility as the greatest benefit. Depending upon the data

source, the challenging aspects of governing within a charter system included lack of public awareness of the "flattening of the pyramid" and what decision lies with whom, the system as the accountable entity in the eyes of the state but managing diverse schools who address their own particular needs, and one school governance council member who advocated for greater expansion of decision-making authority.

It was impossible to determine whether the label of charter system significantly increased the organization's ability to affect student success. What is determinable is that Meadowlands School District used its governance structure, along with the state-contracted Broad Flexibility Waiver, to overcome any obstacles that might ordinarily be faced in a traditional educational setting. The insight of the district-level board to permit schools to design their budgets based on the needs of their students was significant in matching specific needs with financial decisions.

Implications for Further Research

This section on Implications for future research includes, first, an examination of potential effects of charter policy implementation in the state of Georgia, followed by recommendations for additional study. The legislative intent of Georgia's Charter School Act of 1998 was

> to increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation by encouraging local school systems to utilize the flexibility of a performance based contract called a charter. (§ 20-2-2060)

As of June 30, 2015, all 180 school districts in Georgia must submit their choice of Flexibility Option – Charter System, Investing in Educational Excellence (IE2), or Status Quo (O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3).

Operating as a charter system is distinct from managing a school with a charter. Charter systems are ultimately accountable, yet individual schools, using the state-approved system's Broad Flexibility Waiver, make decisions on programs, spend money and help to select school leaders, all under the auspices of the system as a whole who is ultimately responsible for success by all district students. A charter *school* has contracted with the state to set its own goals and submit annual assessments of its progress in meeting those stated goals. A charter *school* owns its decisions and its accountability.

Two decades of research on the charter school reform movement continue to add understanding of this undertaking. Charter districts, on the other hand, are newly formed entities and limited educational research exists on these scaled-up versions of charter schools. The legislative intent to increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation merits future investigation comparing pre- and post- charter status effect on district-wide student achievement.

A review of public school SAT results in 2014, revealed that for a second year in a row, a Gwinnett County charter school posted the highest SAT scores in Georgia. Seven of the other top ten schools were located in affluent areas of suburban Atlanta counties. The remaining two slots in the top ten public schools posting the highest SAT results were a school in Savannah with academic entry requirements and a high school in Columbus.

These public high schools are most likely attended by highly motivated students whose families are potentially advantaged in two ways: financially, and with a generational history of school success. For schools wishing to replicate the success of these schools, a substitute for inherent advantages of socioeconomic status is greater parental involvement through trained school governance councils. Under current legislation, all charter systems are *required* to expand

governance to local schools; IE2 school districts are *recommended* to transition decision-making to the local schools, and Status Quo schools may continue in their current pattern of governance which may or may not include local school governance councils, a decision that is entirely district-based. Additional research into effective local school governance practices within successfully-performing charter systems may increase the likelihood that other districts, regardless of their operating status, may use school governance councils to look at the needs of the school and use community resources to best address those needs, thereby realizing the intent of the legislation to increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation.

Preparation to lead effective school governance councils is key to successful decision-making at the local school level. Essential to this training is understanding of the realm of authority by all stakeholders, and the types of decisions, regulated by Georgia law, that local school governance council members are empowered to make.

Currently, school governance training is created in-district, which in itself, speaks to the fundamental philosophy of charters as a grass roots, locally-led initiative. Further research on how school governance councils make effective decisions would increase a district's training procedures, along with a statewide network to share ideas and experiences by school governance councils. A theoretical framework for launching future research on training for school governance council members is Wenger's Community of Practice theory which declares the benefits of shared experience, joined with passion, to drive strategy and decision-making within a community of stakeholders.

Further, a study on principal effectiveness, comparing school leaders who are hired following the traditional method, normally conducted by Central Office personnel as the most

heavily represented group, as opposed to a principal whose hiring was based on a wide coalition of stakeholders from the school site.

Additional investigation is required for uncovering possible explanations as to why, in the state of Georgia with the exception of a few high-achieving schools, charter schools and charter system schools are not fulfilling the original intent of the reform movement to be schools of innovative practices with replication at other sites. This researcher suspects that until a manner of evaluation and assessment is created that reflects charters' unique search for innovation, the continued mandate that all schools, charter or traditional, be judged under the same parameters, inhibits innovation as teachers, mindful of required annual statewide testing of all students, will be reluctant to stretch themselves and their students in creative ways. A means with which to satisfy parents that their children's learning in a charter system is effective and relevant, and to appease state lawmakers that Georgia charter system students are obtaining a quality education would be to create a charter-based system of accreditation that specializes in three areas of accountability: Regulatory, Market and Performance with standards and benchmarks for meeting these criteria (Miron, 2010). An assessment of this nature would preclude the need for high stakes testing of charter system students.

Conclusions

State legislators endorsing Charter Systems view this education reform movement as a means to improve student achievement by providing choice for families, greater autonomy and flexibility in exchange for accountability, and increased parental involvement. Proponents argue that local school boards and parents are best suited for making educational decisions for their students. Two primary objections to charter schools are lack of documented student achievement

gains by charter students compared to their traditional school counterparts, and further division of already-strained resources adversely affects non-charter schools.

Possibly there was no greater opportunity to view the division between charter proponents and charter opponents in the state than during 2012 when Georgia voters approved the Charter School Amendment. In reaction to a ruling by the Georgia Supreme Court that the "state's involvement in the establishment of public charter schools by the Georgia Charter School Commission was unconstitutional" (Retrieved on March 13, 2015 from http://ballotpedia.org/Georgia_Charter_Schools,_Amendment_1_%282012%29), Representatives Jones, Brooks and Lindsey co-sponsored HB 797 with Senator Chance in the 2011-2012 Regular Session of the Georgia General Assembly. The purpose of HB797 was to expand the definition of state-chartered special schools and revise funding for these special schools. The measure passed and was placed on the November 2012 ballot for decision by the Georgia voters. The Charter Schools Amendment passed, but not before very definitive lines of opposition or support were drawn. Rhetoric from charter school opponents painted bleak pictures of loss of control by local boards of education, and funding out-of-state for-profit charter management corporations, while chartering advocates described local school districts denying charter petitions because of competition.

During the height of discussion on the creation of state-sponsored charter schools, this researcher observed one such debate between Representative Jones, sponsor of HB797, and J. Alvin Wilbanks, Chief Executive Officer and Superintendent of Gwinnett County Public Schools. The debate took place September 2012; Representative Jones opened her talk stating that she "Wore tennis shoes to remind me who I am – I am here for all the moms and dads who are here in tennis shoes, who want to make things better for their kids" (researcher personal notes

created September 24, 2012). She addressed the issue that state-sponsored charter schools would destroy local government control stating that citizens exercise their rights for local control by voting for members of local boards of education. Representative Jones added that even if for-profit companies managed these schools, that it would keep administration costs lower because contracting services not provided by the government would "allow more money to be funneled into the classroom when you contract out" (researcher notes created September 24, 2012). Superintendent Wilbanks opened his remarks stating he was attending in the capacity of a "citizen of the United States, Georgia and the county of Gwinnett … and as a grandparent" (Researcher notes dated September 24, 2012). Mr. Wilbanks noted his opposition to the Charter Schools Amendment should not be interpreted as opposition to charter schools as Gwinnett County Public Schools, of which he is in charge, has approved charter status for schools within the district. Mr. Wilbanks' opposition was twofold: first, the Amendment sought to do something that already existed within the law – a process by which denied charter petitions have recourse to the state for approval, and secondly, it presented a financial hardship. In his closing remarks, Mr. Wilbanks stated, "So my question to you tonight is really as we talk about the Amendment, why at this time do you want to do something that you can already do, and then have to spend money that you don't already have?" (Researcher notes dated September 24, 2012).

Georgia policymakers struggle to address constituents' calls for local control of education – what form of choice should be available, and how to fund these options – while facing the broader issues of application and equity. Application of best practices should be happening in all districts, regardless of operating status – Charter, IE2, or Status Quo – since, at its core, education's purpose is to unlock all students' potential, and to equip our youth with tools to create meaningful and successful lives. It raises a question, too, about the equity of funding.

Charter systems are uniquely positioned to receive state funds, when available, for each student enrolled in chartering. In a September 2014 presentation to Georgia Education Leadership Institute, the state Board of Education favorably positions charter systems with "possible savings through flexibility, regular QBE funding with no expenditure controls, and possible $80-$90 per pupil in supplemental funding through QBE" (Retrieved on March 13, 2015 from http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Documents/School%20System%20Flexibility%20and%20Charter%20Schools%20in%20Georgia%20-%20September%2012%2c%202014%20-%20FINAL.pdf). The positive fiscal impact for IE2 and Status Quo school districts are far less substantial. Further investigation to uncover the rationale for these policy decisions is merited. Policy-makers should be required to defend enormous funding granted to charter systems despite overwhelming scholarly research indicating no correlation between local school governance and increased student achievement. If annual funding is appropriated by the General Assembly, each charter district is eligible to receive between $80 and $90 per student which, in the case of our state's largest charter system, will total between $8 and $9 million dollars using 2014 student enrollment figures

A tenet of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 established a view of governance closer to the students and community whom schools served. Bryk and Schneider have continued to write about results of this reform movement in Chicago (2002, 2003), and in their writings, these researchers focus on the importance of *trust* as key to improving schools.

Trust plays an integral in the interpersonal relationships of those involved in all aspects of stakeholder-involvement in a school setting. Charter system governance structure is, by design, more horizontal than vertical. Bryk & Schneider (2002) coined the term *relational trust,* and it is the virtue of trust that was evident in this study – *trust* by a sitting member of a school

governance council serving as a teacher alongside her/his boss, the school's principal, *trust* by district-level board members that budgetary decisions are best made at the local school level, and even a perceived potential for *lack of trust* by school governance councils involved in the hiring of a principal.

Besides Bryk and Schneider, additional researchers have investigated the role of *trust* as a key component in the success of a school (Kochanek (2005). The term *relational trust* describes the dependency, vulnerability and understanding of roles of individuals and groups within a system, or as Wenger would call it – a Community of Practice, the theoretical framework of this investigation.

A 21st century technological term – *handshaking* – may be overlaid to create a visual understanding of relational trust within a charter system. *Handshaking,* in technology terms, is the "communication between a computer system and an external device, by which each tells the other that data is ready to be transferred, and that the receiver is ready to accept it" (Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Handshake+%28computing%29 on February 3, 2015).

In human terms, successful *handshaking* among charter system governance members would best be described as combining roles and responsibilities with an openness to ideas. So, interlace *relational trust* with *handshaking* across various points in a charter system governance structure (district-level board, superintendent, principal, local school governance council) and its functioning would appear as many hands joined in a circular, supportive fashion.

A higher level of involvement is engagement, and the participants in this study routinely described active engagement among stakeholders as the key link in developing policies, creating programs and making significant decisions to support their stated goals. Agendas, minutes,

observations and interviews emphasized the continuous movement of data, ideas, decisions and goal-monitoring among stakeholders.

Achieving a state of relational trust depends on two things: time and adequate training clarifying stakeholders' roles and responsibilities. District-level board members and principals shared that effective collaboration did not happen overnight, and that the road toward developing a sense of partnership took time. One implication for future charter systems is to develop a systematic plan which establishes continual growth in governance – not just fulfilling required seat hours to indicate "training," but rather a concerted effort that joins ideas and participants in a meaningful way, e.g. a Charter System Community of Practice. Expanding the circle of charter system governance across the state in its own association, apart from traditional methods of school governance, would generate conversations to build a library of best practices to leverage, in the most effective way, the Broad Flexibility Waivers, granted by the state to charter systems.

Dr. Ray Budde first dreamed of public education in terms of chartering by small groups of teachers, freed from bureaucratic oversight. In the last chapter of his final book, *Strengthen School-Based Management by Chartering All Schools*, Dr. Budde (as cited in Budde, 1996) wrote:

> We value what is ours, what belongs to us. Working together with other people in common purpose produces truly amazing results. We have to be responsible for wisely using the resources and opportunities given to us, and, in some significant measure, we must accomplish what we set out to do. (p. 73)

This study contains evidence that *Chartering* and *school governance*, when successfully implemented, may offer possibilities to construct education in Georgia that is meaningful. The

findings of this study have suggested that, apart from partisan narratives, there exists an opportunity to achieve effective education in Georgia with shared governance as a foundational cornerstone. However, more research is needed about how and whether the work of local school governance councils in charter systems evolves toward meaningful policy and budget work, or whether it evolves into a more symbolic role.

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Appendix A

MEADOWLANDS SCHOOL DISTRICT

CRCT SCORES*

		System Reading Score Meets or Exceeds	System Math Score Meets or Exceeds	Prior Year % Change Reading	Prior Year % Change Math
2007					
	Grade 4	87.1	79.2		
	Grade 8	85.0	80.8		
2008					
	Grade 4	90.4	69.1	+ 3.3	-10.1
	Grade 8	85.3	57.1	+ .3	-23.7
2009					
	Grade 4	84.0	69.8	-6.4	+.7
	Grade 8	89.2	62.1	+3.9	+5.0
2010					
	Grade 4	86.1	71.8	+2.1	+2.0
	Grade 8	88.2	70.8	-1.0	+8.7
2012					
	Grade 4	86.4	74.3	+.3	+2.5
	Grade 8	91.6	75.5	+3.4	+4.7
2013					
	Grade 4	88.4	83.4	+2.0	+9.1
	Grade 8	94.9	80.4	+3.3	+4.9
2014					
	Grade 4	90.3	67.1	+1.9	-16.3
	Grade 8	93.7	76.5	-1.2	-3.9

*2011 CRCT scores were not accessible from the Georgia Department of Education website

Percentage point change from 2007 to 2014

Grade 4 Reading	+ 3.2	Grade 8 Reading	+8.7
Grade 4 Math	-12.1	Grade 8 Math	-4.3

Appendix B

eBoard Solutions

Agenda Template

The eBoard school governance council meeting template follows the same template as the district-level board:

I. Call to Order
II. Citizens' Comments
III. Adoption of Agenda
IV. Approval of Minutes
V. School Improvement/Principal's Report
    i. Instruction
    ii. Learning Supports
    iii. Operations
VI. New Business
VII. Old Business
VIII. School Governance Council Agenda Development
IX. Comments and Announcements
X. Adjournment

Appendix C

Consent Letter

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Participant]:

I am a graduate student in the Department of Education Policy and Administration at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in my dissertation research study entitled *Flexibility Options in Georgia: A Case Study of Local School Governance in a High-Performing Charter System* that is being conducted under the auspices of the Professor Elizabeth DeBray. The purpose of this study is to describe what happens when significant issues of budget, personnel, programs and innovation are transferred from district-level to school-level control in a high-performing Charter System as required under O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3.

Your participation will involve one 30-40 minute semi-structured interview with one follow-up conversation and should only take a little over an hour about total. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. As co-investigator with my advising professor, Elizabeth DeBray as principal investigator, I will audio record our interviews, and the recordings will be transcribed and analyzed. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

Confidentiality is assured. The data collected from our interviews, recordings and transcriptions, will be viewed only by me, kept in a secured environment, and the information will be destroyed after three (3) years, upon which time all individual identifiers will be removed via shredding of documents. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only.

The findings from this project may provide information on how a high-performing Charter System in Georgia (using CCRPI 2013 measurements) manages significant issues of budget, personnel, programs and innovation within district-level and school-level governance boards.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at (404) 583-4216 or send an e-mail to sjvaughn@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 629 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

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

Sincerely,

Susan Vaughn

Appendix D

Interview Questions

District-level Board Member

Semi-structured interviews with participants at the district and school levels of a high-performing Charter System in Georgia. The interview questions are aligned with the following research questions:

In a Charter System deemed successfully performing by the state of Georgia,

1. How are significant issues of budget, programs, personnel and/or innovation decided?
2. How do local school governance council members learn their roles?
3. How do selected district-level board members, the superintendent, school leaders and local school governance council members characterize the benefits and challenges of a charter system?

Underlying questions to understand this issue of charter school governance are:

- How do you as a board members characterize the benefits and challenges of moving to a charter system?
- What are types of decisions that the district board has transitioned to local schools?
- The Georgia law requires all school districts to select a Flexibility Option by June 2015. A charter system is required to pass along specific areas of budget, personnel, programs and innovations. How would you characterize this challenge? What are the benefits of transitioning more authority into local school decision makers?
- Could you please talk a little bit about the collaboration of the district board with local school council members, which would include the principal
- As of now, 30 school systems will be joining GCSS as a charter system. What recommendations would you make to them as they move forward? What do you think the role should be of the State Board of Education as so many systems move toward charter?
- If you were to design a perfectly functioning charter system, what would that look like?
- What would a perfectly functioning local school governance council look like?

- How did you receive training to be a district board member? Does the district involve itself in the training of local school council members?

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Superintendent

1. Please describe your leadership background, within a charter system and any other relative positions you have held.
2. What are the benefits and challenges of leadership within a charter system?
3. Please describe a time when having a charter contributed to student success.
4. Please describe the interrelatedness of stakeholders within a charter system – principals, district-level board members, and school governance council members.
5. Charter System legislation calls for significant decisions of budget, personnel, programs and/or innovation to transition to school governance councils. How are these types of decisions made in your system?
6. How is training accomplished?
7. How would you improve the charter system process?
8. How is charter system governance the same or different from site-based management?

Appendix F

Interview Questions

Principal

1. What is the official purpose of a local School Governance Council (SGC)?
2. What procedures are involved in selecting SGC members?
3. How, if at all, are SGC members trained?
4. Describe the governance process between the SGC and the Principal?
5. Describe a time when shared school governance worked for the benefit of the school and a time when school governance was difficult to negotiate.
6. What are the expectations and views of the school in relation to the responsibilities of the SGC?
7. How do other stakeholders (teachers, students and parents) view the SGC?
8. What events surface during SGC meetings?
9. What are the benefits and challenges of utilizing school governance?

Appendix G

Interview Questions

School Governance Council Member

1. Why did you choose to serve for the position of School Governance Council Member?
2. Were you elected or appointed?
3. Is this the first time you have served on a board?
4. Please describe your training for this role, initially and annually.
5. What role should the School Governance Council have in the direction of the school?
6. As a school governance council member, which topic is of the most interest to you: Budget, Personnel, Programs or Innovation?
7. What role does the principal have in the governance of the school? What are the leadership qualities you look for in a principal?
8. Does the school governance council complete an annual performance evaluation of the principal? If so, please explain the process.
9. Outside of current members, what kind of access do other stakeholders have in the proceedings of the school governance council – local citizens, business members?

Appendix H

School Governance Council Meeting
Meadowlands School District
Elementary School
(Redacted)

School Governance Council Meeting
1/15/2015

I. Call to Order

II. Citizens' Comments

III. Adoption of Agenda

IV. Approval of Minutes

i. It is recommended that the School Governance Council approve the minutes of the November meeting.

V. School Improvement/Principal's Report

i. Instruction Discussion Point(s)
   a. CCRPI Score Presentation
   b. Focus on Standards
      1. Analysis of Standards
      2. Plan to support students who need extra help
      3. Plan to support students who need enrichment
   c. MI Fair
      1. Preview - January 28 (4:00 - 6:00)
      2. Main Event - January 29 (6:00 - 8:00)

ii. Learning Supports Discussion Point(s)
   a. Standards Checklists

b. BYB Mastering the Standards Prize Give-Away

1. Prizes for Students

2. Students' names entered multiple ways/multiple times

c. Targeting Achievement Gap (TAG) Teams

1. Focus on lower quartile students (TAG students)

2. Identifying areas of greatest need for TAG students

3. Discussing strategies for supporting TAG students

4. Attended by sped, EIP, ESOL & activity teachers

d. Parent Conferences

e. Technology Plan

f. Stomp Zone - January 16

g. SMART update

iii. Operations Discussion Point(s)

a. Elementary Choice & Kindergarten Registration (Feb. 2 - March 6)

b. Playground Expansion

c. Proposal to honor Inaugural Principal

d. New Partnership with Atlanta Botanical Gardens

e. Proposed 2015-2016 School Year Calendar

f. Current Enrollment at ***

VI. New Business

VII. Old Business

VIII. School Governance Council Agenda Development

IX. Comments and Announcements

X. Adjournment

Appendix I

Roles of School Governance Council Members

Survey

Role Clarification: Who does What?

[Note: This exercise was developed in collaboration with the City Schools of Decatur.]

Place an "X" in the column (School board, System Advisory, School Councils, School Principal, Superintendent are the column choices) denoting who is primarily responsible for each activity. Complete this independently; then pass to the recorder to tally.

01. Submit a grant proposal to a funding source
02. Change meeting times or frequencies of the Local School Council
03. Decide if the principal will represent your school at a business or social function
04. Commission architectural plans for a new building project
05. Plan a Local School Council retreat to review the school's progress
06. Hire an employee for an unbudgeted position
07. Approach citizens about serving on a school committee
08. Change the dress code/policy
09. Decide to change a curricular approach to a subject
10. Communicate information between Local School Councils
11. Decide which items or services to cut to meet budget constraints
12. Give recognition awards to community members for their contributions
13. Develop the agenda for a Local School Council meeting
14. Recommend special tutoring to raise student achievement in the school
15. Select new colors for the school hallways
16. Request police presence due to substantiated rumor about drugs on campus
17. Allow fund-raising on a school campus for a non-profit group
18. Listen to a teacher complaint about the principal
19. Listen to a parent complaint about the revised school calendar
20. Create a subcommittee on parent goals for the school
21. Suggest revisions to the bylaws of the Local School Council
22. Review school finances on a monthly basis
23. Evaluate the principal
24. Recommend the termination of a staff member
25. Create rules for public group use of playgrounds during non-school hours