

BREAKING THE CHAINS AND BEATING THE ODDS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON  
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF A CHARTER SCHOOL FOUNDER & LEADER

by

ARTESIUS MILLER

Under the Direction of APRIL PETERS-HAWKINS

ABSTRACT

Using an autoethnographic qualitative method of research, the researcher provides a first person account of what happens when a Black leader establishes a charter school in a predominantly Black community opposed to the school. This study chronicles the lived experiences and challenges the researcher encountered in the charter school authorization and start up processes. To understand the processes and experiences of starting a charter school, two questions were addressed in this study: What are the lived experiences of a charter school founder and leader in a socio-political community and state? How does the leader navigate through policy, politics, and legislation?

INDEX WORDS: Blacks, educational entrepreneur, oppression, charter schools, education, equity, politics of education, spirituality

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2016

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December 2016

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. I would not be the man I am today, if it wasn't for your love, faithfulness, and support. To my Mother, thank you for instilling in me the value of an education. Thank you for your sacrifice to ensure my sister and I received the best education you could provide as a single Mother. Armani, thank you for allowing me the time away from our weekend gatherings to achieve this accomplishment. I cannot express how proud your big brother is of you, I love you. To my grandmother, thank you for allowing me to see the impact your work as an educator placed on the students of Gary, IN. I know you're smiling from Heaven proud of your grandson. Granddaddy, I can hear you calling Mother Adele and saying, "my grandson has his doctorate now." I love and miss you both. To Granny, thank you for creating a legacy of educators in our family. Uncle Jade, thank you for being an example of an educator committed to his students and community. Auntie Dap and Auntie Francine, thank you for your unconditional love. Shontel, I admire your teamwork with my uncle as an educator-power couple in Gary. Lastly, to DJ, Damione, and DeShonte', I hope that through this accomplishment, you know that anything is possible in life, if you believe.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the life of Ms. Linda Faye Stevenson. Your work as an educator and active member of the Atlanta arts community is truly missed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with the sincerest appreciation that I thank my dissertation chair, Dr. April Peters-Hawkins for your time, support, and commitment to the completion of this dissertation. Thank you for “staying in the fight” and making the necessary adjustments to remain on and lead my committee. To my committee members, Dr. Sheneka Williams and Dr. Kathryn Roulston, I appreciate your push to get the greatest written product from me. A special thanks goes to Dr.

Andrea Smith. Thank you for your support, dedicated to my study.

To the faculty, staff, parents, and students of Utopian Academy for the Arts, I appreciate the opportunity to serve as your leader. Through your dedication to Utopian, you have shown that through access to quality educational programming, great things can happen for students of Clayton County, GA.

To Mrs. Sharon Daniel, Mr. Anthony Bryant, and Ms. Jessie Goree, words cannot express your significance to Utopian Academy for the Arts. I pray that each of you is blessed, as you have been a blessing to our school. To Dr. Bonnie Holliday and Mr. Gregg Stevens, thank you for giving me a chance to start a charter school.

To Mrs. Jacqueline Heard-Fields, thank you for your continued love, support, and encouragement since 2005. To Dr. Nina Gilbert, thank you for serving as my mentor and sharing your story to inspire future leaders who desire to start schools of their own one day.

Lastly, I acknowledge that through God, all things are possible. Had it not been for God, there would not be a Utopian Academy for the Arts, for it was He who gave me the vision to start this school. Thank you God for the humility and spirit to do your work.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Even in the midst of our worst struggle, our forefathers knew that part of our advancement and growth began with a sound education” (Author Unknown).

#### **Introduction**

In the United States, educating the minds of Black students has been a historical struggle for decades and has been experienced by several generations. The education of Black students in the United States developed within a context of political and economic oppression. Dating back to the early days of slavery in the South, Blacks lost their homes and churches to arson, they were publicly humiliated, tortured, and even worse, killed, if it had been known, they were in search of an education (Span, 2009). Whites that attempted to assist Blacks to become literate were shamed, harassed, or even physically attacked. In some schoolhouses where Blacks were educated, one teacher was responsible for approximately 25-30 students, and also forced to teach multiple grade levels; sometimes up to six. There was no kitchen to prepare hot meals, typically no indoor plumbing, running water, or air conditioning. Students drank water from a well, and would only have access to outdoor toilets, one for boys and one for girls (Washington, 2009). In addition to arson attempts by members of the KKK, Black schoolhouses also received far less financial support than did White schools, had fewer books, worse buildings, and lesser paid teachers (Deutsch, S. 2011). Yet, lined up outside of schoolhouses daily, were eager Black students ready to receive an education, they knew it was their only option for advancement and growth.

With political and social pressure by lawmakers to revise systems in place that supported such disparities between White and Black students, two very important court proceedings would later impact the fate of the national educational system in America. The decision of the Supreme Court in 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, tried to reverse some of these inadequacies by stating that educational institutions could be segregated as long as there was some degree of financial equity. Unfortunately, this ruling did very little to change funding levels because there remained wide funding gaps between school types. However, it was the landmark decision from the 1954 court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* that made it a national law, that segregation in public education would not be legal. Even after the passage of *Brown vs. Board*, federal interventions were still necessary, due to the lack of compliance from some state officials. As seen in the stories of the Little Rock Nine and Ruby Bridges; Blacks continued to be victimized; physically, psychologically, and emotionally (Beales, 1995). With the growing dangers of educating Black students, the role and necessity of Black school leaders were becoming significantly important, and the need for the creation of schools by Black leaders was becoming just as prevalent.

The role of educational leadership in communities that serve predominantly Black students requires certain qualities from the school leader, a commitment to the education of Black children; a compassion for, and an understanding of, their students and the communities in which they worked; and a confidence in the ability of all Black children to learn (Lomotey, 1990). Regardless of the economic, cultural, academic, and social settings, these qualities supersede all others when bringing about success (Lomotey, 1990). Within the school, “operating with almost complete autonomy and armed with his educational commitment and training, the Black school leader was able to implement a school program in keeping with his philosophy” (Walker, 2000, p.275). Implementing a philosophic focus desired for Black children

has been commonly seen in Black leaders that have also created schools. Specifically, this was seen in the origins of early schools founded by Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, who used the language and practice of character education to help their students confront racism and navigate a segregated society (McCluskey, 1997).

As an extension of educational leadership, educational entrepreneurship has been a continual practice in Black communities for generations. As seen in the visionary, educational products of Donald Hense, Geoffrey Canada, Tim King, Dr. Nina Gilbert, Kevin Johnson, and the researcher, Artesius Miller, even today, Blacks have continued to develop institutions of learning for Black children. Today, educational entrepreneurs have created charter schools to support the growth and advancement of Black children, with the intent of increased literacy, college and career readiness, and the promotion for students to become positive contributors to society. For some parents that live in low-income areas and/or communities with chronically failing schools; unless alternative school choice options exists, parents are forced to accept their neighborhood schools as their only fate. However, the notion of charter schools is the ability for parents to choose the educational experiences they seek for their children, despite the physical address of their home residence (Belfield & Levin, 2015).

Although charter schools, as public schools offer thematically structured educational programs, with a common goal of closing the achievement gaps between White and Black students, the charter school movement has remained an ongoing controversial topic of discussion between supporters and opponents of this national school choice model (Kirst, 2007). Nationally, educational groups including teacher unions and the national PTSA have formed public stances against charter schools. Additionally, although Black students make up a total of 17% of students

enrolled in charter schools nationally<sup>1</sup>, the proliferation of charter schools has also struggled to establish and maintain support with national Black communities (Stirgus, 2016). In recently drafted resolutions and online platforms, Black civic groups including the NAACP and the United Front, an umbrella group that represents the Black Lives Matter Network called for a moratorium on the expansion of new charters school across America, citing that, “low-income Black students are being inadequately educated; and they do not believe charter schools are part of the solution” (Stirgus, 2016). Yet, for the Black student who benefits from attending a charter school, or the Black student who is enrolled in a traditional public school labeled as chronically failing, the option to attend a charter school should exist. While there is insufficient data to suggest why Blacks oppose charter schools, it might be related to the confusion over what charter schools are. Most Blacks, when asked, believe that charter schools are private schools. The distrust for Blacks and private schools goes back to the beginning of segregation academies. Today, a similar trust exists between Blacks and charter schools.

In Georgia, a pro-charter state in which the researcher has established a charter school, there have been political divides as a result of charter schools. In 2012, a controversial constitutional amendment, to support the authorization of charter schools by a new state level entity prompted supporters and opponents to take public stances for and against charter schools. Although charter schools were heavily endorsed by the Georgia Republican Party, charter schools did not receive statewide support from statewide Democrats. Additionally, influential elected officials, civic leaders and legislators including Rev. Joseph Lowery and State Senator Jason Carter also spoke against charters. The rallied support against charter schools in Georgia

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<sup>1</sup> Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Data Dashboard, 2016. Retrieved from <http://dashboard2.publiccharters.org/National/>

has also extended to groups including the National Parent Teacher Association, the NAACP, and the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, the largest newspaper source in Georgia.

In Courtland County, GA<sup>2</sup>, the location of the researcher's charter school, the list of charter opponents expands to include several city, county, and state elected officials, all of whom are primarily Black. Yet, despite the need for educational reform and increased school choice options for parents, after rebounding an educational crisis in 2008, the Courtland County community, a predominantly Black community, has taken a silent approach to support the establishment and growth of a new charter school, founded by the researcher; a Black male, seeking to start a school to serve Black students.

Despite the numerous challenges experienced in pursuit of charter authorization by the Courtland County school board, after three failed attempts, the researcher managed to receive approval by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore what happens when a Black leader establishes a charter school in a predominantly Black community opposed to the school. The researcher established a charter school in a state and community, where nearly twenty years ago, the opportunities would not have been available. The state of Georgia did not develop a charter school law until 1993. The state's first charter school opened two years later<sup>3</sup>. The idea for the researcher to start a charter school was the result of matching a need with a solution. The researcher founded a charter school on the premise of serving students of Courtland County, GA, one of the most historically underrepresented, and underserved communities in the metropolitan

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym was used in place of actual name to ensure anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> Addison Elementary, a conversion charter school, was the first charter school approved in Georgia by the Cobb County School District in 1995.



Atlanta area. Courtland County, GA features demographics where 69% of total residents are Black and the per capita income in 2014 was \$18,074 (U.S. Census, 2016).

The first charter school in Courtland County was approved in 2005. Since that date and prior to the authorization of the researcher's charter school, only three other charter schools have been established to serve the students of Courtland County, GA. When compared to the successful authorizations and launches of the previous charter schools established in Courtland County, along with support from local city and county officials, such support toward the development and initial start of Utopian Academy for the Arts appeared to have been a thing of the past. The backlash against the opening of the researcher's school might have been due to the state level authorizer that approved the charter school. The researcher's charter school was the first charter school approved by the newly created state-level authorizer, an appellate authorizer to the Courtland County School Board's decision. As such, Utopian Academy for the Arts opened without the approval from the local school board.

Unparalleled to any documented experience of starting a charter school in Courtland County or the state of Georgia, yet, aligned with the experiences of early school founders that established schools to serve Black students, the researcher has experienced several oppressions in the development and startup of his charter school. Examples include the researcher having to file an emergency injunction and temporary restraining order against city and school board officials so that students of his school could enter its building and attend classes; the removal of signage bearing the school's name outside the school's building by city officials; unwillingness of school district officials to transfer student records for new families enrolling at Utopian Academy; threats by city officials to shut down the school's meal service program;; the decision by school district maintenance officials to not turn on the school building's heat in the winter

months, an action prompted by the district's superintendent; along with other actions deemed unfavorable treatment of a public school by Georgia state standards.<sup>4</sup> Despite the loss of its accreditation by the Southeast Accrediting Agency<sup>5</sup>, coupled with an era of featuring a number of Georgia worst schools (Walker, 2016), the Courtland County Public School System has historically sought to prevent the well-intended contributions from the researcher and Utopian Academy for the Arts, for the students of Courtland County. This is in part due to lack of understanding and knowledge of charter school policy; increased competition of charter schools, compared to traditional public schools; and the financial impact of charter schools when approved at the local and state levels (Kirst, 2007).

### **Research Questions**

The principal research questions for this study are: What are the lived experiences of a charter school founder and leader in a socio-political community and state? How does the leader navigate through policy, politics, and legislation?

### **Significance of Study**

Recognized by advocates as an antidote for restoring faith in national public education systems, charter schools are one of the most important educational innovations of this generation. Due to the lack of admissions criteria, charter schools have gained prominence because the admissions process is open to all. As “schools of choice”, charter schools often operate like magnet schools; attracting parents and students who use their sovereignty to select the school that best fits their needs (Bulkley, K. E., & Wohlstetter, 2004). The stories of educational entrepreneurs who have started charter schools often go untold. Even rarely told are the stories of the politics of education associated with charter schools and the challenges and

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<sup>4</sup> As denoted in an official correspondence from the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, defining Utopian Academy for the Arts as a public school.

<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym was used in place of actual name to ensure anonymity.

barriers that exist against charter school founders seeking to educate students through their newly formed schools.

When compared to the early rooted struggles of educating Black students, the ability to create a public school, intended to serve all students regardless of their race, class, gender, disability, or religion, is a mark of national progress. For charter school founders in socio-political communities and states, the journey is no easy task, and due to the nomenclature of some state charter school policies and laws, in addition to common inadequacies found in the overall authorization process, chartering a school requires a great deal. As experienced in the founding process and charter authorization of Utopian Academy for the Arts, receiving a charter only became available after a thrice denial by the local board of education in the community the school would later serve, statewide legislative impact that prompted the support of a constitutional amendment to create an alternative charter school authorizer, and changes to state funding to increase support toward state-approved charter schools.

During the founding years of Utopian Academy for the Arts, unnecessary and unpredictable barriers were established to block the successful outcomes in the charter school authorization and startup phases. Such attempts are remnants of the challenges faced by earlier Black school founders and leaders that sought to make a difference for the students they served (Span, 2009). However, determined to end a generational cycle of educational disparities and economic poverty, the founder of Utopian Academy for the Arts continued to fight for better outcomes and opportunities for the students of Courtland County, GA. This story continues to highlight the struggles Black leaders face when seeking to provide educational opportunities for Black students. This is the story of how Utopian Academy for the Arts came to be.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study will be conducted on the lived experiences of a charter school founder and leader in Courtland County, GA. The study may be limited by the fact that the researcher is also the primary participant. The data collection period for this study has been extensive, in that all data was collected over an eight year period, including the pre-development period of the charter school, to the school's second year of operation. Given that this study includes the participant as the researcher, it might be critiqued as unscientific, narcissistic, and ego-centered (Porter 2004, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 47). In the end, this study highlights the lived experiences of one charter school founder versus many.

### **Overview of Research Methods**

The journey to starting a charter school is completely aligned with the elements of qualitative research (Zeni, 2011). Qualitative research is typically conducted by insiders in educational settings to improve their own practice (Zeni, 2001). "If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 120). The researcher will employ the use of autoethnography as a qualitative method for narrating the lived experiences as a charter school founder and leader in Courtland County, GA. Use of the critical spirituality theory will allow the researcher, as a practitioner, to invoke a sense of hope for a community that lost faith in the public education system, to one of a brighter future, through the creation of a charter school.

The study is bound to Utopian Academy for the Arts, a small, state-approved charter middle school located in Courtland County, GA. Although the school is not affiliated in any capacity with the Courtland County Public Schools System, Utopian Academy has an enrollment zone open to the district's students; the fifth largest school district in Georgia with an enrollment

of over 52,000 students. Utopian Academy for the Arts is currently one of two charter schools within the local community. Utopian Academy for the Arts serves students ages 11-14 and grades 6-8.

Data collection for the study began in 2009 and continued throughout the initial composition of this dissertation in 2016. During this time frame, data was collected from a variety of sources including personal memory, public representation of the history of Utopian Academy for the Arts, media reports, video reports of meetings, and archived documents.

As a unique analytic approach for qualitative studies, through the lens of an autoethnography, the researcher will use various data sources to support the development of an ethnodrama. Within the context of ethnodramas, the analysis and dramatization of significant selections from interview transcripts, field notes, journal entries, or other written artifacts are composed into actual scripts (Saldaña, 2003, p. 218).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter one provides a general overview designed to help frame the study for the reader. Chapter one includes the following sections: introduction, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, limitations of the study, and organization of the dissertation. Chapter two provides the theoretical framework and related literature and research that are significant to the study. Chapter three provides a legislative and political context of Georgia and Courtland County, GA regarding charter schools. Chapter four outlines the design of study, the data sources, data collection methods, data analysis, implied use of the theoretical framework, representation of data, and subjectivity statement. Chapter five presents the findings of the study, in the form of an ethnodrama. Chapter six summarizes conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

There is a story to be told. This chapter outlines the theoretical framework in order to frame the study that is presented. An in depth review of related literature on the history of educating Blacks in the United States South is shared, providing readers the context to understand and appreciate the opportunities that are now available for professional Blacks in education. This includes the ability to not only lead public schools that serve all children, but also the ability to start public charter schools that serve all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, or disability. Furthermore, given the context of this dissertation's focus to highlight one's experience of starting and leading a public charter school, an emphasis is also placed on the related literature of topics including charter schools and school leadership.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The research on the stories that impacted the lives of individuals that started public, private, and religious schools is limited. Even further, the body of research on founders of charter schools is scarce. Historically, through forms of oppression by those in economic and political power, the education of Black students has been traditionally rooted from a context of struggle and conflict. Furthermore, when examining the risks, barriers, and dangers associated with early institutions that educated Blacks in the South, there have been paralleled resemblances in the stories of new school-types established by Black leaders. By understanding the chronological hardships and processes by which Blacks have been educated, the impact of Black led schools on Black students, and the motivations that led to the founding of various school types by Black

leaders, there is a developed appreciation for the opportunities available today, including the ability to start a charter school.

When seeking to determine the individual influences and experiences that led to the creation of charter schools, research tends to provide a further explanation for the purposes of charter schools, significance of their educational programs, and/or detailed descriptions of the communities served by the charter school (Hening et al., 2003). However, for this study which chronicles the lived experiences of a charter school founder and leader, the ability to highlight the vision, motivations, and hardships in the journey to authorization and start-up process is necessary. In this study, the researcher uses a Critical Spirituality Theory lens to examine the lived experiences as a Black visionary educational entrepreneur, and the impact local and state politics, policies, and changes in legislation placed on the charter school authorization and start-up processes for his charter school.

### **Critical Spirituality Theory**

Critical spirituality is a combination of African American spirituality and critical theory (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012). Spirituality is the foundation by which African Americans have built projects of resistance (Cone, 1975, 1997, 1999b). “Spirituality has given people of color the impetus to create, innovate, and transform infirming and depreciating conditions with which they have had to contend” (Dantley, 2005, p.655). Historically there have been oppressions and dangers associated with educating Black students, yet, critical spirituality has equipped Black educational leaders with the necessary tools to effectively lead their schools and their respective communities during difficult times. Despite the lack of resources and support systems commonly afforded to Whites, Black educational leaders that have risen to the occasion, deconstruct hegemonic educational structures, due to their own personal callings.

There are four contributing tenets of the Critical Spirituality Theory (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012):

- Critical Self-Reflection: the process by which prospective and practicing leaders come to an understanding of themselves
- Deconstructive Interpretation: includes deconstructing attitudes, values, and actions that foster inequity
- Performative Creativity: allows educational leaders the opportunity to shape and promote curricula choices and innovations to cater to the social needs of their student populations
- Transformative Action: refers to how leaders put forth action for social change in their schools and communities

Spirituality gives African Americans the inner strength to critically reflect upon the rituals and forms of life that are often grounded in racism, sexism, and classism (Dantley, 2005). For African Americans, spirituality is also a source of performative creativity; it allows for African Americans to dream, but also strategize. One of the most consistent ways of promoting the growth and advancement of Blacks, has been through the creation of institutions of learning established by Black people. Additionally, to support the numerous challenges associated with educating Black students, Blacks have played significant roles in schools, often serving as visionaries in roles of educational leadership. Dreaming and visioning is a spiritual matter that demands strong courage and faith (Cone, 1997, 1999b). Stewart (1997) suggests that Black's struggle with this double consciousness has caused them to hone adaptation and creativity as tools for their survival. He adds that though the consciousness has not always led to psychological disintegration for Black people, it has rather provided a kind of creative edge over



their adversities, which is often ignored. (Stewart,1997). Lastly, spirituality has been manifested in faith and one's belief that the "any given situation can be overcome for the better not yet" (Dantley, 2005, p.655). Such reliance of spirituality offers leaders strategies to meet the daily challenges of schools populated by predominantly Black children (Dantley, 2005).

### **Early Institutions Founded To Serve Blacks in the South**

#### **The Schoolhouse**

The education of Blacks in the United States dates back to the 1800's during the midst of slavery in southern states. "African Americans valued literacy and created private venture and Sunday schools to safeguard their freedom. African Americans sought to organize, staff, and control schools designed to raise their social, political, and economic status" (Span, 2009, p. 264). Blacks built institutions of learning, as a means of seeking their freedom from slavery.

The first types of institutions organized and controlled by Blacks were known as schoolhouses. These segregated one and two room schools were established for Black children in the 1870s. Black schoolhouses educated and nurtured generations of children in spite of severely unequal public resources and associated dangers by Whites. In 1871, Black schoolhouses and teachers became prime targets, devastating the physical and intellectual infrastructure for the Black children and adults served (Deutsch, 2011). During this period, in some instances, students were left without a physical building to attend school because their buildings were torched by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Black schoolhouses also received far less financial support than did White schools, had fewer books, worse buildings, lesser paid teachers, along with other resources to receive a proper education (Deutsch, 2011). In some schoolhouses, one teacher was responsible for approximately 25-30 students, and also forced to teach multiple grade levels; sometimes up to six. In schoolhouses, there was no kitchen to prepare food. Occasionally,

parents did provide hot meals for lunches. There was typically no indoor plumbing, running water, or air conditioning. Students drank water from a well, and would only have access to outdoor toilets, one for boys and one for girls (Washington, 2009).

When southern states chose to integrate public schools between Whites and Blacks between 1871 and 1875, word spread quickly, yet, the news was not well-received. Whites viewed the education of Blacks two-fold. On one side, some Whites envisioned that education would prepare Blacks to become wage laborers. Though some White southerners decided to support Blacks seeking to receive an education, several risked physical harm, ostracism, even worse; death (Span, 2009). On the other half, the need for Blacks to receive an education was not widely accepted by the greater White race; they argued that Blacks could not benefit from “book learning” (Span, 2009). They saw Blacks as their property, unqualified for citizenship and earned wages. However, for the Black student, receiving an education was critical for their livelihood. There became a need to supplement the educational attainment beyond what was received from schoolhouses. There became a necessity to support Black students seeking an education in elementary and secondary schools.

### **Common Schools**

Public elementary schools became first available to Black children in the South in the first third of the twentieth century, long after they had been a commonality for American children (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Southern planters were very instrumental in the development and growth of public education in the south. Although ex-slaves initiated the first crusade of common schools immediately following the Civil War, it was only partially developed until planters returned with power in 1876. Black southerners attempted to construct and maintain what they considered to be a replica of a common school system. Although much

was accomplished, common schools founded by Blacks were nearly impossible to sustain due to the inability to finance a strong system; Blacks were predominantly economically poor people. Additionally, public school funds intended to support Black children were diverted to White children, and there was increased opposition to Black education by planters and White small farmers ( Kluger, 1976). As a result, the chances of Black children being employed were much greater than being educated. Black children did not voluntarily choose gainful employment over formal schooling, yet, because there were no public or private schools available to the vast majority of Black children, employment became the way of life (Anderson, 1988). On the other hand, where public schools were available, Black parents accepted the loss of child labor and additional household income, so their children would be able to attend school.

By 1914, there was an immense migration of Blacks from rural areas to the cities, which according to Anderson (1988), was the “emancipation of Black children from daily labor” (p. 152). This migration known as the Rosenwald school building program, afforded a second crusade for Black common schools in the rural south. By the mid 1930’s, Black elementary schools were transformed into a viable system of universal education. Similar to the growth and expansion of many historically Black colleges and universities that were founded in years prior (Boggs, 2011), this transformation of public education was supported by ordinary Blacks, local White school officials, southern White lay people, and northern philanthropists.

Of the philanthropic agencies that supported the expansion of Black common schools, the Anne T. Jeanes Foundation and the Julius Rosenwald Fund were the most influential. The Jeanes Fund employed supervisory industrial teachers and paid eighty-four percent of their salaries (Leavell, 1930). Apart from their instructional and supervisory work, the Jeanes teachers’ time was highly consumed in also raising money for new school sites and school equipment to

support Black students. The Rosenwald Fund symbolized the crusade for Black common schools in the south. Although the schools were called Rosenwald schools because of their contributions from the fund, in actuality, the fund never gave even one-half the cost of a single school site. It was the Black southerners' beliefs in common schooling and their collective social actions including donating cash, land, labor, and materials to achieve it, that made it possible and sustained the Rosenwald school building program (Anderson, 1988, p. 153). Such alternatives to the state-financed public education system was necessary, Whites all over the South seized school funds that were intended for Black citizens, gerrymandering school districts to exclude Blacks from certain tax benefits, and expounded a racist ideology to provide moral justification of unequal treatment (p.154).

Not only were there hardships associated by Blacks seeking basic literacy at the elementary school levels, state officials soon began limiting Blacks from attending high school, which ultimately hindered their abilities to pursue a higher education (Span, 2009). In addition to the funding inequities and financial disparities that impacted schooling Blacks in the South, other hardships including segregation in schools, violent attacks, and the mass national layoff of Black educators, began to have a snowball effect on Blacks in education, in the years to follow (Walker, 2003).

### **Segregation of Education**

Although there were strategic efforts to support the landscape of public education for Black children, inequalities continued to become an enduring feature of the public education system in the South. Not only were there hardships associated by those seeking basic skills at the elementary school levels, schools were harshly segregated by race, even enforced by state officials in some states (Span, 2009).

## **Oppressions at the Elementary and Secondary Levels**

One of the most oppressive features impacting Black secondary education in the South was the refusal of public high school facilities for Black children, by local and state governments. According to Anderson (1988), from 1880 to the 1930's "almost all rural communities with significantly large Black populations failed to provide high schools for Black youth" (p. 186). A major example of the discriminatory nature of Black secondary education includes the United States Supreme Court's 1899 decision in the case of *Cumming v. School Board of Richmond County, Georgia*. A Supreme Court judge ruled to allow the local school board of Richmond County the ability to close Ware High School, the only high school for local Black students. The rationale from the school board was that, because there was a need to hire new teachers for the local Black elementary schools, and since other schools were financially strapped, it would be in the best interests to close the local high school. Despite alternatives including closing one of the multiple high schools for White students or lowering the salaries of White teachers to balance the salaries of Black teachers, Ware High School, the single, high school for Black students in the state of Georgia, and one of only four in the eleven former confederate states was closed (Anderson, 1988). This decision sent a message to the Black community that there was virtually no hope of sustaining an equal protection claim, as offered to Whites.

For the select few of Black children afforded the opportunity to attend secondary schools, their experiences were tortuous. As noted by Melba Beals (1995), one of nine students recognized as the "Little Rock Nine"; seeking access to a free and public education, as an African American was extremely difficult, even after federal laws were established. Specifically, after the passage of *Brown vs. Board*, federal interventions were still necessary, due to the lack

of compliance from state officials. In 1957, with the support of the NAACP, the courageous nine Black students enrolled in Little Rock Central High School, though they were denied entry by then Arkansas Governor, Orval Faubus. Beals was victimized, physically, psychologically, and emotionally, as she and the other eight students mustered the courage to attend the all-White school. Beals describes her experiences,

“I was escaping the hanging ropes of a lynch mob, dodging lighted sticks of dynamite, and washing away burning acid sprayed into my eyes...On my third trip to Central High, I rode with the 101st Airborne Division in army station wagon guarded by jeeps with turret guns mounted on their hoods and helicopters roaring overhead... It transformed us into warriors who dared not cry even when we suffered intolerable pain” (Beales, 1995, p.126-127).

Because of the intense intimidation and physical harm associated with attending school, one can only imagine the mass number of students that decided to withdraw from school, and/or not return the following year.

Oppressions were also vividly experienced by younger Black students seeking access to equal educational opportunities. The 1998 film, *Ruby Bridges*, is a depiction of the true story of a Black girl, who at the young age of 6, helped to integrate the all-White, New Orleans public school district. Ruby’s early journey into civil rights activism comes as a striking coincidence, given that she was born in the same year the United States Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate schools. The storyline of the film includes parallels of other struggles and hardships of earlier examples of Blacks seeking educational opportunities in the South. In the spring of 1960, Ruby Bridges was one of six Black children in New Orleans to pass an academic test that determined whether she could attend the local, all-White school. Although

her parents disagreed on whether to enroll Ruby in the all-White school, she eventually started later that fall. Every morning when Bridges arrived to school, she was met head-on by verbal and physical threats. One woman told her she would poison her, another taunted her by holding a Black doll in a makeshift wooden coffin, and large crowds of people would throw things at her. With the increasing attempts to harm the young Bridges, federal interventions were necessary; U.S. Marshals dispatched by President Dwight Eisenhower oversaw her safety to and from school. Through the efforts of her teacher, a White woman from the North, and her mother, Ruby Bridges persevered in difficult moments of adversity which led to a victorious ending of a century-old barrier. Ruby Bridges integrated the all-White, New Orleans public school system.

Despite the notable advancements for Blacks in education, the challenges and barriers that made educating Blacks a dangerous endeavor became even more evident during the years immediately following national desegregation of schools. It was during the 1960's and 1970's that several Black schools were closed, thousands of Black teachers were fired, and almost all Black principals were demoted, nationally (Walker, 2003). In the South during this period, Black school leaders were nearly a nonexistent commodity in elementary and secondary schools, yet, there was a vital need for their presence. The role of educational leadership by Blacks in communities that serve predominantly Black students requires certain qualities from the school leader: a commitment to the education of Black children; a compassion for, and an understanding of, their students and the communities in which they worked; and a confidence in the ability of all Black children to learn (Lomotey, 1990).

### **The Need for Blacks in School Leadership**

Disadvantaged Black students are less involved than middleclass White students in the full range of educational opportunities offered by public schools. Not only do they spend less

time at school, being suspended, expelled, and dropping out at higher rates than middle-class White students (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004; Skiba et al., 2002; Vavrus & Cole, 2002), they are also disproportionately under-represented in high ability classroom groups. Regardless of the economic, cultural, academic, social settings, these qualities supersede all others when bringing about success (Lomotey, 1990). In his ground-breaking book, *Going to School*, Kofi Lomotey, speaks on the pervasive and disproportionate underachievement of Black students in public schools. He examines public education in an open political system involving racial, cultural, and ethnically diverse society and argues that such a diverse education should be reflected among school leaders.

Lionel Brown and Kelvin Beckett (2007) argue that researchers have failed to emphasize one of the most important roles Black school leaders have played in desegregated schools, because the literature has not recognized the vital importance of that role during Reconstruction and throughout segregation. Understanding the limitations of current research on the roles Black educational leaders play in increasingly diverse urban school districts requires some historical contextualization. Black school leaders were only reappointed to positions of leadership in large numbers in the late 1970s and 1980s, mostly in predominantly Black populated schools (Franklin, 1990). School leaders during segregation were recruited by Black communities to develop strong academic programs and hire qualified teachers, only to find themselves devoting much of their time to representing the interests of their school and community in contacts with White officials. Similarly, school leaders who were reappointed by urban districts to turn around predominantly Black schools found that to accomplish that goal they had to rebuild school communities by improving communication between disadvantaged Black parents and



predominantly White middle-class teachers, school district officials, and school board members (Walker, 2003).

The roles played by Black school leaders in segregated schools and communities, historically have been crucial. School principals were often the only Black leaders to have regular contact with the White power structure (Walker, 2000), working with school district and state education officials and representatives from Northern philanthropic societies. Within the community, the roles of principals included: motivating parents to provide resources for schools; being active in church; and because they were usually the most educated person in the community, many having masters degrees (Walker, 2000), acting as financial advisors and marital counselors and providing leadership for local initiatives such as credit unions (Walker, 2000). The principal held the authority to hire teachers in line with his/her vision and fire those who did not meet his/her expectations (Walker, 2000). Within the school, “operating with almost complete autonomy and armed with his educational commitment and training, the principal was able to implement a school program in keeping with his philosophy” (Walker, 2000, p.275).

With the historical and evolving challenges experienced by both Black educators and the Black students they taught, some Black leaders chose to create institutions of learning (McCluskey, 1997). Specifically, there was a need for the development and implementation of schools created by Black individuals to serve Black students.

### **Early Pioneers of Black School Founders**

Very little in-depth scholarly attention has been placed on the early lived experiences of the Black individuals that formed their own organizations and institutions to uplift Black people, primarily because such data has not been made available or was not formally recorded. McCluskey (1997) examines Black schooling and discusses how school founders, Lucy Craft

Laney (1854-1933), Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), Nannie Helen Burroughs (1883-1961), and Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1883-1961) used the language and practice of character education to help their students confront racism and navigate a segregated society. In the era in which these four women launched their schools, it was during a timeframe by which “virulent and violent” racism was directed against Blacks (McCluskey, 1997). The women founded schools; seeking to inspire morality, self-sufficiency, and achievement amongst Blacks. The women shared three commonalities, “strong religious convictions, belief in Black women’s leadership as a key to racial progress, and maternal love for the schools they founded” (McCluskey, 1997, p. 404).

**Lucy Craft Laney.** Laney founded the Haines Institute in Augusta, GA. Haines Institute offered what Laney believed was missing in the minimally funded public schools for Blacks, "a complete education for the child" (McCluskey, 1997, p.407). Her original idea was to open a school to solely serve girls, however, she soon admitted the male students that regularly showed up begging for an education. Laney believed that educated Black women, particularly those trained in service-oriented Christian mission schools, were best suited to lead the race in counteracting the effects of a societal image of "shame and crime". She counseled her students that racist attitudes could be defeated with hard work, self-respect, and faith in God. Under Laney’s leadership, Haines expanded significantly, graduating more than two thousand students before her death in 1933. Unfortunately, however, after her death, rising costs, unsteady leadership, and competition from public schools forced Haines to close in 1949.

**Mary McLeod Bethune.** In 1904, Mary McLeod Bethune opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida. Her vision for the school was informed by her experience at Scotia Seminary for Negro Girls and the year she

spent with Laney. The educational model of Bethune's school featured an industrial focus, centered with a domestic science/vocational curriculum, which was modeled from her experiences at Scotia, combined with interests from Booker T. Washington's curriculum at the Tuskegee Institute (McCluskey, 1997). The educational program at Bethune's school mirrored the initial premise of Laney's, to educate the special needs of girls. At the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School, Bethune placed much emphasis on teaching her students religion and vocationalism. Unlike her mentor Laney, Bethune gradually added high school-level courses. Despite comments from her school's interracial board about growing too fast, she approved a school merger with Cookman Institute for boys in 1923. This new coed institution, Bethune-Cookman Collegiate Institute, would become later known today as Bethune-Cookman University.

**Nannie Burroughs.** Nannie Burroughs is credited as being the first Black woman to open an all-female school with a national scope outside of the South. Burroughs opened the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington D.C. in 1909. The school's curriculum prepared its graduates for missionary work and to be "self-respecting wage-earners, with skills in domestic arts, secretarial science, teaching, and beauty culture" (McCluskey, 1997, p. 420). Her vision for the school was to serve Black females between the ages of twelve to mid-thirties by providing a nonsectarian education that would give girls a chance to overcome whatever disadvantages they faced in life. Burroughs was a very expressive oratorical leader; she used the power of her words to inspire her students. She would often tell her students, "no one will give you a chance, you have to take a chance" (McCluskey, 1997, p. 419). As a leader, Burroughs relied heavily on Black people as a major source of financial support; advising Blacks to not "waste time begging Whites for mercy" (McCluskey, 1997, p. 419). Unfortunately, this

eventually became her greatest challenge while leading the organization. She had been cautioned by Booker T. Washington and the male hierarchy of the National Baptists Convention that Black schools outside of the south could not garner support from Northern Whites. Burroughs was a prideful woman, who was determined to not seek philanthropic support from Northern Whites because she perceived it to allow Whites to dictate policy. However, she struggled to overcome several financial crisis in maintaining the operations of her school. Burroughs soon learned that although Blacks had supported her school for twenty years, her school could not “live without a real lift from White friends” (McCluskey, 1997, p. 419). With the support of her White friends, Burroughs’ school, the National Training School for Women and Girls survived. It now operates today as the Nannie Helen Burroughs School, a school nursery through sixth grade, private school for African American children.

**Charlotte Hawkins Brown.** Inspired by Mary McLeod Bethune’s early notion of opening an elite school for Black girls, Charlotte Hawkins Brown opened the Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina in 1901. Brown envisioned converting a small church with two teachers into a finishing school for the sons and daughters of the Black upper middle class. The Institute’s curriculum was intended to train Black youth “in the skills of artisan...and to help them contribute to the best citizenship of their communities” (McCluskey, 1997, p. 413). Brown received much support from both the Black and White communities. Determined to have a school of their own, local Blacks banded together to support the school by rotating the boarding of the school’s teachers. Brown’s upper-class New England sensibilities and her willingness to infuse the school’s curriculum with tenets of a morality-laden industrialism, broadened her appeal and support from White contributors. Some notable White philanthropists that donated included Boston lawyer Galen Stone and James Gamble, president of Proctor and Gamble.

Beginning in 1937, there was a sudden evolution of Brown's school. With the building of a new nearby public high school for Black students, Brown transformed her school in a selective, private, college prep boarding school for Black boys and girls. However, by changing the philosophy of her school meant that the rural Black students that the school was initially intended to serve were replaced by a national pool of students who could afford the five-hundred-dollar annual tuition. Although Brown believed that she was "promoting uplift and racial redemption by educating a group that could display all the characteristics of the 'better class' of Whites and racial ambassadors for their people" (McCluskey, 1997, p. 414), the selective admissions process would later prove to have an adverse impact on the school's fiscal operations. The Palmer Memorial Institute's enrollment began to dwindle and combined with a major fire, the school was not able to rebound and was forced to close in 1971.

The schools founded by Laney, Bethune, Burroughs, and Brown were the epicenters of social transformation that they desired would support the advancement and growth of Blacks, while also altering Blacks' relationship with America. As evidenced in each of their stories, each of the women shared common struggles of financial challenges, which caused each of them to become interdependent on White philanthropy. Although these examples of institution building by Black women were among the earliest women-centered institutions, they highlight the common challenges that Black school founders experienced with seeking to start and lead schools to serve Black children. The four women-founders assumption of leadership was grounded in "religious conviction, which they viewed as a call to service by those blessed with an education" (McCluskey, 1997, p.424). This same calling from God has also been rooted in the context for other earlier and future school founders alike (Gilbert, 2013). Blacks have been pioneers in education for nearly three centuries. Blacks have founded schoolhouses to teach

slaves, common schools to teach Blacks in the Reconstruction era, private and public colleges to teach and support Blacks seeking a higher education. Now across America, there's a new generation and affordability of schools founded by Blacks in public education. Today, Black leaders have founded public charter schools to support and service the educational needs of Black students.

### **Charter Schools**

The ability to design an educational program to fit the needs of its students with flexibility of certain requirements mandated in traditional public schools, the idea to implement an educational plan with a unique thematic structure, or simply the idea to offer an alternative educational setting as a reform effort to failing schools, collectively define the concept of public charter schools. As public schools of choice, charter schools have been introduced nationally as an opportunity to improve student achievement in American public education. Created as an idea by Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the concept was later embraced by Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, in 1988 when he called for the reform of the public schools by establishing "charter schools" or "schools of choice"(Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). As originally conceived, the charter school model was as a legally and financially autonomous public school (without tuition, religious affiliation, or selective student admissions) that would operate much like a private business—free from many state laws and district regulations, and accountable more for student outcomes. In 1991, Minnesota was the first state to pass a charter school law, followed by California in 1992.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were 2,348 charter schools during the 2001-02 school year. Since that year, the number of charter schools has increased as local school districts and families seek reform for their underperforming schools.

Embraced by both Republicans and Democrats, funded at local, state, and federal levels, and approved by most state legislatures, charter schools were put forward as something that combined the independence and autonomy of private schools with public support, yet tuition-free like traditional public schools (Frankenberg et al., 2012). Nationally, many states have been willing to experiment with charter schools. Opponents of charter schools suggest that they try to completely replace the traditional public schools; reduce teacher voice and increase segregation between race and class (Bulkley, K. E., & Wohlstetter, 2004).

### **Who Starts Charters?**

Some charter founders are idealistic education leaders with a great new idea, strong imagination and inexhaustible energy, while some are committed community activists who have longed to run their own schools, or are one of many that are founded and managed by corporations that hope to profit from their operation (Frankenberg, 2003). During the 2012-13 school year, there were more than 6,000 charter schools in operation across the United States. This number significantly increased as parents sought greater school choice options to meet the educational needs of their children, and local school districts and families sought reform for their underperforming schools.

The research interests of this study focus on the lived experiences of the individuals that have started charter schools, specifically, the lived experiences of Black charter school founders. What influences motivated them to start schools? What barriers or roadblocks did they encounter? Were they enrolled in a formal charter school start-up program to support their efforts, or were their initiatives solely grassroots efforts? The success in the charter school authorization phase, the start-up process, and eventual launch of operations, is sometimes heavily contingent on the founder's ability to navigate through difficult barriers. Additionally, while the

professional and personal backgrounds of those that have started charter schools vary (Hening et al., 2003), including access to social and political capital, formal training, and access to philanthropic networks, there have been other factors proven to be just as instrumental, including the roles of faith and spirituality (Gilbert, 2013).

### **Mission-Oriented vs. Market Oriented Founders**

Hening et al. (2003) conducted a multi-state study to present an examination on the typology of charter schools in America. Specifically, the authors sought to determine the norms, traditions, and perspectives of the founders and founding organizations in their study. In their multivariate analysis, the authors discussed the distribution of responding to schools within the categories of typology (p. 497). Schools that were chosen for the study were selected largely for having been in operation for several years and in effort to have a sample size large enough to draw norms and behaviors. Additionally, for their study, the authors were selective of states with school districts in which at least one of the major for-profit charter management firms had a presence to show how schools with close ties to for-profit firms might differ from more community-oriented charter schools (p. 496).

Of the founders and organizations they researched, they determined that there were two broad categories of charter schools founders (p.487). While some charter schools were initially founded by community-based social service agencies (p. 489), in recent years, there has been a growing trend of charter schools rooted from corporations including education management organizations (p. 490). According to the authors, charter schools typically rooted from non-profit founders (teachers, parents, social service agencies, etc.) are typically labeled as “mission-oriented”; whereas, charter schools founded by for-profit are considered “market-orientated” (p. 491). Mission-driven schools typically have a specific agenda to address a particular curricula



focus, whereas market-driven schools are catered to expand charter schools in traditionally underrepresented communities or in areas where there are large underserved student populations (p.493).

Common examples of mission-oriented charter schools include the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter school network, founded by former teachers Dave Levin and Mark Feinberg. KIPP's 20 year track record of preparing students in educationally underserved communities has attained a national reach of 80,000 students in 200 schools across the country.<sup>6</sup> Although KIPP has maintained a strong brand of high achievement outcomes in the communities it serves, a strong proponent in the sustainability and replication efforts of KIPP has been its garnered philanthropic support, including access to educational philanthropists including Doris and Dan Fisher; who've collectively donated over \$100 million to the national charter school network. An example of a market-oriented charter school includes Charles Drew Charter School, a K-12 charter school located in Atlanta, GA. As the first charter school option for students residing within the Atlanta Public Schools System, Charles Drew High School was founded by a group of corporate executives who sought to reform a community that was once best known for its sky-high crime rates. Although the privatization of public education was not a common trend in Atlanta during the development of Drew Charter, the school has since produced great results, and is one of the highest performing charter schools in the state of Georgia (Bloom, 2016).

Although, there is no in-depth study that examines the historical events or premise which resulted in the creation of such charter schools, given the contrast of typology of charter school founders, Hening et al. (2003) draw links between the two broad founder-types and the key resources, dominant norms, incentives, and central actors commonly found. Access to social and political capital and access to philanthropic support has been a commonality for both KIPP and

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Knowledge is Power Program Schools, Homepage, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.kipp.org/>

Drew Charter School. However, for the Black charter school founder that does not share similar backgrounds and/or resources, lacks membership in certain academic and social networks, can he/she create, maintain, and replicate and sustain high performing charter schools?

### **Modern Wave of Black Charter School Founders**

Although there is no formal record of the total number of Blacks that have founded charter schools in the United States, in retrospect, there has been an increasing involvement of the charter school movement by Black educators. Established in 1998 by Mr. Donald Hense, the Friendship Public Charter Schools Network began the nation's first multi-campus charter school in Washington D.C. In 2004, Mr. Geoffrey Canada introduced America to Promise Academy in Harlem, NY; a cradle to college charter school model. In 2006, Mr. Tim King launched Urban Prep Academy, an all-male college prep charter based in Chicago. And in 2008, Dr. Nina Gilbert opened Ivy Prep Academy, a gender-based college preparatory charter school network in Gwinnett County, GA, a northern suburb of Atlanta.

Unlike the initial years when charter school laws were first introduced nationally, the process to receive a charter seemed relatively timely and feasible. Not only has this process changed for new charter school founders, yet, as it will be later discussed in the dissertation, there have also been a noticeable addition of unpredictable roadblocks and adversities experienced in the chartering process (Gilbert, 2013).

### **Barriers Faced by Charter School Founders**

Unless you've personally envisioned the idea of starting a charter school and have actually developed it into fruition, it is unlikely to both fully identify and understand the variety of challenges experienced by charter school founders in the petitioning process. While some challenges are intentionally targeted toward charter school founders and/or the founding groups,

others are indirectly experienced in the founding process. Through the lens of an autoethnographic dissertation, Dr. Gilbert (2013) describes the challenges she encountered in the founding and startup phases of her charter school, Ivy Prep Academy. “In the case of Ivy Prep, the barriers that we experienced as a founding group (charter denials, negative public relations, minimal startup capital) moved into the realm of crisis once students were enrolled”(p. 24). As a researcher, Dr. Gilbert recalls her experiences and describes her challenges as a leader, through written narratives. Specifically, Dr. Gilbert experienced legal crisis when her local school district, along with other neighboring school districts, whom her school enrolled students, sued her school on the basis of equitable funding, by allowing the per pupil allotment her school received, follow the child (p.86). As a leader, she also experienced internal crisis when teachers and parents became discouraged, during difficult times, and decided to leave Ivy Prep Academy (p.105) Dr. Gilbert identified such crisis in a three-part theory defined by Pepper, Matthew, and London (2010) that describes the educational-related crises charter schools often experience. First, they define school crises as an event or series that threatens a school’s core values or foundational practices. Secondly, they define that some schools are born from “complex, unclear, and uncontrollable circumstances” (Gilbert, 2013, p.26). Above all, when either definition of crisis exists, it requires immediate decision making, and certain qualities of the school leader including the ability to “establish clear and shared goals, creating a strong school with established routines that supports an internal professional community, staying focused, communicating effectively, being resourceful, and being steadfast” (Gilbert, 2013, p.26).

Nowadays, charter school leaders must also be able to navigate the ever-evolving broader categories of charter school legislation policy, and laws (Wong & Shen, 2006).

## Policy and Legislation Impact on Charter Schools

From caps on the number of charter schools that an authorizer can annually approve, to the limitations to whom charters may enter a contract agreement with, charter school policies varies by states and is often seen as confused and contested by researchers (Wells et al., 1999). Wong & Shen (2006), provides an outlook on the charter school policy environment, by re-examining the layers of legal provisions in states' charter laws, and have determined that factors including charter school laws are often characterized as enabling or constraining the creation and operation of charter schools. Wong & Shen also present a variety of specific legislation and policy provisions that impact charter school laws; which in turn can impact school founders and their respective chartering processes (p.10):

1. **Authorizing process**, e.g. single or multiple authorizers (local school board, state-authorities, universities); application procedures, caps on enrollment or number of schools
2. **Personnel policy flexibility**, e.g. constraints on labor negotiation, certification of teachers and administrators
3. **Operation**, e.g. funding from authorizers, access to facilities
4. **Accountability, Standards, and Expectations**, e.g. whether charters are subject to the same NCLB testing and reporting requirements, or whether they are given more flexibility in terms of time frames and types of tests and assessments.

Wong & Shen also found a significant internal variation in charter school laws, and suggests that such laws impact charter school outcomes.

## **School Leadership**

Effective school leadership makes a difference in parental and community involvement, access and procurement of resources to support the educational program, and achievement outcomes in students. There's nothing new or especially controversial about that idea. The question that has not fully been answered, even after several decades of school renewal efforts, is just how leadership matters, how important those effects are in promoting the learning of all children, and what are the essential ingredients of successful leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004). With growing interests from individuals seeking to start and lead charter schools; the preparedness of new school leadership, success in roles of district leadership, and the navigation of local politics of education to support leadership in charter schools is equally as important.

### **Preparation of School leadership**

School leaders who work with students and their families on a daily basis must be equipped to make and carry out decisions at their sites in a way that guarantees all students will have the same opportunity to succeed (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). School leaders must be prepared to assist all students in attaining higher levels of academic achievement regardless of their ethnic, language or socioeconomic subgroups (Moyer & Clymer, 2009). For educators seeking to advance their careers into school leadership, there's the traditional "climb the ladder" approach which typically includes on-the-job opportunities to shadow and learn the desired respective roles from someone currently in the position within their buildings. Then there are new career educators that seek to learn about educational leadership in formal masters or doctoral programs. Thirdly, for non-traditional educators seeking to start careers of school leadership, there are formal training and support programs that incubate persons through a series of classes inclusive of school-site trainings. Although in charter school settings, school leaders

are provided the autonomy to waive the leadership certification requirements that are mandated in traditional public school settings, there are fellowship programs like Building Excellence Schools, the Fisher Fellowship Program offered through Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), and the former Partners for Developing Futures program, established to support individuals seeking to start and lead charter schools.

### **Leadership through Superintendency**

Most successes of district and school level leadership in the growth of top-performing organizations depend on how well their leaders interact with the larger social and organizational context in which they find themselves. The empirical research that we know about leaders' effects on student learning mostly concerns school leaders. However, until recently, district leadership effects on students have been considered too indirect and complex to sort out (Leithwood et al., 2004).

In an ethnographic study on district superintendents in the state of California, researcher G. Peterson (1999) suggested that significant challenges created by social, political, and economic trends, influenced schools in America. However, although these difficulties contribute to the changing landscape of education, a body of literature has also found that the implementation of successful instructional reform depends on the leadership of the district superintendent (Fullan, 1993; Petersen, 1999; Petersen, Sayre, & Kelly, 2006). Literature has shown that superintendents have influence on the academic achievement of students (Leithwood et al., 2004). Other research has demonstrated that superintendents are the most important individuals in setting expectations and patterns of change in such reform efforts (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Cuban, 1989; Fullan, 1993). The vulnerability of the superintendent's role to internal and external forces continuously presents obstacles. His or her leadership is key

to successful implementation of reforms that positively impact student achievement (Fullan, 1993; Kowalski, 2005; Morgan & Petersen, 2002; Petersen, 1999, 2002; Seashore Louis et al., 2010; Sergiovanni, 1990). Given the growing levels of political forces that some charter schools encounter, organizational leaders, superintendents must be equipped with the ability to effectively lead, sustain, and grow their organizations, even in difficult times.

### **Politics & Charter School Leadership**

In schools, politics are a daily occurrence. There are political forces within and around schools that dictate how things have been done, how things are done, and how things will be done. Researchers have stated that an important way to be effective in organizational settings is to develop and use one's social and political competence and to build on the ability to persuade, influence, and control others (Ferris et al., 2002). In order to be effective in charter school leadership, individuals need to possess political skill (Ferris et al, 2002). Political skill is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ahearn et al., 2004, p. 311). When political tactics are used to create crises, it is important for charter school leaders to make use of their political skills.

There are four main dimensions of political skill: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and apparent sincerity (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005). The use of these skills not only enhances the effectiveness of a school leader's ability to lead and control their respective organizational environments, yet, they also assist their abilities to position themselves to take advantage of opportunities, develop strong and beneficial alliances, and influence others to support their organizations.

1. **Socially astute** individuals are often seen as resourceful in dealing with others and can accurately perceive and understand social situations as well as the personal interactions that occur in these settings (Perrewé & Nelson, 2004).
2. **Interpersonal influence.** Individuals high in interpersonal influence appear to colleagues as being pleasant and productive to associate with, using such behaviors to control their environments.
3. **Networking ability** is the capacity to build connections, friendships, alliances and coalitions.
4. **Apparent sincerity** is carrying out influence attempts in apparently sincere and genuine ways.

### **Chapter Summary**

Spirituality is the foundation by which African Americans have built projects of resistance (Cone, 1975, 1997, 1999b). “Critically spiritual leaders gather parents, other teachers, members of the community to discuss how the school can be an active partner with others in the community to see equity and fairness shaping the lives of those inside and outside of the school” (Dantley, 2010, pp. 217-218). Spirituality has been manifested in faith and one’s belief that “any situation can be overcome for the better not yet” (West, 1982, 1993). Historically, there have been risks, barriers, and dangers associated with Blacks seeking to receive an education. Yet, through the notion of spirituality, Blacks have honed adaptation in education as a means of their advancement, growth, and survival.

Blacks have been pioneers in education for nearly three centuries. With the historical oppressions experienced by both Black educators and the Black students they taught, there was a divine calling from some Black leaders to create institutions of learning. Blacks have founded



schoolhouses to teach slaves and common schools to teach Blacks in the Reconstruction era. Today, Blacks continue to seek the growth and advancement for Black children through the establishment of public charter schools.

Due to the scarce literature on the lived experiences of Blacks that have started charter schools, the goal of the researcher is to contribute to the subject, as a practitioner-researcher. There is much to be told about the hardships, barriers, and local politics of education, which make educating the minds of young Black children a continuous, historical struggle.

### CHAPTER 3

#### CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

#### **Charter Schools in Georgia**

According to Elazar (1984), states in the southeast region of the United States exhibit traits of a traditionalistic culture; they maintain traditional patterns being responsive to a government elite with partisanship subordinated to personal ties. Bulkley (2005) elaborates on some Georgian's decision not to support charter schools as schools of choice due to the fear of them being used as 'backdoors' to segregation.

In 1993, Georgia passed legislation to enable charter schools state-wide. The state's first charter school, Addisen Elementary was not approved until 2 years later. As in the case of Addisen Elementary, early established Georgia charter schools were created from existing traditional public schools and then converted to charter schools. Such type of charter schools are formally known as "conversion charter schools". This type of chartering continued until 1998, when the state's first start-up charter schools<sup>7</sup>, Savannah Arts Academy and Talbot County Charter Alternative Academy were approved by their respective, local school boards (Erste, 2013).

Compared to other states with charter school laws, Georgia ranks fairly average in terms of the number of charter schools actually available to students. During that school year, Georgia had 310 charter schools in forty-three school districts, with four charter schools serving students statewide (Erste, 2013). Also, during the 2012-2013 school year, 225,259 Georgia public school

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<sup>7</sup> A start-up charter school in Georgia is a charter school approved by a local board of education.

students were enrolled in charter schools; representing a nearly 75% increase from the previous year and nearly 275% increase from the previous three years (Erste, 2013).

In a 2014 report from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the state of Georgia received a 22 out of 43 ranking, regarding its evaluation on the growth, quality, and innovation of its charter schools. The state scored relatively low in the areas of equitable funding; transparent charter application review and decision-making processes; and number of charter school authorizers available in the state.

### **Charter School Authorization**

In Georgia, charter schools may be approved or denied by two main authorizing groups, local school boards, and/or state-level authorizers. From 1995 to 2011, there were four types of charter school authorization in Georgia (Erste, 2013):

1. **Start-up charter school:** As a first step to obtaining a charter, petitioning groups may to submit a charter petition to their local school board to become a start-up charter school. If approved, the petitioning group must then receive final approval by the State Board of Education of Georgia; who also has the ability to override a local school board's approval.
2. **State-chartered special school:** If petitioning groups were initially denied by their local school board to become a start-up charter school; through a previous appellate process, the petitioner(s) could resubmit their petition to the Charter Schools Division of the Georgia Department Board of Education to become a state-chartered special school. Since 2010, there have not been any new state-chartered special schools approved in Georgia.

3. **Conversion charter school:** As in the case of the first 34 charter schools approved in Georgia, local school boards may take existing traditional public schools and convert them into charter schools.
4. **State-commission charter school:** For petitioning groups seeking to become a start-up charter school and were initially denied by their local school boards; through a newly established appellate process, the petitioner(s) can resubmit their petition to the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, formerly known as the “Georgia Charter Schools Commission”. State-approved charter schools must also receive final approval from the State Board of Education of Georgia.

Since 2011, there have been only three types of charter schools operating in Georgia, start-up charters, conversion charters, and state-commission charters.

### **Funding for Charters**

Charter school opponents often lobby to states to underfund state categorical aid and provide less money per pupil (Kirst, 2007). In a national study of charter school funding (Curtis, 2011), Georgia charter schools were receiving on average \$8,880 per pupil, while traditional Georgia public schools would have received \$11,686 for those students. As a result, such charter schools were receiving \$2,806 per pupil – or 24.0% - less than what the traditional public schools would have received for those same students. In another national study on charter school funding (Batdorff et al., 2014), Georgia charter schools were receiving on average \$7,713 per pupil in public funds, while traditional Georgia public schools received \$11,917 for those same students.

When drawing a comparison between locally-approved and state-approved charter schools, there is also a noticeable variance between funding levels. In Georgia, charter school petitioners are encouraged to receive authorization from local school boards because funding

levels are higher than if approved at the state level. However, in recent years, state-approved charter schools have since received supplements to their lesser earned revenues, as a result of political support at the state level. In 2011, the state's Governor, with the assistance from the Georgia House of Representatives passed legislation to directly support state approved charter schools. House Bill 797, provided state-approved charter schools a supplement of \$3,500, per each student enrolled in the state charter school. Prior to House Bill 797, charter schools approved at the state level operated on only approximately half of the funds of other public schools; given state charter schools did not, and still currently do not receive local tax-based revenue.

Unless charter school founders have access to seed monies, capital, or high-net worth individuals, launching a charter school can be very difficult. Often times, groups like education management organizations see this as a material weakness for independent charter schools, and to their advantage offer predatory lending to the organizations. If desperate for the financial support, some schools succumb to applying for the financial aid. However, the long-term effects can be detrimental to the school's overall financial health. In Georgia, federal grant-aid for charter schools has nearly dissolved. In 2013, Georgia expended all funds from the federal charter school grant program, with no anticipation of receiving funding in the near future. For newly approved charter schools, this requires school leaders in Georgia to attract private dollars to support their annual operating budgets.

To supplement the lesser earned revenues of charter schools in Georgia and to offset many of the high-costs associated with operating charter schools, some national and local philanthropies have recognized the need to support them financially and have created private grant programs for them to apply. Many of them require that schools have a track record and

operational history of at least three years before they are considered for grant making<sup>8</sup>. An example of a private foundation that supports charter schools nationally and in Georgia is the Walton Family Foundation.

Though the Walton Family Foundation is one of very few national philanthropies to support newly-approved charter schools, their geographic focus only extends to include charter schools serving students in the Atlanta Public Schools System. For charter schools that have attendance zones outside of the Atlanta city limits, similar to the early school-types founded by Blacks to support the education of Blacks in the South (Bullock, 1967), such lack of access (Span, 2009) hinders opportunities to strengthen and enhance the educational programming, staffing, and growth for some schools.

### **Unconstitutionality of State Level Authorizer**

In 2008, through the support of Georgia's House of Representatives, State Senate, and then Governor, Sonny Perdue (Republican), a legislative bill was introduced and passed that would later create the Georgia Charter Schools Commission. The Commission was created from House Bill (HB) 881, and established by the General Assembly during the 2008 legislative session. HB 881 allowed the commission to approve or deny charter school applications. From 2009 to 2011, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission approved 16 schools. Despite the ability to approve its initial 16 schools under its authority, House Bill 881 was not directly aligned with the Georgia Constitution. "Authority is granted to county and area boards of education to establish and maintain public schools within their limits. This language continues the line of constitutional authority, unbroken since it was originally memorialized in the 1877 Constitution of Georgia, granting local boards of education the exclusive right to establish and maintain, the exclusive control over, general K-12 public education" (Rubin, 2011).

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<sup>8</sup> Examples include the Charter School Growth Fund and Walton Family Foundation.

Conflicts with its verbiage, as compared to the state’s constitution, in addition to its ability to redirect funds so that commission-approved schools could receive their share of local, tax-based dollars, impacted the decision from seven school districts statewide to sue the State of Georgia over the constitutionality of commission-approved charter schools. Atlanta, DeKalb, Candler, Coweta, Bulloch, Gwinnett and Griffin-Spalding city and county school districts, collectively sued to have the state law that created the Georgia Charter Schools Commission declared unconstitutional (Dodd, 2010). The systems lost their case in Fulton County Superior Court in 2010, but later appealed to the Georgia Supreme Court. The Georgia Supreme Court focused on two issues in its ruling:

1. Does the state constitution give the state the right to create charter schools over the objection of local boards of education? The state argued for a broad definition of state-sponsored “special schools,” which have historically been limited to the state-run schools for the blind and deaf.
2. The second point of contention was whether the seven-member Charter Schools Commission was a device for the state to divert local money to charter schools. While the court ruled in favor the local districts, the fate of Commission approved charter schools was still to be determined.

On May 16, 2011, the Georgia Charter School Commission was ruled “unconstitutional” in a 4-3 vote by the Supreme Court of Georgia. Of the schools that were originally approved by the Commission, there were a total of eight that were approved to become state-chartered special schools. Additionally, another three did not open, and the remaining four were locally approved. The following table represents the Commission approved schools and their subsequent authorizer, post-unconstitutionality:

**Table 1: Commission Approved Schools and Subsequent Authorizer**

Name of Charter School	Original Authorizer	Subsequent Authorizer (Post - Unconstitutionality) 2011	Subsequent Authorizer (Post-Constitutionality) 2013	Charter School Currently Open (Yes/No)
Georgia Cyber Academy	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Georgia Connections Academy	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Cherokee Charter Academy	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Provost Academy Georgia	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Locally approved	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Heritage Preparatory Academy	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Locally approved	State Charter Schools Commission	No
Chattahoochee Hills	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	No approval	Fulton County Public Schools	Yes
Atlanta Heights Charter	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Fulton Leadership Academy	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Museum School of Avondale Estates	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Locally approved	DeKalb County Public Schools	Yes
Peachtree Hope Charter	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	No approval	N/A	No
Coweta Charter Academy at Senoia	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	
Heron Bay Academy	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	No approval	N/A	No
Pataula Charter Academy	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Ivy Prep Academy-Norcross	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Locally approved	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes
Statesboro Charter Conservatory for Liberal Arts and Technology	Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Dept. of Education: state-chartered special school	State Charter Schools Commission	Yes

## Charter School Legislation & Politics in Georgia

### House Resolution 1162

One way to overcome local opposition to charters is for a state to authorize nonlocal chartering agencies such as universities, mayors, and state agencies to serve as charter authorizers (Vergari, 2002). On January 24, 2012, Georgia lawmakers filed a constitutional amendment to address the Supreme Court's decision ruling against the Georgia Charter Schools Commission. Although the measure failed the State House on the first vote, it later passed on the



second. Shortly thereafter, the State Senate passed the legislative bill; which was voted by Georgians during the November 2012 general election. The proposed amendment; House Resolution 1162 would give a state level entity the authority to authorize charter schools; without consulting the local school board in the district where the charter school is located. This political move was not well received by many, including local school boards and district superintendents. As a result of the proposed constitutional amendment, this meant that there would be increased state control over local education issues (Wohlstetter, 1994). Removing local control of education to that of the state was one of the primary arguments from opponents of House Resolution 1162. If approved, this amendment would override the local taxpayers' right to elect a school board to establish, maintain, control, and manage the schools within their districts, henceforth, allowing a state-level authorizer to make the determination to open a school, with no input from the local governing body.

Politics played a key role in the debates on the proposed constitutional amendment. Pro-charter politics plays out differently in each state. According to Kirst (2007), and as seen in Georgia, Republicans tend to support charter schools more than Democrats. The heated debate of the proposed constitutional amendment did not just include parents, educators, and community members, it also received much participation from state elected officials including Governor Nathan Deal (Republican) and State School Superintendent John Barge (Republican). Although the constitutional amendment was a bipartisan supported bill, its efforts were undoubtedly advocated by Georgia Republicans. While campaigning for office in 2010, Superintendent Barge completed a survey from the Georgia Charter Schools Association, a statewide charter advocacy group, regarding his position on charter schools. Based on his survey responses, not only did Barge show his support toward charter schools, he also voted to support having charter

applications considered by multiple authorizer types, including local school boards, the state Board of Education and the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia. As a “pro-choice” candidate for state superintendent, Barge gained statewide support. However, in the months following the passage of House Resolution 1162, the once, “pro-choice” superintendent, changed his views; against the charter school amendment. For opponents, this decision change of Superintendent Barge’s public opposition could not have come at a timelier manner. As state superintendent, not only did his views carry significant influence over educators statewide, yet it included rallied support from other elected officials, civic leaders and legislators including Rev. Joseph Lowery, and State Senator Jason Carter. His support also extended to groups including the National Parent Teacher Association, NAACP, and the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*.

On election night, November 7, 2012, approximately, 58.5% of Georgians voted in support of the charter school amendment (Deane, 2012). The outcome of House Resolution 1162 marked a very significant policy change in the state of Georgia, charter petitioners could now seek and obtain approval at both the local and state levels. Out of all the counties in Georgia, Courtland County, GA voters had the highest percentage of Georgians to support the charter school constitutional amendment, a total of 71% in favor (Deane, 2012).

### **Courtland County, GA**

#### **Loss of Accreditation**

In 2003, the Courtland County School District was first placed on accreditation probation from the Southeast Accrediting Agency (SAA) following concerns regarding misconduct by its school board. According to SAA, school board members were “fatally flawed” and did not understand their jobs and violated policies (Elgart, 2008, p. 7). According to the 2008 report

from SAA, the following were contributing concerns that led to the later revoking of the district's accreditation:

1. **Vision and Purpose.** SAA officials said "the system has failed to establish a vision for the system in collaboration with its stakeholders."
2. **Ethics.** Mandate No. 3 states the board must "enact and commit to an ethics policy that governs the actions and work of the members of the board of education and staff including appropriate steps when said policy is violated."
3. **Policy Review.** The board has to gain a clear understanding of, and commit to following, its "policy role and responsibilities," according to mandate No. 4.
4. **Forensic Audit.** SAA officials expressed concerns over the board's ability to live up to its fiscal responsibilities, and demanded a forensic audit of the school system's finances and spending habits. The controversial 2006 purchase of 155 acres of land in Rosewood<sup>9</sup>, the awarding of contracts and the board's hiring practices were cited as examples.
5. **Attendance Records.** SAA officials required the school system to perform comprehensive audits of student attendance records after board and district staff members told investigators, during interviews in January, the records may have been altered to avoid "legal actions or sanctions."
6. **Conflict Resolution and Governance Training.** SAA officials determined both the board, and the district's administration, operated in a "state of chaos," according to mandate No. 8. The accrediting agency's officials recommended the board contract external support until the school system could "demonstrate

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<sup>9</sup> Pseudonym was used in place of actual name to ensure anonymity.

sustainable organizational and governing practices that supported a healthy and effective educational system.”

Despite the formal notices and concerns from SAA, the culture of the school board did not change. In 2008, the Courtland County Public Schools district lost its accreditation. The loss of accreditation placed a significant adverse effect on students and staff members throughout Courtland County. For example, although graduating seniors did receive high school diplomas, there were initial challenges regarding eligible senior’s receipt of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship program. As a preventative measure, then Governor, Sonny Perdue signed Senate Bill 480 into law; providing that students attending eligible high schools that lose accreditation within 2 years of being accredited will be eligible to receive the HOPE Scholarship as freshmen if they meet all other HOPE eligibility criteria. For students seeking to leave the state of Georgia for college, the loss of accreditation caused students to lack the necessary requirements to be admitted into universities, colleges and trade schools. The accreditation status in Courtland County also impacted district funding and operations; this meant a loss of money for pre-kindergarten education and prevented teachers from receiving benefits if they changed school systems. Additionally, with a total of over 3,500 students leaving district schools and at an average of \$7000 per student, funding toward educational programs and district schools were hit with a heavy \$24.5M loss.

In the months following the loss of Courtland County’s accreditation, community members sought answers regarding the accountability to the district’s students. Not only did the accreditation loss place a significant hardship on the district’s schools, it also impacted the local economy; businesses began to leave in masses, and Courtland County had the highest foreclosure rates in the metropolitan Atlanta area (Wheatley, 2008). For parents seeking alternatives to the

failing Courtland County school district, and that did not have the option of moving from Courtland County and/or enrolling their children in private schools, sought public school choice options including charter schools. Unfortunately, in Courtland County, the demand for charter schools significantly exceeded its supply.

### **Resistance to Charters**

As seen in other states with charter school laws, in Georgia, it is not uncommon for a charter school application to be denied for political reasons. For example, a proposed charter school in San Diego was recommended for approval due to its strong application, and ability to launch post-authorization, however, the school did not have enough votes by the local school board to be approved (Koran, 2014). According to a regional director of the California's charter school advocacy group, he did not think the board's argument was very compelling and wondered whether it was "more of a political decision than a factual one" (Koran, 2014). In Georgia, there has also been a growing debate over the efficacy of charter schools. In 2012, there was a proposed constitutional amendment to create a new state-level entity to approve charter schools denied by their local school boards. In November of 2016, Georgia voters will also vote to determine whether chronically failing traditional public schools should be converted into charter schools, a plan under the proposed Opportunity School District. Under both legislative examples, charter school critics often question hidden agenda of lawmakers (Kirst, 2007). Charter school politics can be viewed as diverse and complex depending on state and local contexts, and contingent upon the particular types of charter schools. Kirst (2007) identifies the following seven charter school types that most influence politics at the local community and school board levels:

1. New charter start-up versus the conversion of an existing school

2. Brick and mortar school site, as opposed to a virtual-based charter school
3. Charter school dependent on school district, or charter school independent of district
4. Local educational agency, state, county, or institution of higher learning as a chartering authority
5. Union versus non union
6. Profit management company or non-profit management company
7. Themed charter schools or general education

### **Authorization History**

Courtland County Public Schools is the sixth largest school district in the metro Atlanta area and in the state of Georgia, collectively (American School & University, 2016). However, as compared with other metro Atlanta public school districts, the supply of charter schools significantly under-weighs its demand. To date, there are only three charter schools that have been authorized by the Courtland County school board, Lewis Academy for Excellence, Unidos Dual Language Charter School, and Elite Scholars Academy. The Georgia Department of Education authorized Scholars Academy as a state-chartered special school in 2008 to serve students of Courtland County. The State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia authorized Utopian Academy for the Arts as a state-commissioned charter school in 2013, with a proposed attendance zone for Courtland County students.

1. **Lewis Academy of Excellence.** Dr. Patricia Lewis, a Black, veteran educator of the Courtland County Schools System founded Lewis Academy for Excellence in 2005, the district's first charter school. Although the school performed well academically, the school was not renewed after the completion of its first charter term, due to the lack of support from the Courtland County School Board.

2. **Unidos Dual Language Charter School.** In 2006, Dr. Dell Perry Gilles, a White, bilingual and former international school teacher founded the Unidos Dual Language Charter School; the state's first two-way immersion charter school. In February, 2016, the Courtland County Board of Education voted to not renew the charter of Unidos. The school was converted from charter school status and currently operates as a traditional public school.
3. **Elite Scholars Academy.** In 2009, Dr. Graysen Walles, a Black, former school teacher of the Courtland County Public Schools founded the Elite Scholars Academy. In January, 2016, the Courtland County Board of Education voted to not renew the charter of Elite Scholars. The school was converted and currently operates as a magnet school.
4. **Scholars Academy.** Scholars Academy was approved by Georgia Department of Education in 2008. There was no information available on the school's founder. Scholars Academy was later closed by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia in 2013 for cited reasons of academic performance.
5. **Utopian Academy for the Arts.** In 2013, Artesius Miller, a Black non-traditional educator founded the Utopian Academy for the Arts. Utopian Academy was approved by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia. Utopian Academy was the first and only school approved of sixteen proposed charter schools. In 2016, Utopian Academy for the Arts was operating in its third year.

### **Chapter Summary**

The state of Georgia has experienced a whirlwind of triumphs and pitfalls within the charter school movement. Charter school expansion has slightly increased, a state-level authorizer was ruled unconstitutional, yet through the amendment of the state's constitution, another was

recreated, funding appears to struggle for equity between traditional public schools and charter schools; and new laws have been enacted; some hindering growth, yet, some that promote the advancement of charter schools.

Despite the growing number of districts with underperforming schools and their lack of alternative public school options including charter schools; the successful outcomes of some charters as compared to traditional public schools; and the recent efforts by elected officials to increase the number of charter schools, there has been a decline in the number of new charter schools approved by local school boards and state-level authorizers in the state of Georgia.

The idea for the researcher to start a charter school was the result of matching a need with a solution. Utopian Academy for the Arts was founded on the premise of serving one of the most historically underrepresented, and underserved communities in the metropolitan Atlanta area; Courtland County, GA. Beginning in 1995 to prepare for the 1996 Olympic Games, the City of Atlanta began the process of demolishing housing authority apartments throughout the city. Over a ten year period, this continued and majority of those families were relocated into Courtland County, GA (Harlan, 2015). In 2008, an educational crisis occurred; the Courtland County School District lost its accreditation. The accreditation loss and the removal of the board members generated anger and concern about the fate of the 52,000 students in the largely Black district's 59 schools (Brown, 2008). As a result of accreditation lost, there was a significant mass exodus of students from district schools (Brown, 2008). In 2010, C-TRAN, the county's proprietary public transportation system dissolved (Hall, 2010). During this time, MARTA, the local transportation provider that services metro Atlanta counties, also discontinued services to/from Courtland County.



Recognizing the need for education reform and increased charter school offerings in Courtland County, the researcher developed a group of individuals to assist with the development of Utopian Academy for the Arts. Initially, Utopian Academy was founded on the premise to service the educational needs for Courtland County's most at-risk population, African American and Latino teenage males<sup>10</sup>. However, with changes in federal education laws including Title IX, the researcher revised Utopian's enrollment plan to include female students. The rationale for the enrollment plan of Utopian Academy for the Arts is four-fold and is supported by research. The goal of the researcher is to restore faith back in the public education system for residents of Courtland County, GA. The researcher seeks to provide a significant educational benefit of providing the county's only charter middle school and the only public school in Courtland County that uses a single-gender instructional approach. Lastly, the researcher sought to develop a public school in Courtland County to offer a comprehensive educational program in the dramatic, media, and culinary arts.

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<sup>10</sup> Source: Clayton County Government, Juvenile Court Administration, 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.Claytoncountyga.gov/courts/juvenile-court/organization.aspx#administration>

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Access to high quality educational resources and opportunities has been a historical struggle for Black students for generations. As a means of providing parents a choice of selecting an educational program to fit the needs of their children, the notion of implementing a school type that is unique in thematic structure, and as a means of restoring faith and hope in public school systems across the country, charter schools have been introduced nationally as a potential antidote for solving academic achievement gaps between White and Black students.

The research design and methodology outlined in this chapter provides a detailed description of the research process that was used for this study. This chapter is divided into nine main sections: 1) purpose of study and research questions, 2) theoretical framework, 3) design of study, 4) data collection, 5) data analysis, 6) representation of data, 7) subjectivity statement and 8) chapter summary.

#### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to identify the contributing factors that led to starting Utopian Academy for the Arts, a state-approved charter school located in Courtland County, GA, and the chronicled lived experiences of a charter school founder and leader in the charter school authorization and start-up process. The purpose of this study was also to explore what happens when a Black leader established a charter school in a predominantly Black community. The principal research questions for this study were: What are the lived experiences of a charter school founder and leader in a socio-political community and state? How does the leader

navigate through policy, politics, and legislation? Through the context of an autoethnography, combined with the use of arts-based inquiry and the critical spirituality framework, the aforementioned research questions were answered by the researcher.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The journey to charter school authorization is no easy task. While some charter school founders receive approval instantly after applying for the first time, as in the case of the researcher's charter school, Utopian Academy for the Arts, it sometimes take three years and five denials before receiving approval<sup>11</sup>. With challenges in navigating the changing policies affecting charter schools, along with associated challenges of access to equitable resources in Georgia, the researcher experienced a socio-political process in the founding of his charter school. The researcher also gave credit to the role of spirituality in maintaining sanity and truthfulness to his work as a charter school founder and leader. In this study, the researcher used a critical spirituality theory lens, as he examined the lived experiences as a Black educational entrepreneur and the impact politics, policies, and changes in legislation played in the charter authorization of Utopian Academy for the Arts.

The implementation of a critical spirituality theoretical framework provided the research a unique perspective and approach on the lived experiences as a Black educational entrepreneur that chose to start a charter school. Critical spirituality is a combination of African American spirituality and critical theory (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012). Charter schools are often created by various founder types including individuals, parents, local community groups, and private organizations.

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<sup>11</sup> Three denials by the Courtland County School Board, and two withdrawals to become a state-chartered special school, after a recommendation for denial was made in the petitioning process.

The researcher used the four tenets of critical spirituality theory to theorize the lived experiences of starting a charter school.

- 1. Critical Self-Reflection.** Described as “the process by which prospective and practicing leaders come to an understanding of themselves (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012); critical self-reflection involves educational leaders coming to grips with their sacred, genuine or unvarnished self” (Dantley, 2010, p. 216). When educational leaders engage in such self-interrogation, they are guided down a road of liberation for the self and then for others (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012). “Completeness for the oppressed begins with liberation. Until that is achieved, individuals are fragmented in search of clarity, understanding, and emancipation. This liberation is not outside of us, or created or accomplished through some external force. Rather, it begins with a change of thinking” (Milner, 2006, p. 85). When leaders can reflect deeply on their own beliefs, assumptions, biases, stereotypes, and feelings, then we can begin to understand ourselves and others with greater clarity. In the journeys of petitioning to the Courtland County School Board, the Georgia Department of Education, and the State Charter Schools Commission, this tenet was paralleled by the researcher’s story. When a leader has become self-liberated and understands and appreciates their purpose for their work as a visionary, he/she becomes more in tune with systemic challenges of inequalities and politics. Such experiences are later discussed.
- 2. Deconstructive Interpretation.** Deconstructive interpretation is defined as the way “leaders apply a critical theoretical perspective to the ways in which they have been socialized as well as to the ways socialization process operates through major institutions of the American society” (Dantley, 2009, p.51). This includes deconstructing attitudes,

values, and actions that foster inequity. When a leader breaks down processes, ideals, concepts, and values (Beachum et al., 2007, p.271), they are made aware of their positioning of certain terms and ideals.

- 3. Performative Creativity.** Performative Creativity emphasizes the “development of pedagogical and leadership practices that move the school and the learning community from maintaining the status quo to envisioning a more democratic culture and a space where the legitimization of voices of difference can take place” (Dantley, 2010, p.217). Performative creativity allows educational leaders the opportunity to shape and promote curricula choices and innovations to cater to the social needs of their student populations.
- 4. Transformative Action.** As the final tent of critical spirituality, transformative action refers to how leaders put forth action for social change in their schools and communities (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012). This process includes dialogue, modeling, and community engagement. Open dialogue between students and school leaders enables leaders to understand the concerns of their students, which is important as school leaders must learn to value the voices from members of their organizations (Dantley, 2010, p.217). Secondly, modeling plays a significant role within transformative action. As leaders, people not only look to what leaders say, yet, they also look to see what they do (Fullan, 2004). When positive leadership is displayed, students, parents and staff members alike are influenced to imitate. Lastly, as role models within their respective schools, community engagement suggests that the leader also establish relationships with his/her respective community. “Critically spiritual leaders gather parents, other teachers, members of the community to discuss how the school can be an active partner with others

in the community to see equity and fairness shaping the lives of those inside and outside of the school” (Dantley, 2010, pp. 217-218.)

### **Design of Study**

Qualitative research is a methodological approach used to study complex phenomena by collecting and analyzing non-numerical data. Specifically, qualitative research involves the study of social phenomena that promotes the understanding of human interaction (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Qualitative research can also be used to gain new perspectives on things about which much is already known, or to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This research approach relies heavily on descriptive data collections methods, participant observation, and journaling.

There are various genres of qualitative research, yet, because the genres have expanded significantly over the years, qualitative methodologists have organized each type into categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Common among methodologists such as Patton (2002), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), include ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. Furthermore, Patton (2002) recognizes autoethnography and narrative inquiry as key approaches to qualitative studies. Ellis (2004) adds: life histories and focus groups to the list, along with the following techniques: performative, visual, and feminist methods, particular forms of documentary, content, discourse, and conversational analysis; and some critical, cultural studies, and social action research.

Qualitative research is frequently conducted by insiders in educational settings to improve their own practice (Zeni, 2011), while qualitative inquiry audiences include other researchers, scholars, policy-makers, and others interested in understanding some problem or phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The use of qualitative data is beneficial, to describe a phenomenon

is not just an important consideration only from the researcher's perspective, but also from the reader's perspective as well (Hoepfl, 1997). "If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 120).

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a research, reporting, and form of autobiographical self-reflection method that utilizes a writer's personal experiences and history to help analyze, describe, or report on cultural, social, or political phenomena. Derived from ethnography; a descriptive account of a community of culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), autoethnographies are written subjectively and autobiographically, so that the reader is drawn in emotionally, morally, and intellectually. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to write an autoethnography. Consequently, as a method, autoethnography is both a process and a product. (Ellis et al, 2011). Autoethnography differs from autobiography in that it combines the techniques of research and reporting with relevant personal experience and beliefs in order to make a cultural phenomenon understandable and relatable for the audience (Hogan, 2013).

Similar to writing an autobiography, ethnographies are interpretive. Grounded in theory and rigorous analysis, Denzin (2013) points up the inherent weaknesses in traditional biographical forms and outlines a new way in which biographies should be conceptualized and shaped. Autoethnographers "ask their readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.745.). By understanding the context for which autoethnographies are written, the researcher addressed its significance as a qualitative method for understanding the experiences of starting a charter school.

## **Writing as Therapeutic**

Writing personal stories can be therapeutic for participants and readers (Richardson, 2000). Consequently, writing personal stories can be therapeutic for authors as we write to make sense of ourselves and our experiences (Kiesinger, 2002; Poulos, 2008), and purge our burdens (Atkinson, 2007). By documenting the lived experiences of starting a charter school, readers will learn of the authors perceptions of both the internal and extrinsic factors that impacted the process. Similarly, through a reflective process, the researcher as a practitioner and writer, depicted and drew upon the lived experiences, emotions, and personal growth during the years of seeking charter authorization and ultimately the launch of his first charter school. The researcher also examined the roles of family, faith, and religion. By writing therapeutically, the researcher sought to improve and better understand relationships (Adams, 2006; Wyatt, 2008), encourage personal responsibility and agency (Pelias, 2000, 2007), raise consciousness and promote cultural change (Ellis, 2002; Goodall, 2006), and give people a voice that, before writing, may not have felt they had (Boylorn, 2006; Jago, 2002).

## **Practitioner Research**

The premise of this research was rooted in a combination of scholarly interests combined with professional practice. The development of Utopian Academy for the Arts began while the researcher was enrolled as a graduate student at Columbia University. During this time period, the researcher utilized New York City as an incubator for research and best practices. Given his interests of starting and leading a charter school, the goal of the researcher was to adopt best educational practices that, if proved to have successful outcomes, and with student demographics aligned to that of Courtland County, GA, would later be incorporated into the charter petition application, and implemented once the school began operation.



This notion of applying research to professional practice is aligned with the work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle. In their book, *Inquiry as Stance*, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) provide readers a framework that identifies practitioner research as an effective way to take on issues of equity that shapes educational policy and reform. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, p. 7) cite that best practices have “the capacity to overcome the impact of factors and forces outside of school, including failed social policies, poverty, and racism.” The authors also promote using this method as a means of revealing both the accomplishments and problems faced by educators as they conduct their day-to-day work.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle identify five major themes in practitioner research (p. 7):

1. Taking on Issues of Equity, Engagement, and Agency
2. Developing Conceptual Framework
3. Inventing and Reinventing Communities of Inquiry
4. Shaping School Reform and Educational Policy
5. Re-Forming Research and Practice in Universities

## **Strengths & Critiques**

All research types contain certain strengths and limitations. Despite the claims that autoethnographies are insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic (Ellis, 2009; hooks, 1994; Keller, 1995), when researchers write autoethnographies, they produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience (Ellis et al., 2011). Critics want to hold autoethnography accountable to criteria normally applied to traditional ethnographies or to autobiographical standards of writing. Consequently, autoethnographies are often criticized for either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful. When compared to other methodological approaches

to research, autoethnographers find it futile to debate whether autoethnography is a valid research process or product (Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2009). Autoethnographers view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy. Overall, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better (Holman Jones, 2005, p.764).

### **Data Collection**

An autoethnographer may use a combination of concurrent self-observation and recording (e.g., diary, audio-visual), archival data (e.g., memoirs, photographs), and triangulation through other sources of data (e.g., interviews with individuals who could corroborate data or conclusions) as a means of explicitly linking concepts from the literature to narrate their personal experience (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996). Chang (2008) suggests that there are various techniques of data collection autoethnographers may use to help facilitate their recalling, organize memories, and compose accounts of lived experiences. These techniques include but are not limited to: using visual tools such as free drawings of significant places; inventorying people, artifacts, familial and societal values and proverbs; chronicling the autoethnographer's educational history, typical day and week, and annual life cycle; reading and responding to other autoethnographies and self-narratives; and collecting other forms of data from others including, personal journals, field notes, letters, conversation, interviews with significant others, family stories, documents, photographs, and memory boxes.

Data for this autoethnographic study were collected over an eight year period, from July 2008 to July 2016. During this time frame, data were collected from a variety of sources including personal memory, electronic journal entries, media excerpts, archived documents, and

charter-related documents. Each of the aforementioned data sources guided the reflective process in the development of an ethnodrama:

1. **Personal recollections.** The researcher used personal memory as a data source to reflect upon and highlight his lived experiences of starting and leading Utopian Academy for the Arts. Unlike any other form of data, personal memory allows researchers to tap into the wealth of data to which no one else has access. Whereas qualitative/ethnographic fieldwork is likely to take place in an environment where the researcher comes in direct contact with others, autoethnographic fieldwork often involves others in the researchers' recollection and reflection (Chang, 2008). Despite the ability to record mental and emotional processes of starting a charter school, the researcher recognizes that multiple sources of data can provide bases for triangulation that helped enhance content accuracy and validity of the autoethnographic writing (Chang, 2008). Throughout the experience of starting Utopian Academy for the Arts, the researcher recorded thoughts, prepared for meetings and presentations, and stayed organized by utilizing electronic journal entries. Specifically, the researcher used "Notes", an iOS software installed on both the Apple iPhone and iPad for all electronic journal entries. All journal entries were text-based, non-audio entries. Examples of journal entries includes notes gathered from meetings with Georgia Department of Education officials regarding pre-operational responsibilities including facility procurement and personnel recruitment; meetings with local business leaders and elementary school principals to support marketing and enrollment efforts; minutes from meetings with various realtors regarding potential facilities; notes from meetings held with local private foundations in efforts to raise funds on behalf of Utopian Academy; and recorded thoughts of financial grief and stability when Utopian Academy

experienced an unexpected shortfall of revenues from the state. When copied into a word document, this totals 3 pages.

2. **Public representation of the history of Utopian Academy for the Arts.** The researcher included a 12 minute YouTube video, in which the researcher narrates the journey to authorization and experiences of starting Utopian Academy for the Arts. The video features clips from 2011 and 2012 Courtland County school board meetings, when the Courtland County school board voted to deny the charter of Utopian Academy for the Arts. Since its original date of upload to YouTube, the video had received over 1400 views and had received 3 comments by public viewers, all of which support the claim for charter schools in Georgia, and the need for Utopian Academy for the Arts in the Courtland County community, as denoted by a Utopian parent and other national viewers. The video was produced in 2014 initially to be seen by participants attending a fundraiser to support the philanthropic efforts of the Utopian, in addition to allowing parents attending the school's first open house an opportunity to understand the school's history. The video can be viewed via the following url:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szewVzjaH0M>. The researcher also included a 5 minute YouTube video, in which students from Utopian Academy showcase the need for support against the Courtland County School Board's decision to evict Utopian students from its school building. The tax payer-owned property leased by the Courtland County Board of Education in July of 2016, asked Utopian officials to purchase the building for 1.5 million dollars (an amount far above true market value) or they would demolish it. Since its upload date to YouTube in February of 2016, the video had received over 450

views. The video can be viewed via the following url:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dZ5JtLAqok>.

3. **Media reports:** The researcher collected in excess of 50 articles published by local newspapers, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* and the *Courtland News Daily*, including both hard copies and online editions. Articles published by the local organs extend from 2012 to 2016 and includes journalists' accounts of the thrice charter denial by the Courtland County school board, approval by the State Charter Schools Commission, operational delays in starting first school year, visits by the governor of Georgia, the immortalization of a state law bearing the Utopian's name, and challenges with Rosewood and Courtland County officials. The researcher also included as a data source, a 13 page magazine article published by the *Atlanta Magazine* which covers Utopian's founding history; mission, vision, and educational program; and statistical snapshot of the charter school movement in Georgia.
4. **Video recordings of meetings.** Through a formal Open Records Request, submitted by email to the Courtland County Board of Education, the researcher requested copies of the June 6, 2011; June 4, 2012; and June 3, 2013 school board meetings. Each video includes the duration of the entire school board meetings, ranging from 120 to 230 minutes each. Additionally, each video includes the Courtland County school board's decision to deny the charter for Utopian Academy for the Arts. Each of three school board meetings from 2011, 2012, and 2013 were been transcribed by the researcher.
5. **Archived documents.** The following archived documents were collected: emails, agendas from local school board and state-commission board meetings, press releases, violation notices, and copies of state legislation and laws that provided contextual

information concerning the founding of the charter school. Apart from in-person discussions and meetings, the use of email was a primary mode of communication for the researcher with others. The researcher included email communication to/from Rosewood city officials, Courtland County Public Schools district officials, and state officials regarding the improper and unfavorable treatment of Utopian Academy for the Arts as a public school in Georgia. The email distribution of press releases by the researcher to stakeholders of the Utopian Academy school community also chronicled the experiences and challenges the researcher encountered in the initial years of Utopian's operations. Meeting agendas and corresponding meeting minutes were also collected from Courtland County school board and State Charter Schools Commission meetings, of which topics included the vote of Utopian Academy to become a charter school. Throughout the data collection period, the researcher also maintained copies of charter-related documents including the charter petition and budget for Utopian Academy, open records requests, charter contract with State Charter Schools Commission, Utopian governance board meeting agendas and minutes, enrollment flyers, lease agreements, court documents, citations and fines from city of Rosewood, invoices for legal services rendered as a result of unforeseen circumstances established by Rosewood and Courtland County officials, and academic performance data from the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Documents including the charter petition and budget, and enrollment flyers were developed by the researcher. Additional documents including lease agreements, court documents, citations, fines, legal invoices were provided to the researcher upon request. The researcher also included the signed charter contract between Utopian Academy for the Arts and the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, along with a memo written by State Charter

Schools Commission staff regarding the definition of Utopian as a public school, which was used to support Utopian’s legal claim in a court lawsuit filed against the city of Rosewood.

**Table 2:** Overview of Documents

<b>Document</b>	<b>Total Number</b>	<b>Description</b>
Charter petition applications	5	Electronic copies of charter petitions submitted to the Courtland County Board of Education (years of submission: 2011, 2012, 2013), Georgia Department of Education (year of submission: 2011), and State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia (year of submission: 2013).
Annual operating budget	2	Copy of board approved budget for the 2014-15 school year along with a copy of the amended budget, given the shortfall of 80 students from the school’s initial opening.
Signed charter contract	1	Charter contract agreement between Utopian Academy for the Arts and the State Charter Schools Commission signed by the researcher as chairman of the Utopian Academy governing board and Charles Knapp, chairman of the State Charter Schools Commission.
Meeting agendas and minutes	20	Meeting agendas and corresponding minutes from the Courtland County school board meetings and Utopian Academy for the Arts governance board meetings. Dates of coverage (June 2011-July 2015)
Lease agreements	3	Copies of lease agreements between Utopian Academy for the Arts and the Southern Crescent Center for Innovation (lease period: July 2014-September 2014), Utopian Academy for the Arts and the Courtland County Board of Education (October 2014-June 2016)
Invoices	10	Invoices for related services in response to mandates by the City of Rosewood and the Courtland County Board of Education regarding the building occupancy of Utopian Academy for the Arts, including maintenance costs, legal services.
Fine and court documents	3	Violation notices from city of Rosewood and copies of court documents filed against city of Rosewood by the researcher’s legal counsel.

Emails	200+	Email communication between the researcher and legal counsel; Rosewood city officials; representatives of the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia; Utopian governance board, staff, and stakeholders on various topics including enrollment, operations, and finance. Email correspondences range from June 2013-July 2016.
Press releases	3	Copies of press releases sent to Utopian stakeholders covering various topics including a “cease and desist” filed against the City of Rosewood for interference with Utopian’s meal service program (date: September 23, 2015), the removal of Utopian’s school sign by Rosewood city officials (date: August 19, 2015), extension of lease agreement with the Courtland County school board (March 8, 2016).
State legislation	3	House Resolution 1162: state constitutional amendment House Resolution 797: supplemental funding for state-approved charter schools House Bill 372: Utopian Academy for the Arts Act
State assessment report	3	Dashboard performance of state charter school performance by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, data from the Georgia Department of Education.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Ethnodrama**

One of the most unique elements of autoethnography as a methodology includes the ability, as a writer, to tell your story in a way that fits best. Because the researcher’s goal was to not only contribute to the limited body of literature available on the lived experiences of charter school founders who lead their organizations, the researcher also employed the use of an arts-based inquiry for the storytelling. Specifically, the researcher extracted data to support the development of an ethnodrama which chronologically highlighted the researcher’s decision to enter the professional field of education and the vision to start a charter school; the countless



challenges experienced in the charter school authorization process, along with the challenges experienced in the early stages of the charter school's operation; and how as a school leader, the researcher navigated through numerous roadblocks, and barriers established by local and county officials.

An ethnodrama is a written play script consisting of dramatized, significant selections of narratives collected from interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, blogs, email correspondence, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, court proceedings, and historic documents (Saldaña, 2011). An ethnodramatic play script was deliberately chosen as the representational method of the autoethnographic reflection for this study, because it was determined that this art form was the most appropriate and effective modality for communicating observations of the cultural, social, emotional, and personal life experiences of founding and leading a charter school in the Courtland County community of Georgia (Saldaña, 2011, p. 15). Playwriting as a form of qualitative research, as noted by Saldaña (2003) is an ethnodramatic research representation that allows writers to tell their story credibly, vividly, and persuasively.

Within the context of ethnodramas, the analysis and dramatization of significant selections from interview transcripts, field notes, journal entries, or other written artifacts are composed into actual scripts (Saldaña, 2003, p. 218). Saldaña adds, "both the researcher and the audience gain understandings not possible through conventional qualitative data analysis, writing, and presentation from ethnotheatre's artistic rigor and representational power" (2003, p.230). Because there is a need for more good scripts in both theatre and in qualitative inquiry (Saldaña, 2003, p. 231), the researcher sought to employ his professional background in theatre and education to enhance and contribute a unique perspective of the genre and literature.

According to Saldaña (2011), there are four main approaches to ethnodramatic playwriting. Of the four approaches, the researcher employed two for the development of the ethnodrama used in this study:

- 1. Ethnodramatic Adaptations of Documents and Published Accounts.** Involves use of autobiographical, biographical, official, and historical textual materials, that are adapted by the playwright. Although the actual words may not be documented, related letters and other handwritten documents can be adapted to provide an authentic insight into the historic person's ways of thinking (p.20). A common example of this approach is the phrase that prefaces a number of films and television specials: "based on a true story" (p.20). Through journalist's accounts of the antagonistic efforts by local city and school board officials toward the researcher and Utopian Academy for the Arts as a whole, the researcher adapted published material from media reports faithfully and through artistic interpretation (p.20). Through use of this approach, the researcher developed scenes to highlight the experiences when Utopian Academy was approved by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, Utopian students were denied access to enter the school building on its first day of school, the researcher's legal counsel filed court ordered judgements against local city officials, Utopian students were evacuated by the local fire department, the governor of Georgia visited Utopian Academy, a state law named after Utopian Academy was enacted, building signage for the school was removed by city officials, and local school board officials threatened to evict Utopian Academy from its school building. In addition to the ethnodramatic adaptations of published newspaper and magazine articles, the researcher also used documents (emails with graduate school

faculty that suggested the researcher start a charter school and end of summer reviews) to compose short scenes. Additionally, although the researcher's study did not include Saldaña's approach of dramatizing interview transcripts, the researcher utilized the verbatim approach, which, as referenced by Saldaña, includes preserving the precise language from recordings or written transcripts. Using a verbatim approach, the researcher took original video footage of school board meetings when the charter for Utopian Academy for the Arts was discussed and denied, and converted the audio transcriptions into short scenes. The researcher also, in-part, used the verbatim approach with email communication as a data source, in the development of scenes featuring challenges with local school district and city officials. This included the unannounced and harassing visits to Utopian by local school district officials, unwillingness by local school district officials to allow the researcher access to the building's HVAC's system during winter months, and the unauthorized release of the school's fire alarm system by local school district officials. Ethnodramatists including Paul Brown (2001) attest that verbatim adaptation is not only more authentic, it also creates a sense of character.

2. **Original Autoethnodramatic Work.** This variant of ethnodramatic writing is the "playwright's personal memories, experiences, and perceptions as sources for the dramatic text" (p.24). For the scenes developed, in which the researcher did not employ the ethnodramatic adaptations of documents and published accounts approach, the researcher relied heavily on personal memory. Although prior to and throughout the early composition of this study, the researcher was a full-time practitioner seeking to start a charter school, the researcher easily recalled significant

moments in the years of petitioning for a charter, and the challenges he overcame to open and lead his charter school. Because readers are completely reliant on the playwright's storytelling as the direct and only source, the writer had an ethical responsibility to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, unlike fictional theatre, readers are "assuming belief" (p.24).

The researcher developed an ethnodrama about establishing a charter school in unwanted chartered territory, utilizing the approaches of ethnodramatic dramatization and original autoethnodramatic work. The researcher used data sources including personal recollections, public representation of the history of Utopian Academy for the Arts, media reports, video recordings of meetings, and archived documents to design an ethnodrama of which the findings were composed into four acts, aligned with the four tenets of critical spirituality.

In ethnodramas, the cast of characters are developed based upon the minimum number of participants necessary to share the story line's progression, and whose stories are potentially engaging for an audience (Saldaña, 2003, p.221). For this study, key characters included the researcher as the charter school founder, relatives of the researcher, local school board and city officials, the governor of Georgia, Utopian governance board members, and Utopian staff and students. Once characters have been developed, researchers may compose monologue or dialogues as the next step. Monologues are extended passages of text spoken by one character. As suggested by Saldaña, monologues aren't developed from what participants say in interviews, per se, they are creative and strategic edits from transcripts and other data sources, to "restory" their narratives (2003, p.223). Dialogue occurs when two or more characters exchange thoughts. Similarly, dialogue in the data can be derived from transcripts between the researcher and participant, or participant field notes. In dialogues, artistry happens when conversations are

artificially constructed from several data sources, from different participants, and across different time periods (S. Finley & Finley, 1999). For this study, the researcher employed use of several data sources to offer triangulation and to exhibit collective story creation through multiple perspectives (Saldaña, 2003, p.225).

## **Representation of Data**

### **Arts-Based Inquiry**

As an educational practitioner, researcher, and professional artist, the design elements employed in arts-based educational research, were both unique and appropriate for this study. Within recent decades, there have been increases in the number of educational scholars and researchers whom have explored the possibilities of inquiry approaches, that are varying degrees and ways and artistic in character (Barone & Eisner, 1997). For educational research to be considered arts-based, two criteria must apply. First, arts-based research is engaged for a purpose often associated with artistic activity: the research is intended to enhance perspectives pertaining to certain human activities. Secondly, arts based-research is defined by the presence of certain aesthetic qualities that infuse the inquiry process and the research text; the more pronounced they are, the more the research is characterized as arts-based (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 95).

Although arts-based educational research has been questioned by those who have misunderstood this unique approach to educational inquiry, the ultimate goal for performing the research was for the betterment of educational policy and practice. The researcher sought to contribute both to educational policy and practice by highlighting the impact evolving changes in state and local policies, legislation, and politics have impacted in the experiences of starting a charter school in Georgia.

## **Ethnotheatre**

Upon completion of the dissertation, the researcher sought to develop the ethnodrama into a formal production, also known as ethnotheatre. Ethnotheatre refers to the combination of traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated performance of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretation of data (Saldaña, 2011). This study involved the documented lived experiences of the charter school founder and leader of Utopian Academy for the Arts. Given Utopian's unique thematic structure of the arts, with a specific emphasis on the dramatic and media arts including theatre, music, broadcast and video production, visual art, and dance, the researcher sought to have students from the charter school perform the ethnodrama. With a variety of ways to disseminate research, choosing an ethnodrama and its performance rather than a series monograph, book chapter, academic journal article, poem, or visual art rendering, the researcher had the ability to choose the best way to communicate with others what he observed and learned about the human condition (Saldaña, 2011). Many audience members who attend an effective theatre production, even if the play is fictional work, testify afterward that the live performance made things seem more real (Saldaña, 2011, p. 15). By allowing students of Utopian Academy for the Arts the opportunity to act out key players that were involved in the founding of the school, along with other significant individuals throughout the first two years of their school's operation, the researcher hoped that the student actors, along with the audience members would develop a greater understanding and appreciation for the school's history and existence.

## **Quality**

For this study, ethnodramatic representation was chosen not for its novelty, but for its appropriateness as a medium for telling the researcher's story credibly, vividly, and persuasively

(Saldaña, 2003, p. 218). With professional backgrounds as both a theatre artist and educational practitioner, as recommended by Saldaña (2003), the researcher heightened the artistic quality of ethnotheatrical representation, by collaborating ventures of ethnography and theatre practice (p. 218). A quality ethnodrama includes the use of a plot as the overall structure of the play, and should include a beginning, middle, and end. Although, not needed in that exact order, the researcher sought to develop an ethnodrama on the lived experiences of founding and leading a charter school in chronological order of significant events that took place. Because an ethnodrama is considered to be a “data corpus”, with all boring parts taken out, the researcher intended to only highlight the most significant moments that took place in the founding and initial phases of leading his charter school, for “dramatic impact” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 221). Additionally, to further enhance the quality of the ethnodrama, the researcher involved peers from the university to review and provide feedback.

### **Ethics of Representation and Presentation**

One of the most contested tensions of composing ethnodramas is the ethics of representation and presentation, the moral and authentic use of participant materials (Saldaña, 2011, p. 39). Saldaña suggests that good ethnodramatic scholarship and artistry involves rigorous research on the subject matter, and the process of research adapted and scripted by a sensitive and seasoned theatre artist (2011, p.38). For this study, the researcher collected several categories of data over an extensive period, and the researcher is also a theatre artist. For researchers that develop an ethnodrama to tell their own story publicly, Saldaña (2011) suggests that, if making references to other living people or actual settings in their story, the researcher should replace the names with pseudonyms to protect their identity and to keep the researcher, as a playwright, from encountering any problematic legal issues (p.39). The researcher used

pseudonyms throughout the dissertation and ethnodrama. By employing composite characters and redacting the original names of individuals, cities, and municipalities, the researcher sought to protect the names of those involved, by preserving their confidentiality.

For researchers that intend to represent their studies through the production of ethnotheatre, Saldaña, recommends that researchers provide copies of all play scripts to their participants and invite participants to production rehearsals, and when possible, ethnodramatists should also send video recordings of rehearsals to key participants, if they are unable to attend them live (2011, p.40). Additionally, Saldaña suggests that if researchers know during fieldwork that they intend to represent their study as a theatrical production, some interview time should be devoted to participants of that portion of the project to inform them of intended performance goals (2011, p. 40). As a playwright, the researcher also had the ethical responsibility for cautioning audiences through advertising, promotion, news releases, and program notes, what the play is about. For the representations of ethnotheatre, it is also ethically important for researchers, as playwrights to caution audience members if the performance includes profanity, violence, or special effects that might trigger adverse physical reactions (Saldaña, 2011, p.43).

### **Subjectivity Statement**

I considered it an epiphany. I can recall, it was just like yesterday. It was July, 2008 when I stood on the balcony of my rented condo in Chicago and I prayed. My work as a charter school founder and leader began in 2008 with a conversation I had with God. In fact, my work as a charter school founder and leader was a calling from God. As an undergraduate student at a historically Black college, I flirted with careers in investment banking and finance. I had the opportunity to intern with Goldman Sachs & Co. as a sophomore in New York City, followed by an internship with JPMorgan Chase & Co. in Chicago. While both experiences were rewarding,



having to work seven days a week on a combined average of ninety-five hours, things began to take its toll. While I applaud myself for securing the internship opportunities and their eventual successful experiences, I knew that working as an investment banker was not aligned with my long-term “calling” in life. These events proved to be the catalyst for my decision to transition into working within the family business of education. I prayed, and God quickly answered.

With a majority of my relatives working as professionals in the field of education, I knew that it would only be a matter of time before my entrance into this “spiritual” work would take place. It’s generational and genetic. My great-grandmother founded a schoolhouse for her children and other Black families in rural Mississippi in the early 1900’s. Of her twelve children, six became educators, including my grandmother. Of my grandmother’s four children, her only son and his wife are both educators.

A family tradition in producing educators, combined with religious values and practices from the Christianity religion; professional experiences in financial services, education management organizations, and non-profits; practical experiences with local urban schools; combined with an Ivy League master’s program, impacted my decision to start a charter school. As a product of the urban, local public school system in Atlanta, GA, I have seen hands-on the academic disparities and challenges that affect our youth. As a researcher and school founder, it was my desire to highlight the experiences as a Black man in the charter school authorization and start up processes. Although the study might be limited by the fact that as a researcher, I am also the primary participant, and might be considered to have biases, given the story is only told from one side, it is my hope that its significance will impact future studies and practitioners alike. Will my study increase the level of support to future minority charter school founders? Will my experiences lead to more authorizations of charter schools founded by minority leaders? These

are just a few questions I hope to add value to this much needed area of research and practice in the state of Georgia national communities alike .

### **Chapter Summary**

As a Black educational leader and charter school founder, spirituality played a significant role in my professional work. Specifically, a family tradition of producing educators, combined with religious values and practices, spirituality lives within me. Spirituality gives Blacks the inner strength to critically reflect upon the rituals and forms of life that are often grounded in racism, sexism, and classism (Dantley, 2005). Given the lived experiences of starting a charter school, using a spirituality theoretical lens for my study, I examined its role and impact in the founding of Utopian Academy for the Arts.

As witnesses, autoethnographers not only work with others to validate the meaning of their pain, but also allow participants and readers to feel validated and/or better able to cope with or want to change their circumstances (Ellis et al., 2011). When researchers write autoethnographies, they make personal experiences meaningful and cultural experiences engaging, yet also, by producing accessible texts, they may be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards, a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994).

Given the limited body of literature and research on the stories of charter school start-ups and the lived experiences of those that have founded charter schools, I sought to provide a clear understanding to novice researchers and future scholars on the subject, based upon my experiences. Because there was much to be told about the hardships, barriers, and politics of education, that make educating the minds of young Black children a historical struggle, I

believed that through the development of an ethnodrama, a unique method would also contribute to greater research. As a study that examined the influences leading to the authorization and operational launch of my first charter school, I highlighted traditions, norms, and professional backgrounds that contributed to my work as a charter school founder and leader.

## CHAPTER 5

### AN ETHNODRAMA

#### “Breaking the Chains and Beating the Odds”

#### Cast of Characters

##### **THE FOUNDER AND HIS TEAM**

ARTESIUS: Black male, school founder and leader

KIM: Black female, employee of Columbia University

HOLLY: Black female, mother of Artesius

MRS. FIELDS/JACKIE: Black female, retired educator, founding board member

MRS. STEVENSON/LINDA: Black female, former high school drama teacher of Artesius

TONY: Black male, accountant, founding board member

##### **THE SCHOOL BOARD AND DISTRICT STAFF**

BOARD MEMBER 1/DR. ARQUETTE: Black female, school board member

BOARD MEMBER 2/MRS. BLAKE: White female, school board member

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND/MS. GRAND: Black female, school board member

BOARD MEMBER 4/MR. ROYAL: Black male school board member

BOARD MEMBER 5/MR. BROWN: Black male, school board member

BOARD MEMBER 6/MR. EASTER: Black male, school board member

BOARD ATTORNEY/MR. CAMPBELL: White male, lawyer

TOM WELLS: White male, school district employee

STEVE COX: Black male, school district maintenance department manager

ROB PETERS: Black male, school district employee

JIM HEMMINGWAY: Black male, school district employee

SUPERINTENDENT/MRS.VANDYKE: Black female, school district superintendent

##### **THE SUPPORTERS**

RON: Black male, videographer

BRANDI STEDMAN: Black female, executive director of local family foundation

NICOLE BURNS: Black female, founder of Girls Prep charter school, mentor of Artesius

VERONICA SAMUELS: Black female, state representative

SANDRA DELANCY: Black female, parent, governing board chair of Utopian Academy

RAY: White male, legal counsel for Utopian Academy

JUDGE SIMON/HONORABLE MARK SIMON: White male, superior court judge

LYNN BROWN: Black female, area consultant, nutrition division of Georgia Department of Education

GOVERNOR NICK DENVER: White male, Governor of Georgia

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: White male, chairman of State Charter Schools Commission  
DIRECTOR HENDRIX: White female, executive director of State Charter Schools Commission

**THE CITY MAYOR AND STAFF**

MAYOR DEVILLE: Black female, local city mayor  
CASSANDRA MILTON: Black female, assistant city manager

**UTOPIAN STAFF AND STUDENTS**

MRS. THOMAS: Black female, school front office manager  
MR. BENJAMIN/FRANK: Black male, school principal, year 1  
MRS. BELL: Black female, school registrar  
MS. HILL: Black female, school nutrition manager  
MS. PINNINGTON: Black female, school principal, year 2  
CISELY: Black female, seventh grade student  
GEOFFREY: Black male, sixth grade student

\*Pseudonyms were used in place of actual names to ensure anonymity.

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**Abstract:** June, 2012. After being denied by the Courtland County Board of Education, Artesius petitions a second time for a charter. During this board meeting, Artesius speaks on behalf of Utopian Academy to Courtland school board members, along with Brandi Stedman (Steve & Marjorie Stedman Foundation) and Sandra Delancy (future Governance Board Chair of Utopian).

**Scene 3. “HR 1162 Passes-There is Indeed Hope for Georgia Charters”** Page 109

**Abstract:** November, 2012. It’s election night, November 7, 2012 and there is a watch party taking place at Girls Preparatory Academy. On this evening, President Barack Obama is reelected for a second term as the President of the United States and in Georgia, the ballot item for House Resolution 1162 (HR 1162), also known as the “Charter School Constitutional Amendment” passes. Through HR 1162, charter petitioners can now seek charter approval by a new state-level authorizer, if denied by their local school boards. Ironically, of all counties in Georgia, Courtland County, GA has the highest percentage of Georgia voters to support HR 1162.

**Scene 4.** “And the Charter is DENIED for the Third Time” Page 112

**Abstract:** June, 2013. For a third and final time, the Courtland County school board votes on the charter petition for Utopian Academy for the Arts. During this meeting, school board members question the superintendent’s and district’s CFO preparedness for the recommendation to deny the charter application of Utopian; which causes a stir amongst board members and meeting attendees. Artesius and Sandra Delancy both speak during public comments.

**Scene 5.** “Utopian Has Finally Been Approved” Page 120

**Abstract:** October, 2013. After three unsuccessful attempts of charter authorization, the petition for Utopian Academy for the Arts was finally approved by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, the single state charter school approved during the first petition cycle.

ACT THREE

**Scene 1.** “My Boss Sent Me Over Here to Walk Around the Building” Page 126

**Abstract.** July, 2014. A prospective parent seeking to enroll her children at Utopian Academy dialogs with the front office manager. As she expresses concerns of challenges she’s encountered with trying to officially enroll her children at Utopian, she finds out that in lieu of sending registration records, her son’s school submitted an unbelievable package. Also, later that morning, Utopian officials receive an unannounced and ambushed visit by a Courtland County Public Schools district official who informed Utopian staff they must immediately vacate the school building.

**Scene 2.** “It’s the First Day of School, but There Won’t Be School” Page 131

**Abstract:** August, 2014. Unlike any other public school in Georgia, UAFA is about to have the worst start for any school opening its doors for the very first time. Due to threats of possible violations of city codes and the possible evacuation by the local fire chief (*if building is occupied by students*), Artesius is forced to share unfortunate news with his school community.

**Scene 3.** “While Suing the City in Court, Rosewood Fire Department Evacuates Our Students”

Page 139

**Abstract:** August, 2014. After being prevented from allowing students to enter its school building for a full week, Artesius files an injunction and temporary restraining order against the Courtland County Board of Education and the City of Rosewood. While in court, waiting on the judge to make his ruling, Utopian students are evacuated from its school building by Rosewood Fire Department.

**Scene 4.** “The Governor Visit Utopian Academy!” Page 143

**Abstract:** August, 2014. The date is August 19, 2014. The Governor of Georgia visits Utopian Academy for the Arts following the series of events that delayed the start of the first school year. The Governor praises Utopian and school founder, Artesius for his efforts of perseverance to open the school’s doors.

**Scene 5.** “There is a State Law Named After Our School!” Page 145

**Abstract:** April, 2015. The date is April 21, 2015. After passing a unanimous vote by the Georgia State Senate and House of Representatives, *HB 372: The Utopian Academy Act* is signed into law by Governor Nick Denver.

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**Scene 1.** “They Took Down Our Sign!”

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**Abstract.** August, 2015. Two weeks before the start of the second school year, Rosewood city officials inform Utopian that they have violated local city codes in relation to the school’s building signage. In addition to fining the school, city officials remove the school’s banner that was previously mounted outside the building.

**Scene 2.** “We Will Shut Down Their Kitchen!”

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**Abstract.** September, 2015. Rosewood city officials send code enforcement to Utopian and prompt the school to obtain a business license within a 24 hour period, or risk the interference of shutting down their food service program.

**Scene 3.** “Why Won’t the Courtland County School Board Turn On Our Heat?”

Page 156

**Abstract.** December, 2015. Historically, Utopian school officials have not had the autonomy to operate the school building’s HVAC systems, which have now become a challenge due to the increasingly colder temperatures with the change of seasonal climates. The larger challenge is that Courtland County Public Schools controls the building’s HVAC system and is not willing to enable the winter settings.

**Scene 4.** “Who Triggered the Fire Alarm?”

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**Abstract.** December, 2015. Minutes after conducting a lock-down drill at Utopian Academy, sounds from the building’s fire alarm begin to echo throughout the hallways. After investigating the number of possible causes to trigger the alarm, Artesius discovers that it was engaged by two individuals from...

**Scene 5.** “We’re Gonna Kick You All Out of the Building”

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**Abstract.** January, 2016. The Courtland County Board of Education is at it again. Without proper notice to Utopian school officials, the Courtland County Board of Education intends to vote to evict Utopian from its current school building; an old Courtland County Board of Education elementary school.

**Scene 6.** “The Test Scores Are In!”

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**Abstract.** May, 2016. While addressing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class one final time during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotional exercises, Artesius learns that the scores have been released for the spring 2016 administration of the Georgia Milestones Assessment..



## **ACT ONE**

## Scene 1. “A Conversation with God”

**Abstract.** It’s the summer of 2008 and Artesius has just nearly completed his second internship as an investment banker. While standing on the terrace of his rented condo, Artesius reflects on his experience from the summer and has a conversation with God.

ARTESIUS (*looks to the ceiling*): GOD—I am truly blessed. I would have never thought that I would have been given the opportunity to intern on Wall Street—or with companies like Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan Chase. You’ve given this young—Black man from southwest Atlanta the chance for something greater in life. To grow up as humbly as I did where my Mom was the “Mom” and “Dad”—to make it into a school like Morehouse where I learned that I could even work on Wall Street—(*tears begin to fill his eyes*) I just—never would have imagined that I would be doing something like this. I mean—why me? GOD, please don’t take this the wrong way—I really enjoy and appreciate the chance to have these opportunities, but truth of the matter is, I’m not happy—I mean, let me not say that I’m not happy... I just don’t feel like I’m giving back in life the way that my Mom raised me. I guess what I’m trying to say (*pause*) is that I think I might want to switch fields. The main reason I decided to do banking was because I wanted venture out into a different field from my family and make a name for myself. Most of all of my relatives are educators, so I knew at some point I would consider going into the field. But honestly—I think that time may be sooner than I was planning. Granny started a schoolhouse back in Mississippi—nearly half of her kids went into education. My grandmother taught her whole life back in Gary, IN—and her only son has been teaching HIS whole career—It just makes sense.

(*Artesius walks outside gazes out into the distance for a moment*)

ARTESIUS: I can see myself going into school administration—Artesius Miller, this young, Black man in education that’s just doing it! I can picture that...people wanting to know...where

did he come from? He's this young guy in education that's transforming young student's minds.

*(pause)* If it's within your will Father...please let me know—please show me a sign.

*(Although the weather had been somewhat cloudy outside, clouds began to pass and the sun begins to shine down brightly)*

ARTESIUS *(smiles)*: I think that's a sign that perhaps this is something that I should do!

*(ARTESIUS walks back into apartment and sits behind computer)*

ARTESIUS *(reading computer screen)*: I've been hearing a lot about Teach for America...oh wow—and they have fellowships down in Mississippi? I'm gonna apply there because I KNOW no one is trying to go down there to teach. *(chuckles)* But then again, I have another six more years with the Gates Scholarship—I might also need to apply to a few graduate programs—the scholarship does pay for a masters and doctorate degree. Let's see...I know that I want to apply to Northwestern...but *(glances down at computer)* what's this ranking report from U.S. News & World Report? The best education schools—hmm, Teachers College at Columbia University...they're number one---let me see what they're about. *(pause)*

*(Artesius scrolls through the website of Teachers College, Columbia University)*

The Department of Organization and Leadership—they have so many programs to choose from. I'm torn. They have masters programs in Education Leadership, but then they also have this Higher and Postsecondary Education program that appears to be popular. I interested in both—

## Scene 2. “You Should Start a School”

**Abstract.** Artesius meets a staff member in the Educational Leadership Studies Department of Teachers College, Columbia University that suggests that he start a school.

**Location:** Teachers College, Columbia University (Office of Educational Leadership Studies)

ARTESIUS: Good morning, I came by to get some information on the Education Leadership Studies program.

KIM: Good morning, what information in particular are you seeking?

ARTESIUS: Well—I am a recently admitted student in the Higher and Postsecondary education program but I believe that I might have enrolled in the wrong program of study.

KIM: What do you mean?

ARTESIUS: Well I have an interest in K-16 education— however, I believe that I might have enrolled into the wrong spectrum first. I’m interested in K-12 education, but I also have an interest at the collegiate level. Specifically, I am very interested in school leadership.

KIM: There are a few programs that might be of interests to you, but I am afraid to say that neither are directly correlated with the Higher and Postsecondary program. You would have to apply to those programs independently from your current program.

ARTESIUS: So there’s no way of transferring from my current program to Education Leadership?

KIM: I’m afraid not. You could defer enrollment from your current program and apply for admission into Education Leadership, but your admission is not guaranteed.

ARTESIUS: (*shaking head in disbelief*) Wow! That would be too risky. I mean—it’s already July and I would be gambling my chances of even being able to stay in New York—and Columbia for that matter.

KIM: You can always stay in your current program for the autumn semester, apply to Ed Leadership, and if admitted, start your new program in the spring.

ARTESIUS: (*anxiously smiling*) You know what? I think I'm gonna do just that!

KIM: I'm glad that I was able to help you, you seem very interested in that program, and I believe it might be a better fit for you.

ARTESIUS: I appreciate that. I'm really interested in having a career in school leadership.

(*Artesius and Kim dialog for several minutes later*)

KIM: Have you ever thought about starting a school?

ARTESIUS: What do you mean?

KIM: Have you ever thought about starting a school of your own?

ARTESIUS: What—like a private school?

KIM: Private school or even a charter school?

ARTESIUS: That's never really come across my mind. I mean, I wouldn't even know about how to even start a private school, and I don't really know much about charter schools.

KIM: I think you should really look into charter schools, I think you would make a great fit to start one, you're very passionate about helping kids.

ARTESIUS: (*smiling*) Well thank you. I must admit, I would need your help on learning more about charters, I mean—this is very new for me.

KIM: Well, there are tons of charter schools here in New York City that you can go and visit.

Charter schools are on practically every corner here. You say you're from Georgia, right?

ARTESIUS: Yes, that's true.

KIM: There are charter schools down there in Atlanta. (*Pointing to computer*). Here, let's pull up Georgia's charter schools information so that you can learn more.

*(Artesius & Kim view the Georgia Department of Education website)*

KIM: I'm printing some information for you to take home and review. I think this will be a good start for you.

*(Kim hands Artesius a Georgia Dept. of Education charter school petitioner application)*

ARTESIUS: Thank you. If it's okay with you, I'd like to come back and talk more about this.

KIM: That's not a problem. I would also encourage you to consider taking an elective course with a professor in the Educational Leadership studies program and also getting your application in for spring admission ASAP!

### Scene 3. “I’m Starting a Charter School, I Need Your Help”

**Abstract.** After speaking with a faculty member from Columbia University about the possibility of starting a charter school, Artesius identifies prospective founding board members for Utopian Academy for the Arts.

**Location.** New Residence Hall, Teachers College, Columbia University

*(Artesius sits in his NYC graduate dorm and speaks with his Mother, who offers advice on possible founding board members for his school).*

ARTESIUS: I’m looking for experts in various fields. I think it’s important to get people that aren’t just educators—at the end of the day, you have a school but you have to run it like a business.

HOLLY: Well son, I’m going to suggest that you think of people that you know, and people that you know will be committed. You got to have that commitment from folks...this is a big task you’re asking them to take on.

ARTESIUS: You’re right Ma.

HOLLY: Who have you considered so far?

ARTESIUS: For educators, I thought of MRS. FIELDS—she has 38 years of experience teaching and she’s retired now. MS. STEVENSON has been an educator for a while and she brings that “arts” background to the table, which is important if we’re planning “arts-based” school.

HOLLY: You might want to consider Armani’s principal, DR. BARBER. I think he would take pride in helping out, plus you want to have a school administrator’s perspective.

ARTESIUS: I will ask him...text me his contact information. I will reach out to him.

HOLLY: I will.

ARTESIUS: I thought about asking one of my frat brothers, GEORGE. He's a Vice President of a local major corporation.

HOLLY: These all sound good. And you need someone with a finance background. You have someone on your team that's sharp when it comes to money and numbers?

ARTESIUS: I was actually thinking about asking TONY.

HOLLY: Well that's who I was going to suggest...he's been with the IRS since he came out of Morehouse—plus I think he would also take pride in helping you start this up. Sounds like you have your team...you just need to begin to talk with folks.

ARTESIUS: I'm gonna start making some calls tonight before it gets too late. I will talk to you in the morning. Love you, Ma.

HOLLY: Love you too son. Good night.

ARTESIUS: Good night.

*(About fifteen minutes elapse and Artesius begins to make a series of phone calls to prospective board members).*

ARTESIUS: Hey Mrs. Fields...how are you this evening?

MRS. FIELDS: I'm doing well son! It's good to hear from you. How is Columbia treating you?

ARTESIUS: Columbia has been just fine...staying extremely busy—taking six classes, I have a graduate assistantship with the Office of Admissions, and I'm volunteering at a KIPP school on Saturday's.

MRS. FIELDS: Son, I don't know where you find the time to do all of those things and stay on top of your books.

ARTESIUS: I pray! *(chuckles)*



MRS. FIELDS: That's the answer...it's just a blessing that at such a young age—you're so spiritual, I wish we had more young people like you.

ARTESIUS: Thanks Mrs. Fields...I wanted to reach out to you because I need your help with a special project.

MRS. FIELDS: Oh really, what's that?

ARTESIUS: Mrs. Fields, I'm thinking about starting a charter school.

MRS. FIELDS: I think you would make a fine school founder.

ARTESIUS: Thank you. I've been doing a lot of research on charter schools, and typically you have a lead school founder that works closely with a founding team, and so I am building that "team"...a founding board of directors, and I wanted to see if I could have your support? You're the first person I've asked.

MRS. FIELDS: I would love to. I've always believed in you since you were a student at North Atlanta. It would be my pleasure.

ARTESIUS: Thank you, Mrs. Fields. I will be in touch with you on the next steps. Have a good night.

MRS. FIELDS: You too. Good night dear!

*(Artesius calls next prospective board member)*

MRS. STEVENSON: Hello—

ARTESIUS: Hey Ms. Stevenson!

MRS. STEVENSON: Oh hey there, Artesius—how are you?

ARTESIUS: I'm doing well...doing well.

MRS. STEVENSON: How are you enjoying New York? You get a chance to see any shows since you've been up there?

ARTESIUS: New York has been good. And I haven't seen any shows yet since I've been up here...New York is expensive! (*chuckles*) –but my goal is to see FELA this fall while it's on Broadway.

MRS. STEVENSON: Very good. Well what can I do for you this evening, sweetie?

ARTESIUS: Well I'm glad you asked. Ms. Stevenson, I am in the process of starting a charter school and I would like to have your participation as a founding board member.

MRS. STEVENSON: Count me in! Just send me some information on everything so I can take a look at it, and I will.

ARTESIUS: Wow. I didn't expect to get that yes so quickly!

MRS. STEVENSON: It's no problem...but look sweetie, I will have to talk with you later—I have a call coming in that I will need to take. Take care.

ARTESIUS: Thanks Ms. Stevenson, you too.

*(Artesius calls next prospective board member)*

TONY: Artesius, how's it going man?

ARTESIUS: It's going great TONY. Working hard up here, and trying to find ways to support my hometown at the same time.

TONY: Awesome. What ways of support are you planning?

ARTESIUS: TONY, I've been doing some research and visits of charter schools here in New York, and the more I see the educational possibilities for students here, the more I want to expand to the reach of students back in Atlanta. I'm thinking of starting a charter school.

TONY: Oh man, that's FANTASTIC!

ARTESIUS: Thanks Tony. I was on the phone with my mom earlier tonight and as I was sharing with her the need to identify individuals I know that are experts within their fields— that would possibly consider aiding in the efforts of me starting a school...we both thought of you.

TONY: Oh man. *(surprisingly shocked)* You guys thought of me?

ARTESIUS: Yes sir.

TONY: Wow! I really appreciate that. You will need yourself a solid team of folks. Sure, I will help.

ARTESIUS: THANK YOU! I really appreciate the support Tony. I will follow up with you soon via email regarding the next steps. I'm also going to be organizing a meeting with the other founding board members soon.

TONY: You have my email?

ARTESIUS: I do.

TONY: Great, I will look out for that information.

ARTESIUS: Thanks again, Tony.

TONY: No problem. Proud of you man.

*(Artesius gathers some thoughts down on his notepad)*

ARTESIUS: Got my team solidified...some good people on board. Next step, I just need to bring everyone together.

#### Scene 4. “Let’s Learn Charter”

**Abstract.** At this point of the petitioning process, the founding board of Utopian Academy for the Arts has been developed and has started to meet on a monthly basis. During this scheduled meeting, ARTESIUS meets with the board to discuss sections from the charter petition, Walton grant, board training opportunities, and submission of charter application to the Courtland County Board of Education.

**Location.** Vision International Academy of Mableton Charter School

*(Founding board members sit around table reviewing sections of charter petition sections composed by ARTESIUS).*

ARTESIUS: I appreciate everyone giving up their Saturday afternoon to be with us. Thanks Dr. Barber for providing the meeting space.

DR. BARBER: It’s no problem, we have work to do...so let’s get it done.

TONY: That’s exactly it Ms. Stevenson! That’s the mindset we have to have in order to be productive.

ARTESIUS: That’s right. Thanks Ms. Stevenson.

MRS. FIELDS *(enters room)*: Hello everyone! Glad to see you all today.

EVERYONE *(speaks to MRS. FIELDS)*

MRS. FIELDS *(to ARTESIUS)*: ARTESIUS, how was your flight?

ARTESIUS: It was good, I got in yesterday morning—glad to be back in town.

MRS. FIELDS: I don’t know how you’re able to do it, son. You’re taking all those classes up there at Columbia and you still find time to come home every month—work on this charter school—I just don’t know how you’re able to do it and still be so energetic.

MS. STEVENSON: That’s that YOUTH he has, Jackie!

MRS. FIELDS: You’re right, Linda....*(chuckles)* God knows I can use some of that energy.

ARTESIUS: Alright (*chuckles*)....As you look at today's agenda, we have a number of topics that we're going to cover. Last month we covered "state and federally mandated programs" and in December we covered our "educational program" section. This month we're covering the "school operations" section. We're going to continue meeting and discussing each section of our charter petition individually so each of us has a good understanding of the content. Also, keep in mind that we will eventually have to interview as a part of the authorization process, and with the Walton grant— so it is important for us to really know what we're putting down on paper. And speaking of the Walton grant, the deadline is in a month.

TONY: How much is this grant worth?

ARTESIUS: We would be looking at \$25,000 for the planning grant.

TONY: Okay. Do we apply directly to the Walton Family Foundation for this grant?

ARTESIUS: Actually, this grant is administered through the Georgia Charter Schools Association. Speaking of GCSA, they have a program for groups like ours that are interested in starting a charter school called Leader Start. It costs about \$10,000, but I hear that its worth the investment.

MS. STEVENSON: Artesius that is a lot of money—

MRS. FIELDS: That is!

ARTESIUS: I'm willing to withdraw from my own savings to register us for the program—I believe that it might be worth the investment.

TONY: Artesius I can help contribute something...just let me know the deadline so I can help.

ARTESIUS: Thank you Tony. And I know that is a lot, so I wouldn't expect anyone to actually give that much, but any contributions that are affordable, I would appreciate it—I will be in touch with the board once I have us confirmed for the trainings.

## **ACT TWO**

**Scene 1.** “The Motion Carries Seven to One”

**Abstract:** The Courtland County Board of Education votes on the charter petition of Utopian Academy for the Arts for the first time.

**Location:** Courtland County Board of Education Board Room

Date: June 6, 2011

BOARD CHAIR: The next thing on our agenda is the consent agenda, which includes the superintendent’s recommendation for Utopian Academy for the Arts and Courtland Academy Charter. I really need before we discuss a motion to approve the consent agenda, a second, and then we can do comments. Okay? Dr. Arquette—

BOARD MEMBER 1: Madam Chair I make a motion that we approve the entire consent agenda.

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you, I need a second for that motion. Mrs. Blake?

BOARD MEMBER 2: I second.

BOARD CHAIR: We have a motion and a second. Now it’s appropriate for us to have a discussion. Ms. Grand, I think you want to make comments?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: Madam Chair, I don’t think it’s appropriate to put the charter schools in with the consent agenda. The consent agenda should not involve the vote on the two charter schools that we discussed last week, which I believe is Utopian and Courtland Academy Charter...they should not be a part of the consent agenda, that should be something that we vote on separately. I am asking that we pull those two items from the consent agenda.

BOARD CHAIR: Okay, Ms. Grand will you make that in the form of a motion please?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: Well, I guess I’ll ask for a point of clarification then, I don’t think we normally make a motion to pull items from the consent agenda, so, parliamentary, or Mr. Campbell, can we do it without a motion? Cause it should not be on

there, it should be an action item, that's what you had on the agenda when we last left—now you SLIPPED it in on the consent agenda.

BOARD AUDIENCE: *Begins to roar in excitement after BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND comments*

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say "slip", but—

BOARD CHAIR: Ms. Grand, I'm sorry but that was out of order. That has been straightened out.

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I'm sorry I didn't mean to say you slipped it in, but it was under the action agenda, excuse me.

BOARD ATTORNEY: Madam Chair?

BOARD CHAIR: Yes, Mr. Campbell—

BOARD ATTORNEY: At the end of the work session, and in accordance with your policy, you adopt the agenda, at that time you went through and listed what items to be on the consent. I, I would recommend that we check with the board secretary or perhaps the chair might remember whether or not these two items were at that time placed on the consent agenda.

BOARD CHAIR: Mr. Campbell, I'm not certain that we specified "consent" or otherwise...we talked about the items that would be voted on this evening.

BOARD ATTORNEY: Okay. Without the specificity, I would just recommend that those items be pulled and voted on separately.

BOARD CHAIR: Okay, without vote.

BOARD AUDIENCE: *Clapping. Cheers.*

BOARD CHAIR: Board, I want to advise that—under legal counsel, we will pull Utopian Academy and Courtland Academy and will vote on them separate. (*Waits for response from*



*board*) Okay, then all in favor approving the revised consent agenda, will you please vote?

*(Pause)* We're voting on the revised consent agenda.

*(A few moments later)*

BOARD CHAIR: Now we are ready to consider the matter of the Utopian Academy for the Arts.

The superintendent recommends that that petition be denied, therefore we are voting on the superintendent's recommendation. (uh) I need a motion to either uphold or deny the superintendent's recommendation. Mr. Brown?

BOARD MEMBER 5: So moved...on the denial on that recommendation.

BOARD CHAIR: Mr. Brown has moved that we uphold the superintendent's recommendation to deny the petition. Is there a second to that motion, please? Dr. Arquette?

BOARD MEMBER 1: I second that motion, Madam Chair.

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you. There is a motion and a second to uphold the superintendent's recommendation to deny the petition for the Utopian Academy for the Arts... Ms. Grand?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I want to know—I'm trying to find out why we would act so quickly on this—when it was just on last week that we received the information on their charter. We didn't really have time to review the information to make an informed decision.

BOARD AUDIENCE: *Gasps.*

BOARD CHAIR: Other comments? All in favor of this particular motion, would you please vote on your keypad. And the motion carries six...the motion carries seven to one. Thank you.

*(Noticeably emotional, Artesius stands up in audience seating area)*

ARTESIUS: We're trying to save our young men by proposing Utopian Academy for the Arts.

BOARD CHAIR: Please. Please be quiet sir. Please be quiet sir. *(hits gavel twice)*

ARTESIUS: We're trying to save our young men, and this is not right! Our children need better. You say "it's all about the children"? But I guess it's really not.

BOARD AUDIENCE Member: Tell them young man!

BOARD CHAIR (*Continues to hit gavel.*):

BOARD AUDIENCE: *Clapping. Cheers.*

ARTESIUS: We're trying to save our young men! Utopian Academy for the Arts is here to help save our children, and you won't even give us the benefit of the doubt by reviewing our application. This is NOT RIGHT!!

*(School district police rush to escort ARTESIUS out of the boardroom.)*

BOARD CHAIR: Mrs. Blake?

*(People begin to stand in the boardroom as BOARD MEMBER 2 is talking and begin to exit the boardroom.)*

BOARD MEMBER 2: Please don't take this as a one-time only shot, take it as they're going to give you direction on which way to move forward.

BOARD CHAIR: Ms. Grand?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: Well they may have an opportunity to reapply, but I believe that the charter school law says that the charter school should offer something that's is different and unique to the school district. A charter for a single gender school is unique and different to the school district, so I don't see why we wouldn't consider something—we don't offer ANYTHING that's single gender, I think that would be a good way for us to go to improve our graduation rates, in particularly for male students—I think we need to look at something unique.

BOARD AUDIENCE: *Clapping. Cheers.*

*(about two minutes later)*

**Location:** Courtland County Board of Education Parking Lot

ARTESIUS: For them to just sit there and make a decision like that, they don't care. Ms. Grand was the only one that showed SOME type of empathy.

HOLLY: Son, you can't let them get the best of you like that. And tonight they did. You cannot let someone get you to a point where you get all worked up, that's what they want. You can't let them win like that. You win by getting this school approved.

BOARD MEETING ATTENDEE (*addresses Artesius*): Young man, I want to thank you for having the courage to stand up to them tonight. Had you not done that, they would continue to think that it's okay for them to walk over people and make decisions for our youth without care. When you believe in something, and strongly in something, you have to stand up and speak for what's wrong and what's right. And tonight they were not right. This reminds me of the days in which I stood with Dr. King and Whites would treat us unfairly, as if it was justified. You got to fight for our children. Promise me you will.

ARTESIUS: Yes sir, I will. I appreciate you sharing words of wisdom with me tonight. I needed to hear that from someone that understand the importance of injustice to our kids, this community, and OUR people as a whole.

## Scene 2. “And the Motion Fails Four to Two”

**Abstract:** After being denied by the Courtland County Board of Education, Artesius petitions a second time for a charter. During this board meeting, Artesius speaks on behalf of Utopian Academy to Courtland school board members, along with Brandi Stedman (Steve & Marjorie Stedman Foundation) and Sandra Delancy (future Governance Board Chair of Utopian).

**Location:** Courtland County Board of Education Board Room

Date: June 4, 2012

BOARD CHAIR: Board members we normally go into executive session at this time, but we’ve been in public participation all day long, so if no one has objections I’d like to move the public participation up from our executive session. Is there an objection from the board? Then let’s go ahead and go to our public participation.

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: Madam Chair?

BOARD CHAIR: Yes ma’am.

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: My objection would be that if some of those people that signed up anticipated us being in executive session and they’re not in here now, is there any way that you can just check and see if they’re present?

BOARD CHAIR: You mean call roll? *(Begins to call a series of names)* Brandi Stedman are you here? Artesius Miller?, Joseph Hines? Denise Hillman? Armani Singh? Armond Salter?

*(Although Artesius is not present in the board room, board attendees look to find him in the lobby area, as he is seen on his phone speaking to other board meeting attendees that are in route.)*

*(In lobby)*

HOLLY : Son, they’re doing roll call, let’s go! You know they’re trying to start early with public participation because they don’t think you’re here and they want to skip over your turn to speak.

ARTESIUS: Thanks Ma. I’m coming in with you.

*(Back in board room)*

BOARD CHAIR: Each speaker tonight is allowed three minutes to present to the board. Please step aside when your time is called. Our first speaker is, Brandi Stedman.

BRANDI STEDMAN: Good evening chairman of the board, Superintendent. I thank you for the opportunity to share a few words this evening. I'm really excited to speak on behalf of the Utopian charter school. Our students need valuable and quality education. As the program director of the Steve & Marjorie Stedman Foundation, I have to say, we have never before supported an organization or school of this magnitude, and we stand in full support of the Utopian Academy and what they are stated to bring to Courtland County. We're excited for an arts program. We're excited for education. We ask that you fully submit and support this effort and that you really take a look at what they have to offer our children. "It's all about the children?" Let's make it, "all about the children" and support this wonderful charter school.

BOARD AUDIENCE: *stands and claps in response*

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Stedman. *(to audience)* And I want to comment on the fact that you held your signs well, and you did it exactly how the fire marshal told us we had to do it.

BOARD AUDIENCE: *continues to stand with homemade signs made with various comments in support of Utopian Academy for the Arts.*

BOARD CHAIR: Our next speaker is Artesius Miller.

ARTESIUS *(looks back at board meeting attendees)*: Y'all can continue to stand up, it's okay.

ARTESIUS *(to board members)*: The time is now. Good evening Superintendent and school board. My name is Artesius Miller and I stand before you on behalf of Utopian Academy for the Arts. After submitting our charter petition application last spring, it was determined that the school board voted on our charter petition application without prior review of our charter

application. However, to show that we are not only committed and dedicated to the students and this community, (*pointing to district logo behind board*) because it's all about the children, we resubmitted again. (*Pause*) And we brought people here to show this school is wanted. We're bringing in resources that aren't even here within the community. We just had the daughter of actor, author, radio host, host of *Family Feud*, Mr. Steve Stedman that said, I've never donated, I've never dedicated to any other school before, but not only am I dedicated to Utopian Academy for the Arts, I'm committed to Courtland County as well. One of the worst things that you can do to any child, to any child, is limit the education that they can receive. When you talk about educational resources, when you talk about an EDUCATIONAL PLAN that does not exist, how DARE we restrict the minds of our youth, when they can be POSITIVE contributors to society, beginning here with Courtland County. I stand before you on behalf of the founding board of individuals that are highly qualified to start a charter school. We're providing something that you cannot find—We're PROVIDING a longer school day and a longer school year. We're trying to keep our kids from off the street so they can stay focused. Not only that, we're providing SATURDAY SCHOOL. When was the last time you heard of a school offering Saturday school for their students? How do you restrict the minds of these students that stand before you—

TIME KEEPER: Time! Time!

ARTESIUS: Thank you for your time and consideration.

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Miller.

(*For performance, as noted by projector on stage: Six more Utopian supporters take the stand to speak on behalf of Utopian Academy for the Arts to the Clinton School Board. BOARD CHAIR moves to the business agenda to discuss the charter petition of Utopian Academy for the Arts*)

BOARD CHAIR: And our final petition is the Utopian Academy for the Arts. The superintendent recommends the denial of the charter petition. Board what is your pleasure. Ms. Grand?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I move that we not accept the superintendent's recommendation for denial.

BOARD CHAIR: That would mean that you would approve the charter petition?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I move that we accept the charter application for Utopian Academy for the Arts.

BOARD CHAIR: We need a second for that motion.

BOARD MEMBER 4: I second that motion.

BOARD CHAIR: Okay, Mr. Royal seconds that motion. Board it is time for you to vote your pleasure for Utopian Academy for the Arts. Board members you may vote. Okay?

*(Board members vote)*

BOARD CHAIR: And the petition fails, the motion fails, 4-2. So the charter is not approved.

BOARD AUDIENCE *(gasps)*

### Scene 3. “HR 1162 Passes-There is Indeed Hope for Georgia Charters”

**Abstract.** It’s election night, November 7, 2012 and there is a watch party taking place at Girls Preparatory Academy. On this evening, President Barack Obama is reelected for a second term as the President of the United States and in Georgia, the ballot item for House Resolution 1162 (HR 1162), also known as the “Charter School Constitutional Amendment” passes. Through HR 1162, charter petitioners can now seek charter approval by a new state-level authorizer, if denied by their local school boards. Ironically, of all counties in Georgia, Courtland County, GA has the highest percentage of Georgia voters to support HR 1162.

**Location.** Girls Preparatory Academy Kirkwood Campus (School Cafeteria)

*(Parents and students arrive onsite to the school’s cafeteria; the designated location for the watch party.)*

NICOLE BURNS: ARTESIUS! I’m so glad to see you this evening. I didn’t think you were going to make it.

ARTESIUS: C’mon Nancy, you’re my mentor...wouldn’t miss it. Plus I couldn’t miss the opportunity to be in the same room with other charter supporters WHEN this amendment passes.

NICOLE BURNS: We shall see—I like how you always remain to stay so hopeful!

ARTESIUS: When it comes to children, you have to learn to be optimistic. This...YOU know.

NICOLE BURNS: You’re right, but I can’t pretend that I have not been somewhat worried on the outcome. There has been a lot of campaigns and money spent to prevent this amendment from passing. I can’t tell you how many people in my church won’t even speak to me because they’re against this amendment.

ARTESIUS: Most of the Black pastors across the state are against it—

NICOLE BURNS: Then you have the NAACP that’s taken a stance against it---the national Parent Teacher Union and the state superintendent also. It’s a mess!

ARTESIUS: Well, let me tell you this. As my grandmother used to always say, “it’s okay to be concerned, but you can’t worry”.



NICOLE BURNS: ARTESIUS, you are right. (*jokingly*) What am I gonna do with you and all this wisdom at your age?

ARTESIUS (*smiles*): Enough about me. I saw you and a few of your scholars featured on the news the other night. You all are really the face of this amendment. Your school is a true indicator for why this is so necessary...the adversity that you've had to experience just so your school could get approved, then to stay open, all of this going on with the Georgia Charter Schools Commission being ruled unconstitutional—Man!

NICOLE BURNS: You're right, it has been tough...but we do what we have to do for our children. Look (*points at large television in the room*), the results are starting to come in.

*(Nancy, Artesius and other event participants begins to gather around television, while anchor reports)*

NEWS REPORTER (*from television set*): Obama has won each of the battleground states including Florida, Nevada, Ohio—Am I reading this correct? Okay. President Barack Obama has just surpassed the 270 electoral votes needed. President Barack Obama has been reelected as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.

*(Cheers and applause take place across the room from supporters of Barack Obama)*

ARTESIUS: Nancy, do you see that at the bottom of the screen?

NICOLE BURNS: Wait! I didn't see it. What was it?

ARTESIUS: I want to wait before I get excited....make sure I saw that correctly—but it looks like they displayed the results of the Charter School Constitutional Amendment.

NICOLE BURNS (*reads the results from screen*): SHUT THE FRONT DOOR. It passed...58.58%!

*(Screams of happiness and excitement is heard all throughout. Kids begin to run in circles across the room.)*

NICOLE BURNS: Artesius, do you know what this means?

ARTESIUS *(smiles)*: That there is hope after all?

NICOLE BURNS: Yes, you now have a true shot of getting your school approved. You still have to go back to the Courtland County School Board, but if they say no, you can appeal to the new state level authorizer that will be created, now that this has passed.

ARTESIUS: God is good.

#### **Scene 4.** “And the Charter is DENIED for the Third Time”

**Abstract.** For a third and final time, the Courtland County school board votes on the charter petition for Utopian Academy for the Arts. During this meeting, school board members question the superintendent’s and district’s CFO preparedness for the recommendation to deny the charter application of Utopian; which causes a stir amongst board members and meeting attendees. Artesius and Sandra Delancy both speak during public comments.

**Location:** Courtland County Board of Education Board Room

Date: June 3, 2013

BOARD CHAIR: Only speakers who signed up for public participation will be allowed to speak.

We ask that they identify themselves before speaking. Time may not be yielded from one speaker to another. Each speaker will be allowed three minutes. Our first speaker for tonight is Artesius Miller.

ARTESIUS: Good evening superintendent, Board Chair, board. My name is Artesius Miller and I’m standing before you on behalf of the Utopian Academy for the Arts’ Founding Board. I stand before you this evening very concerned. For the last three consecutive years the charter school review committee has not followed guidelines for the charter petition process. The laws according to the state of Georgia, state that any board, whether at the state level or the local level, the board has sixty days to review a charter school petition before voting. However, this has not taken place within the last three years. It alarms, it disappoints, and it disturbs me that even after it has been brought to your attention, that this has not changed—the policies have not changed. The vision for Utopian Academy for the Arts is to give every child an opportunity for something that is different. Charter schools are choice schools to allow parents and students an opportunity for something that doesn’t exist. And truthfully, have we given these parents (*points into board attendee sitting area*) an opportunity for a charter school here in Courtland County? There are a few questions that I want to ask, and I’m not looking for a response because I know

that you all can't give one this evening, but truthfully, I have a few questions that I would like to ask. Have you read the charter petition for Utopian Academy for the Arts? Have you all given us a fair consideration? This is the third year that we've brought to your attention that our petition has not been reviewed, it has not been properly scored. There were some issues that were discussed in your work session regarding our budget. I brought copies of our budget. I have highlighted areas that were of original concern to show that these concerns were addressed in our budget. Lastly, superintendent and school board, it concerns me that not a single charter school has been approved in the last six years in Courtland County. You're talking about exposure, access to resources for children in an innovative setting. Our students deserve more. Thank you for your time.

BOARD AUDIENCE: (*stands and claps*)

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Miller. Our next speaker is Veronica Samuels. Ms. Samuels you will be introduced in just a few minutes in your official capacity. Okay?

REPRESENTATIVE SAMUELS: Good evening school board members, superintendent, and all staff, my name is State Representative Veronica Samuels. Is Courtland County Public Schools doing an effective job? I would venture that you all deserve an "N.I.", which is a "needs improvement".—The fairness and the review of charter school petitions. Charter schools are mandated to be UNIQUE. Utopian Academy has been before this board three times, it has a curriculum that no other school in the county has, and you don't have to audition to get into this school. The fact is, 71% of the voters in our county voted in favor of the charter schools amendment, which allows parents choice. Before I was told by board members that the voters didn't understand what they were voted for; that's an insult to the voters to say that they were

uneducated on what they voted for. In conclusion, I come this evening to ask you as board members be engaged, be considerate, and be informed. Thank you.

BOARD AUDIENCE: *(claps)*

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Samuels. Our next speaker is Sandra Delancy.

MRS. DELANCY: *(glances down at phone and begins to address board)*: Good evening. I'm here as a voice to support Utopian Academy for the Arts. As a parent that has been in the school system for over 20 years, I have witnessed the many changes that the school system has been through—Utopian has an excellent concept that—I believe can better serve and help expand the horizon for children of today. This school system has prohibited the growth and creativity—the stimulation that the students need today. You should encourage, but not put down children. You are failing my child with the things she needs, and as a supportive parent, it is my duty to make sure that my child has what she needs for this world. I am to support her to be able to make sure that her education is in the hands of people that care. *(begins to shake her heads to push back tears that began to roll down her face)* If you are not fighting for the education of the children, then what are you fighting for? As of this new school year, I will be a part of this continuing experiment your staff has admitted to, I'm fighting for my child and those that comes behind her. Thank you.

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Delancy.

*(For performance, as noted by projector on stage: Over the next 20 minutes, a series of other individuals speak during the public participation on behalf of Utopian Academy.)*

BOARD CHAIR: Okay, now we're going to move down into the business agenda—

SUPERINTENDENT: Thank you. For the Utopian Academy for Arts, (uh) you have the executive summary as well as the report of deficiencies. The superintendent's recommendation is to deny.

BOARD CHAIR: Ms. Grand?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I don't have a motion for that, but since we say we are going to discuss, I want to discuss.

BOARD CHAIR: Okay.

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I'm in support of this charter because—number 1—would be located in the northern end of the county that's in my district. We have NOTHING on the northern end of the county, no specialty school. All of the specialty schools, there's a line drawn...everything's on the southern part of the county. Mr. Miller has come before us three times—he's bent over backwards to try and be in compliance with what we say, would make his school unique to the district. I feel that this school is unique to the district and it has arts. It's a single gender school that Mr. Miller is proposing, and the thing that this board does not look at is the fact that, the worst performing student of all is the Black male that's in our school district. There are more BLACK MALE students incarcerated other than being educated. I'm TIRED of the fact that we don't look at things that would be in the best interests of our children. We need equity in what is afforded for our students in Courtland County. I'm going to go back, again, nothing on the north side. We have art magnet at M.D. Ryans, but again, that's only for a select few of students. We would have arts here, single-gender education—we would have a variety of educational experiences for our students, and I'm asking that you all look at something for the north end of the county—because the board needs to fair to all of the children in Courtland

County, not just look at what's on the south end of the county. I'm asking for your support on this one.

BOARD CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Grand—

BOARD AUDIENCE: (*stands and claps*)

BOARD CHAIR: Does anyone else from the board wish to speak on this? Mr. Royal?

BOARD MEMBER 4: Yes madam... madam chair. What would be the financial impact to the budget, current budget, or subsequent budgets?

BOARD CHAIR: I'll lean to the superintendent.

SUPERINTENDENT (*appears to be unsure*): Thee—from my understanding, the money follows the child.

BOARD MEMBER 4: How much money, in dollars would this impact?

SUPERINTENDENT (*motions for DISTRICT CFO*): Ken?

DISTRICT CFO: Thee (uh), we would have to calculate the per pupil that is received from the state, plus the per pupil received (uh) from the local (uh)...local revenue and that amount would then be paid to the charter school.

BOARD MEMBER 4: That wasn't done as a part of the consideration? As to whether or not you're going to recommend deny or accept?

DISTRICT CFO: (uh) No sir, no, I'm not aware of that.

BOARD CHAIR: Any other thoughts besides Ms. Grand—I'll come back to you. I'm giving everyone a chance to speak first. Any other comments? Okay, back to Ms. Grand then.

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: Alright, I want to address that, the money following the child. (*nods head*) That's not at any loss for us, because the money always follows the children, wherever we have children in the school, the money is there. We're not gonna lose any money,

these are still our children. It would be better for us to accept this charter under Courtland County Board of Education then for him to turn around and get this charter through the state, and then we really would be losing. We have 2 charter schools, and there are 14 charter schools in the Atlanta Public Schools school district, 12 charter schools in DeKalb, I don't know how many they have in Fulton. We have people that say YES to charter schools, what is wrong with the Courtland County Board of Education saying yes to charter? We're not hurting our kids, we are enhancing our children. So if we're not going to step up to the plate to say that we can offer something better, then give somebody else the opportunity, give our CHILDREN the opportunity to something better...

BOARD AUDIENCE: (*stands and claps*)

BOARD CHAIR: Mr. Easter?

BOARD MEMBER 6: I'd like to go back to what Mr. Royal asked—He asked what was the financial impact of this program, and we deny a program and we don't even have the figures...that's kind of troubling to me. (*facing superintendent*) You didn't give a specific number, he asked you a specific number...we're denying and we don't know the specific number? The amount that it's going to cost this district...or supposedly cost this district. And we just going to DENY—I can't believe that we're doing this!

SUPERINTENDENT: The number is based on the number of children that the (uh) charter would receive, and that's what's in their charter.

BOARD MEMBER 6: And I understand that—but as a county, as educators, and business people...that was a question that you should have anticipated that was gonna be asked of YOU, from this board. And we can't answer it?



BOARD CHAIR: Well I think perhaps they can, (*looks to DISTRICT CFO*). Mr. Thompson, can you give us the per pupil FTE monies that we get from the state? I'm not so sure about the local monies because that's so fluid. (*glances at budget that ARTESIUS provided earlier that evening*) I think I read—and I'm afraid to do that (to read budget numbers)...

DISTRICT CFO: The per pupil is approximately \$6500 (uh) but again, whatever students attend the charter school, the amount that we're paying for those students now, from the state and local funds, would then be issued to that school.

ARTESIUS (*stands in boardroom*): The numbers are in the budget that I presented to each of you earlier this evening.

BOARD CHAIR (*addresses ARTESIUS*): Please sit down sir, please sit down!

(*directed to board members*) We do have their budget, we received additional information this evening on their budget. That's the amount of money that would come to them, that's in their budget.

BOARD MEMBER 6: So if these are still our kids, then why would we be losing money?

BOARD CHAIR: Alright—

DISTRICT CFO: Just to clarify, we did not say that we would be lose money...it's just that the money would follow the students.

SUPERINTENDENT: Yes, that's all we've said is that, the money follows the student, whatever the state allocates that's where that money would go, and we would adjust our budget accordingly.

BOARD MEMBER 6: So there's no financial impact?

SUPERINTENDENT: Only that we would reduce the budget we have (uh) because we have not taken away any student funding at this point and that would then impact the funding for Courtland County Public Schools.

BOARD CHAIR: The floor is open regarding Utopian Academy for the Arts.

BOARD MEMBER 4: Madam Chair—

BOARD CHAIR: Mr. Royal?

BOARD MEMBER 4: I make a motion that we deny the superintendent's recommendation concerning the charter school, Utopian Academy for the Arts.

BOARD CHAIR: That would mean that you would approve the petition, right? Asking for a point of clarification.

BOARD MEMBER 4: Yes.

BOARD CHAIR: Okay. We need a second to that motion. Ms. Grand?

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND: I second the motion.

BOARD CHAIR: Okay. The motion is, I will shorten the motion...but is to APPROVE the Utopian Academy for the Arts charter petition. Board members if you would please vote at this time.

*(Board member votes began to highlight green in favor, red against for the charter petition)*

BOARD CHAIR: A vote in the green is to approve it. A vote in the red is to not. And the motion fails, and the charter is denied. I'd like to go at that a little more directly.

*(speaking directly to board attorney seated in boardroom)* We have a motion to approve it, and it failed. So are we finish? Thank you. I encourage Utopian to go the state route, that's why we have a charter commission, and I encourage you to do that very thing.

## Scene 5. “Utopian Has Finally Been Approved”

**Abstract.** After three unsuccessful attempts of charter authorization, the petition for Utopian Academy for the Arts was finally approved by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, the single state charter school approved during the first petition cycle.

**Location.** State Charter Schools Commission (Boardroom)

CHAIRMAN KRAFT (*hits gavel*): Alright. We’re about to get started this morning. Thank you everyone that has come out this morning to our monthly State Charter Schools Commission meeting. We have an eventful morning as reflected on our agenda.

DIRECTOR HENDRIX: Thank you Chairman Kraft. This morning we will discuss and vote on seven charter petitions that have been submitted for our first petition cycle. Ced and I have corresponded with each of these schools and they have participated in interviews, along with fellow commissioners. Ced and I have provided you copies of our executive summaries for each of the schools, and our recommendation to either deny or approve their charter petitions. As we prepare to have our commissioners vote on the recommendations, we believe that it’s only fair for the groups to have a representative from each group to speak this morning, if they choose to do so.

*(Various individuals from each of the group take the podium and speak on behalf of their charter school petition, all which have been recommended for denial. Artesius takes the stand, as the final charter petitioner to speak. His school is the only recommended for approval).*

ARTESIUS: Mr. Chairman, Commissioners, Director Hendrix and staff—It brings me great pleasure to stand before you today, as you prepare to make a decision on our charter school, Utopian Academy for the Arts. I am humbly asking that you accept the staff’s recommendation to approve Utopian Academy for the Arts. It has been a long journey to get to this point today. As you might be aware, the application process for Utopian Academy for the Arts has extended

beyond a three year period. For the last three consecutive years, our charter petition has been denied by the Courtland County Board of Education, all without proper cause and review.

During this three year period, there have been countless efforts to ensure that Utopian Academy for the Arts is a high quality option for the parents and students of Courtland County, GA. I have taken this time with my board to develop a strong model that is unique, sustainable, and highly desirable by the community. Presently, in Courtland County, there are very few options for parents to access a high quality education. Your decision today, will allow our families the right to a quality educational program and experience. Again, I am humbly asking for your support.

Thank you. (*ARTESIUS walks back to seat*)

BOARD AUDIENCE (*cheers and claps*)

HOLLY: Son, you did a great job up there.

ARTESIUS: Thanks Ma. I just really hope they consider this.

HOLLY (*smiling to son*): Already said a prayer.

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: At this time we would like to thank each of the representatives that have come before us this morning to speak on behalf of their charter schools. At this time Commissioners, we will take a vote.

(*Motions are made to approve the recommendation for denial of six charter school applications.*)

*Following each motion, Commissions vote in favor of the recommendation.)*

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: Is there a motion for Cirrus Academy?—

COMMISSIONER 1: Motion to accept the recommendation for denial...

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: Is there a motion for Cobb Preparatory Academy?—

COMMISSIONER 2: Motion to accept the recommendation for denial...

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: Is there a motion for Georgia Fugees Academy?—

COMMISSIONER 3: Motion to accept the recommendation for denial...

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: Is there a motion for Hephzibah Charter Academy?—

COMMISSIONER 1: Motion to accept the recommendation for denial...

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: Is there a motion for International Charter School of Atlanta?—

COMMISSIONER 2: Motion to accept the recommendation for denial...

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: Is there a motion for Sports Leadership and Management Middle School?

COMMISSIONER 4: Motion to accept the recommendation for denial.

ARTESIUS (*to his mother*): I don't why, but I'm really nervous right now.

HOLLY: We got this son!

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: Is there a motion for Utopian Academy for the Arts?—

COMMISSIONER 3: Motion to accept the recommendation to ACCEPT...

COMMISSIONER 4: I second that motion.

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: We have a motion that has been seconded. I will call for questions. Being that there are no questions or need for discussions, all in favor—

COMMISSIONERS (*in unison*): I!!

CHAIRMAN KRAFT: The motion has been unanimously approved. Director Hendrix, do you have any comments.

BOARD AUDIENCE (*cheers and claps*)

DIRECTOR HENDRIX: Thank you, Chairman Kraft. I would like to go on the record by saying that the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia appreciates each of the schools that have participated in our first petition cycle. I know that this was also a very difficult meeting for those of you that were not approved. I would highly encourage those of you that were not approved to

Artesius...as his school did take three years before being approved. In fact, Artesius would you like to share any words of advice.

ARTESIUS (*approaches podium*): First of all, I'd like to say thank you Dr. Hendrix and Commissioners for giving us and the students of Courtland County, GA this opportunity. To those of you that were not approved this morning, I feel your sentiment. I do know how you feel...I have been where you are in this very moment, and I can relate. One thing that I will share that hopefully is encouraging news, is that the additional time that you have to prepare your school and further enhance what you already have in place, you will appreciate it in the long-run. Use this time to reflect on the weaknesses that were identified by the Commission staff. What are some things you can do to strengthen your overall program? Stay motivated because those children that you sought to support still need your help. I wish each of you the best luck, and if I may be of any assistance to any of you, please let me know.

DIRECTOR HENDRIX: Thank you Artesius for the words of encouragement.

ARTESIUS (*nods head*): No problem, Dr. Hendrix.

BOARD MEETING ATTEENDEE 1 (*stands in anger*): How DARE you! I can't believe you all approved only ONE school? Who does this? And what really are we supposed to learn from this school anyway? We go through ALL OF THIS red tape to have this constitutional amendment passed last year, we VOTE to bring you all back as a new authorizer, and you decide that you're only going to approve ONE SCHOOL? The nerve of you!!

DIRECTOR HENDRIX: Sir, myself or Ced would be more than willing to speak with you once the meeting is over, but I am going to have to ask you not to speak out of turn like this.

CHAIRMAN KRAFT (*nods head in disbelief of attendee*): Thank you, Director Hendrix. At this time, this brings us to the conclusion of our meeting. Commissioners, if there are no other points for discussion; I am going to ask for a motion for us to conclude our meeting.

COMMISSIONER 4: So moved, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN KRAFT (*knocks gavel*): This meeting is adjourned.

ARTESIUS (*to mother*): I'm happy right now, but I feel like I can't really embrace what just took place. I mean—in that short amount of time, I can't believe—that guy just ridiculed the Commission for just approving our school. And did you see his face when they said to reach out to me? It was like—such an idea was so beneath him...

DIRECTOR HENDRIX (*approaches Artesius*): Congratulations Artesius...and I'm sorry that—that guy did that.

ARTESIUS: It's not your fault. He's just upset. But you're right, that doesn't make what he did right.

HOLLY (*to Artesius*): You've worked hard son for this moment. You can't let him or any other person steal your joy. You've earned this! Mama is so proud of you.

ARTESIUS (*smiles*): Thanks Ma! Now the real work begins.

## **ACT THREE**



## Scene 1. “My Boss Sent Me Over Here to Walk Around the Building”

**Abstract.** A prospective parent seeking to enroll her children at Utopian Academy dialogs with the front office manager. As she expresses concerns of challenges she’s encountered with trying to officially enroll her children at Utopian, she finds out that in lieu of sending registration records, her son’s school submitted an unbelievable package. Also, later that morning, Utopian officials receive an unannounced and ambushed visit by a Courtland County Public Schools district official who informed Utopian staff they must immediately vacate the school building.

**Location.** *Utopian Academy for the Arts (Front Office)*

*(MRS. THOMAS, Utopian’s office manager, speaks to a new family enrolling at the school)*

MRS. THOMAS *(to parents walking out of door)*: Call me if you need anything, I will be here until about 4 o’clock today! *(Addresses parents walking in front office)*: Good morning, how are you?

PARENT: Good morning. I will be doing a lot better once I get my sons actually enrolled here in this school. I’ve been going back and forth with my sons’ school about their records.

MRS. THOMAS: What do you mean, what’s been going on with their records?

PARENT: Well, the first day I went to request their records, the school was extremely nosey about where I was withdrawing to place them. I didn’t want them all in my business, but one of my sons told them he was going to a new charter school in Rosewood. Lord—what he say THAT for! So at first they told me the counselor wasn’t in that day, and that I would need to see her before I could get the records. So the next day I go there to meet with the counselor, but the counselor tells me that she can’t find my sons’ records, something about them being sent to their feeder school—and no one can find their records.

MRS. THOMAS: Girl—that is awful.

PARENT: So *(pause)* you can imagine how I’ve been feeling.

MRS. THOMAS: So you finally got the records I see?

PARENT: But wait, before I even get to this point, let me tell you what they did the THIRD TIME I went over to this school. So I get there, and they give me the “run around” saying that the counselor couldn’t meet with me. I told them they have some nerve to tell me that after I done been around to that school two other times. So then, she “magically” gets out of this meeting she had been in all morning. Come to find out, she says the records had been in her office the WHOLE time, but she thought she already mailed them out. Long story short, she finally gives me their records and tells me that I cannot open the envelopes (*points to envelopes*) with the records, because if I do, ya’ll can’t take them. I wanted to so bad, because I had this feeling that she was up to something. (*hands envelopes to MRS. THOMAS*) I just need you to open it up so I can make sure I have everything I need and can get them enrolled so I can buy their uniforms and everything before school starts in a few weeks.

MRS. THOMAS: No worries! (*begins to open envelope and takes out stapled document, and shakes head*) Oh no...

PARENT: Oh no, what?

MRS. THOMAS: What school were your sons coming from?—

PARENT (*provides the name*)

MRS. THOMAS: We need to call them right now. (*hands stapled document to parent*) Look at what they sent over.

PARENT (*very furious as she looks at the document*): What in the HELL? They put a SCHOOL SUPPLY LIST stapled to some BLANK SHEETS OF PAPER?!

MRS. THOMAS: This is unbelievable.

*(Two hours later)*

*(Front office door bell rings)*

MRS. THOMAS: Pull the door! Good morning—

TOM WELLS: Who are you? You're not supposed to be in this building!

MRS. THOMAS: Excuse me sir, how may I help you?

TOM WELLS (*walks passed MRS. THOMAS*): My boss sent me over here—and YOU ARE NOT supposed to be in this building!

(*MRS. THOMAS rushes back in the front office to her phone*)

**Location.** *Utopian Academy for the Arts (Office of Executive Director)*

MRS. THOMAS (*calls Artesius' office phone*): Mr. Miller, I need you in the front office quick, there is a guy here that's telling us we need to get out of the building!

ARTESIUS: I'm on my way!— (*walks into hallway and sees Tom Wells approaching his office*)

ARTESIUS: Good morning sir, (*extends handshake*) Artesius Miller. What's your name?

TOM WELLS: My name is Tom Wells.

ARTESIUS: Please, come into my office so that we can talk. (*motions to Tim to sit, however, Tim continues to stand*)

TOM WELLS: My boss sent me over here to walk around the school, so that's what I'm here to do. He heard that there was a charter school in this building.

ARTESIUS: Well sir, we are a charter school. The name of our school is Utopian Academy for the Arts and we're a middle school; 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade...and we're open to all families here in the County.

TOM WELLS: Well SIR, you all not supposed to be in this building.

ARTESIUS: For what reasons?

TOM WELLS: One—This facility was condemned by the Courtland County School Board.

ARTESIUS: Condemned? Can you give me explicit examples by how it was condemned? (*walks over to desk*) I'm going to get a notepad so that I can accurately write this down.

TOM WELLS: Well—not condemned, it's just not feasible. The building is in no shape to operate as a public school because it has a poor roof structure, old HVAC systems, mold, and plumbing issues.

ARTESIUS: Is this related to a specific portion on the school property, or the entire property itself?

TOM WELLS: Up there in the front, when you first turn in.

ARTESIUS: (*although Artesius doesn't nod his head, he knows that Utopian does not occupy space on the building's front end*) Is that the only problem?

TOM WELLS: Two—The Courtland County School Board did not grant permission for Utopian Academy for the Arts to occupy any space in the old Rosewood Elementary School building.

ARTESIUS: Well, we have a lease for the building, and we did our proper due diligence before we moved in.

TOM WELLS: And three—Courtland County Public Schools still owns and operates this school building property.

ARTESIUS: Does this mean that the Courtland County School Board pays the utility, water, and other monthly bills for the site?

TOM WELLS: Yes, that is correct. If something were to happen to this building, Courtland County Public Schools would be held liable. So I advise you all to begin to move everything out of this building before there becomes a problem.

ARTESIUS: That's the PURPOSE for having commercial insurance, which we are currently bonded, including our landlord, and whomever they are held responsible. Your boss that you've referred to a few times, what's his name? I want to reach out to him and to the superintendent—

TOM WELLS: His name is Jim Hemmingway.

ARTESIUS: Thank you, I will contact him. In the meantime, I am going to request, Mr. Welch, that—if you need to come back over here to the building, that you please make an appointment. In a few weeks our students will be here, and that is the proper thing to do, when children are present.

TOM WELLS: *(without saying anything in response, heads for door)*

ARTESIUS *(walks and sits behind computer at desk and begins to draft a memo to send to Jim Hemmingway and superintendent)*

## Scene 2. “It’s the First Day of School, But There Won’t Be School”

**Abstract.** Unlike any other public school in Georgia, Utopian Academy is about to have the worst start for any school opening its doors for the very first time. Due to threats of possible violations of city codes and the possible evacuation by the local fire chief (if building is occupied by students), Artesius is forced to share unfortunate news with his school community.

**Location:** *Utopian Academy for the Arts.* 6:00AM

ARTESIUS (*on the telephone*): Rod, you’re on your way?

RON: Yes sir, I should be there by 6:15AM.

AM: Perfect. I will see you soon. I’m gonna need you today brother.

RON: My cameras are fully charged and I will be onsite to get full coverage for you.

*(Artesius walks in main office)*

ARTESIUS: MRS. THOMAS, how are you this morning?

MRS. THOMAS: I’m excited Mr. Miller! I know you have to be as well, right?

ARTESIUS: (*hesitantly*) I am excited, just a little nervous (*shaking head*)..that’s all.

MRS. THOMAS: Well son, it ain’t nothing that the good Lord don’t have your back on. It’s the first day of school, in the first school year. I can imagine that I would be a little nervous too.

ARTESIUS: Have you seen MR. Benjamin?

MRS. THOMAS: I think he’s in his office.

ARTESIUS: Thank you.

*(Mr. Benjamin sees Artesius walking towards office)*

MR. BENJAMIN: Good morning—Mr. Miller, have you gotten anymore news since yesterday’s meeting?

ARTESIUS: Good morning. I have not, and that’s what’s driving me crazy. I stayed up late last night, close to about 3AM with my mentor, and her publicist to help get the word out. A press

release went out this morning to each of the local media circuits. We should have the local news stations, the *AJC*, and the *Courtland News Daily* present.

MR. BENJAMIN: Good. Artesius, I've been running charter schools for nearly twenty years, and I've never heard of a school being threatened to not open its doors before. I've never seen something like this.

ARTESIUS: It's sad, but welcome to Courtland County, GA.

MR. BENJAMIN: Artesius, isn't Courtland County primarily made up of Black people?

ARTESIUS: Yes sir.

ARTESIUS: I came by to see you because we will need to inform the teachers and staff to let them know what's going on. Our attorney should be here right at 7:00AM. I've asked him to come because I know there will be several questions, and we want to be proactive and not reactive when it comes to communicating with them and soon enough our parents and students.

MR. BENJAMIN: I agree. As I see the teachers arriving this morning, I will let them know to meet in the front office at 7:15AM.

ARTESIUS: Thanks Benjamin.

*(Utopian staff is assembled in the school's front office)*

ARTESIUS: Good morning team.

UTOPIAN STAFF: Good morning Mr. Miller!

ARTESIUS: As you all know, today is scheduled to be a big day for us. Unfortunately, I have some "not the greatest news" to share. We won't be having school today.

TEACHER 1: Wait—what? No school, what's going on Mr. Miller?

TEACHER 2: Wow!

TEACHER 3: Can we do anything to help?

TEACHER 1: What's stopping us from having school?

TEACHERS 4-5 (*in small conversation*): I wonder if he didn't have all his paperwork together.

How does something like this happen, the day of?

*(sighs continue, small conversations erupt in front office)*

ARTESIUS: Let me have everyone's attention please. Thank you. You all must understand this has to be extremely difficult for me. Yesterday, there was a meeting held here in Rosewood. The meeting included some folks from the Courtland County school board, the city of Rosewood, and Mr. Benjamin was also present. To sum up the meeting, it was shared that, "if we allow students in our building to have school...there would be problems.

UTOPIAN STAFF (*begins to gasp, chatter, and to worry*)

ARTESIUS: Let me regain your attention please—let me have your attention please.

TEACHER 3 (*raises hand*): Have the students and parents been informed?

ARTESIUS: They have not...before sharing anything with them, I wanted to ensure each of you knew first. If you all wouldn't mind joining me, I would like to head out into the parking lot so that they can be properly informed.

*(About 30 minutes later. Utopian parents, staff, and students interact in the school's parking lot.*

*Local media outlets interview parents and students)*

PARENT 1: Mr. Miller, I know this might not be appropriate for you as the school leader to do but do you mind if I lead us in prayer?

ARTESIUS: If that's not a problem with anyone that stands out here, I don't mind.

*(Utopian school community embraces and begins to pray)*

ARTESIUS: If I could get everyone's attention. (*pause*) Thank you. This has been a very difficult morning as each of us would not expect to be told that we can't start school, because we



don't have a business license, along with other matters that are not requirements for charter schools to occupy a building. I ASSURE you that my board, leadership team, and I have done everything that is expected and necessary to start school today. Many of you have followed our school's journey to getting approved and saw the many challenges it took for us to get to that point—You have some people that just want to do anything necessary to prevent our success. They didn't want to see us get our charter approved, yet, we did. Now they don't want to see us open our doors. I have asked our school's attorney to join us this morning. We have been working closely together to get us in the building.

PARENT 2: So there won't be school tomorrow?—

ARTESIUS: Unfortunately no.

PARENTS (*gasps and begin to grow more concerned*)

ARTESIUS (*to attorney*): Ray you want to?—

RAY: I have reached out to the school board's attorney and the city attorney to find out exactly what the school needs to do to allow your children in the building to go to school. The problem is—there has not been anything in writing and the rationale for why we're being told the students can't enter the building keeps changing. Mr. Miller and his board have engaged my firm for necessary legal intervention, if need be, we're just looking for them to have good faith and do the right thing before we take them to court.—

ARTESIUS: If everyone has their phone, I would like you to take down this number...7-7-0-4-7-3—. That's the number to the Courtland County Board of Education. There is a school board meeting scheduled for this evening at 5:00PM. If it is within your will, I am asking you to be PRESENT. At every board meeting they allow public comment. It is important for us to get

answers on why the City of Rosewood won't let us in the building. Also, if you have time this morning, I am asking that you join our school staff and myself as we travel to the Rosewood City Hall to meet with the mayor. We must get answers from both sides—the City of Rosewood says that the school board doesn't want us in the building and that we don't have permission to be in the building—but then the school board says that Rosewood's blocking us from using the building—it's the City that's preventing us because we don't have a business license.

PARENTS (*gasps and chatter begin*)

PARENT 3: It just sounds like a BIG MESS. It seems like they don't want this school to open at all if you ask me!

PARENT 1: We're in this thing with you Mr. Miller. We're with you all the way!

ARTESIUS: I appreciate that. Let's head to meet with the mayor...we need to get our kids in school!

*(Fifteen minutes later. Hundreds of Utopian supporters begin to arrive at Rosewood City Hall)*

**Location.** Rosewood City Hall & Town Center

ARTESIUS (*to receptionist*): Hi—good morning. We're here to speak with the mayor.

RECEPTIONIST: Good morning—do you have an appointment.

ARTESIUS: No ma'am we don't.

RECEPTIONIST: The matter that this is concerning?

ARTESIUS: Utopian Academy for the Arts. The new charter school around the corner.

RECEPTIONIST: One moment please, let me see if the mayor is available. (*calls mayor on phone*) Mayor? Yes, they're here!

RECEPTIONIST (*to Artesius & Utopian supporters*): We are opening up our board room. If you all will travel over, the mayor will be with you shortly.

*(Utopian staff, parents, students and local media assemble in the board room awaiting for Mayor's entrance.)*

MAYOR DEVILLE: Hey ya'll! Ya'll been waiting on me a long time? Chile—I'm so sorry...you know it takes me a while to get around on this bad knee. Now which one of you is in charge?

UTOPIAN SUPPORTERS (*point to Artesius who stands*)

ARTESIUS: That would be me, Mayor.

MAYOR DEVILLE: You a young little thing—handsome too. How can I help you sugar?

ARTESIUS: Mayor, we appreciate you taking time to meet with us this morning. As you can imagine we are very disgusted over the thought that our students could not go to school today. We've also been told that we would have challenges with them going to school in the future until we get permission from the City.

MAYOR DEVILLE: Well sweetie—you can trust and believe it's not the MAYOR that doesn't want your beautiful little children to be able to go to school. (*glances at students*) They all look so nice in their school uniforms. I honestly don't know what's going on—

ARTESIUS: Mayor—that seems to be the problem...no one seems to know what's going on. I guess the bigger picture is that there are people from the City of Rosewood saying that our kids can't enter our building. As the face of the City—if you're saying it's not the city holding us back—you have some people misrepresenting your city and I think you might want to fix that.

MAYOR DEVILLE: I agree—but the school board said they didn't want ya'll in that building—

UTOPIAN SUPPORTERS (*gasps loudly in excitement and shock*)

MAYOR DEVILLE: Lord—chile—I didn't mean to say that. Ya'll got these television reporters and cameras in here and through me off.

ARTESIUS: Mayor, I thought you didn't know what was going on?

MAYOR DEVILLE: Well, I don't—I just heard someone say that...that's just “he say, she say”—doesn't really matter anyway.

UTOPIAN SUPPORTERS (*begins to chatter and become embarrassed by the mayor's comments and actions*)

MAYOR DEVILLE: This is what I'm going to suggest. Ya'll need to go talk to the school board..caz Mayor DeVille ain't got a bone to pick in this fight baby. That's right—sugar I don't want no one saying that Mayor DeVille wouldn't allow these sweet babies the right to go to school. (*Looks to media circuits*) Ya'll make sure you get that on camera please. You all have a great day now (*stands and exits room*).

PARENT 2: So she just stood there and lied to us in our face?

PARENT 1: That's exactly what happened!

ARTESIUS: We didn't get answers.

### **Scene 3. “While Suing the City in Court, Rosewood Fire Department Evacuates Our Students”**

**Abstract.** After being prevented from allowing students to enter its school building for a full week Artesius files an injunction and temporary restraining order against the Courtland County Board of Education and the City of Rosewood. While in court, waiting on the judge to make his ruling, Utopian students are evacuated from its school building by Rosewood Fire Department.

**Location (Interior):** Utopian Academy for the Arts’ Main Office

NPR REPORTS: *“It’s the second time within a week, that students could not complete their first day of school. Students at Utopian Academy for the Arts were turned away by city officials, yet again.”*

ARTESIUS (*Addresses school staff*): Good morning team. Today will be a better day, our students are here, our parents are happy, we will continue to get through this struggle. The thought of them delaying the start of our school year has been rough, but we are Utopian. We are fighters.

MRS. THOMAS: Good luck today in court, Mr. Miller. I pray that the court supports your request to make the City and the School Board stop these shenanigans. This is a public school for God’s sake!

ARTESIUS: You are right. We will be okay. I shall see you after the judge makes his ruling.

**Location (Exterior): Courtland County Superior Courthouse**

*(A long line of Utopian supporters and local citizens are seen standing in line as they prepare to proceed through the security entrance of the Courtland County Court House)*

ARTESIUS: Can you believe all these folks showed up? I mean, it’s terrible that the school board and the city of Rosewood are blocking our kids from starting school. I’m just grateful that we have the support of our parents to help us fight for what we know has been injustice. Ray-- thank you for serving as our legal counsel.

RAY: This definitely helps our case as we deliver our defense to the judge. We should be in good shape.

**Location (Interior): Courtland County Superior Courthouse**

ARTESIUS: (*On the phone*) The courtroom is packed, the media is here, we also have parents present. How are the kids doing at school?

MR. BENJAMIN: They're doing well, you don't worry about us here. I'm holding down the fort.

ARTESIUS: Thanks Frank. About another fifteen minutes, and the judge should be out from his chambers to get started. I will keep you posted once everything un-rattles.

CASSANDRA MILTON: Hi Mr. Miller, I was waiting for you to get off the phone.

ARTESIUS: Good morning Mrs. Moore.

CASSANDRA MILTON: You know, we heard you guys had those kids in that building. Now, didn't we tell you, you needed our permission to do that? You might want to make a phone call to your school.

ARTESIUS: Why is that?

CASSANDRA MILTON: Because we are sending the Rosewood Fire Department to evacuate your building.

ARTESIUS: You can't be serious.

CASSANDRA MILTON: Don't try me.

ARTESIUS: (*On the phone*) Frank, I want you to listen to me, and listen to me closely. I was just informed by Mrs. Milton from the City of Rosewood, that they have prompted the fire marshal to evacuate our building. Now I don't know if there is any truth to this, but we need to be prepared in the event this is a real threat.

*(Five Minutes Later)*

**Location (Interior) Courtroom 3B**

BAILIFF: All rise for the Honorable Judge Mark Simon.

ARTESIUS: *(Glancing at phone)* Incoming text reads, “*There are 5 fire trucks here at the school!*” “*We have started to alert parents.*” I’m not believing this.

JUDGE SIMON: You may be seated. It is my understanding that we are here this morning because we have a new school that is having some conflicts with one of our cities. Now it appears that this charter school has been looking to come into this county for the last three years, and of which, the county’s school board has denied them each time. Now that they have gone to the state, and received authorization from them, folks on the north end of the county are trying to block them from opening their doors. I mean what is it? It seems like every time you *(the city)* have asked them to do something, they have done it. And you keep changing the requirements, as soon as they fulfill your last request.

CITY ATTORNEY: Well judge, they have done things against the city’s will. Prime example, they have those kids in that building right now, and they have not received all proper inspections needed for them to have children in there.

JUDGE SIMON: Well if it’s the inspections that’s holding those children back from going to school. I am going to mandate that you guys go over there and inspect that building. Let me also go on the record by saying that this school will not be evicted or have any other repercussions, that I’ve heard people saying. This is a public school for God’s sake. I am ruling in favor of the school’s request of the emergency injunction and temporary restraining order against the City of Rosewood.

**Location (Exterior) Utopian Academy for the Arts Parking Lot 11:15AM**



ARTESIUS: So we won our case this morning, but the city has hurt our school yet again. They are killing us.

MRS. THOMAS: We had another 30 students withdraw today.

MR. BENJAMIN (*nodding head in disbelief*): Chick-Fil-A came by today and donated lunches for the students. They heard about us on the news. We have about ten more students waiting on parents to get picked up.

ARTESIUS: Thank you. We will get through this.

#### Scene 4. “The Governor Visits Utopian Academy!”

**Abstract.** The date is August 19, 2014. The Governor of Georgia visits Utopian Academy for the Arts following the series of events that delayed the start of the first school year. The Governor praises Utopian and school founder, Artesius for his efforts of perseverance to open the school’s doors.

**Location.** Utopian Academy for the Arts

ARTESIUS (*addresses student population*): Good morning EAGLES!

STUDENTS: Good morning, MR. MILLER!!

ARTESIUS: Today we have a very special visitor. We have the governor of Georgia in the building!

STUDENTS: (*cheers and applauds*)

ARTESIUS: Students, I want to put it into perspective for how BIG this is. First of all, it is very rare that you have the governor of any state coming to visit a single school. Secondly, with everything that our school community has experienced, everyone around the state followed closely to see why someone or any entity—for that matter...would prevent students—(*points to students*) each and every one of you from the opportunity to get a quality education. In fact, it was just a few days after we officially opened, that I received a phone call from the capitol. I was informed that Governor Denver had been made aware of the several challenges we experienced—and that it was not right—Not only did he want to make that clear to me—but he wanted to let everyone from across the state know that he is standing alongside our school. Guys—that’s MAJOR! He has taken time out of his VERY busy schedule to be with us this morning.—At this time, I would like to bring to the stage, Governor Nick Denver.

GOVERNOR DENVER: Thank you, Artesius. Let’s give your incredible visionary school founder and leader, Mr. Miller another round of applause.

STUDENTS: (*cheers and applauds*)

GOVERNOR DENVER: Thank you students. I am excited to be here this morning. As you may know, last year we had an independent charter school commission—that was created as a result of a state constitutional amendment that authorized the independent charter school commission. There were some sixteen applications last year for charters, but only YOUR school was the only applicant granted a charter. You guys made history as the first state charter school, under this new independent charter schools commission!

STUDENTS: (*stands, cheers and applauds*)

GOVERNOR DENVER: I was very impressed by the art presentations and performances that were shared on the stage this morning. In fact, I was very impressed by the students of your choir. Now I might be boisterous for doing this, but I am going to say that I feel very confident in my re-election. Should I win my re-election for governor of Georgia, I want to invite the choir from Utopian Academy for the Arts to sing at my inauguration!

STUDENTS: (*stands, cheers and applauds*)

GOVERNOR DENVER: Lastly students, as Mr. Miller has expressed my sentiments with you earlier about the unfortunate acts by some adults to prevent you from receiving your education, I am making it a priority for state lawmakers to establish legislation to protect schools like yours from a delayed opening, when the school has done everything appropriate and necessary to start. I commend each of you for withstanding the storm of local politics and staying committed to sticking with this school. It is my goal to come back and visit you all very soon. Keep up the great work!

## Scene 5. “There is a State Law Named After Our School!”

**Abstract.** The date is April 21, 2015. After passing a unanimous vote by the Georgia State Senate and House of Representatives, *HB 372: The Utopian Academy Act* is signed into law by Governor Nick Denver.

**Location.** Georgia State Capitol

ARTESIUS (*addresses students in attendance*) Eagles...you have determined to make history yet again! Years from now, future students will read about this in their social studies textbooks. Today—the piece of legislation that has carried our school’s name will be signed into law by Governor Denver.

STUDENTS (*smile in excitement*):

ARTESIUS: Can someone tell us the process for a legislative bill to become law?

STUDENTS (*eagerly waves their hands to be called upon*)

ARTESIUS: Yes, CISELY?

CISELY (*smiles*): Well Mr. Miller...I believe that first there has to be a lawmaker that’s interested in a topic that can impact citizens across the state.—Next they have to introduce that to the subcommittee that’s aligned with that topic, then it goes to the committee, and then to the house or senate floor—depending on if the person is a house representative or state senator.

ARTESIUS: That’s correct—

CISELY: From there, the bill must be passed on both sides of the capitol, the house floor and the state senate floor—then it lands on the governor’s desk awaiting for approval?

ARTESIUS: CISELY, that was a great explanation! Guys, let’s give your classmate a round of applause!

STUDENTS (*cheers and applauds*)

ARTESIUS: The unique thing about this particular bill—"House Bill 372: The Utopian Academy for the Arts Act" is that when the bill made it's way to the house and senate floors—it passed unanimously. Do you all know what that means? (*sees student waiving hand*) Yes

GEOFFREY?

GEOFFREY: It means that everyone said yes to it?

ARTESIUS: That is correct, son! Every single person both republican and democrat—Black and White—they all said yes. And it's very rare that you get the support of all state lawmakers to agree on a single subject.

GEOFFREY: Mr. Miller, what does House Bill 372 mean?

ARTESIUS: Great question—this means that once the Georgia Department of Education has signed off on a facility that a charter school will use as its school building, no school board, city, county, or other local municipality can create additional requirements for that charter school to occupy that building. That was the case for us. Although the Georgia DOE gave us permission to use our building, people from the school board and the city of Rosewood would not acknowledge that— and they blocked you guys from going to school—

CISELY: For two full weeks—

ARTESIUS: Yes CISELY—you're right.

MRS. DELANCY: Mr. Miller, I think they're about to begin—we might want to make our way over to the staging area.

ARTESIUS: Thank you!

GOVERNOR DENVER (*gestures for students to stand on stage*): Are those the students from Utopian Academy I see over there? Today is a historic day for your school, charter schools,

really all schools across Georgia for that matter. And guess what? I have a Utopian blazer just like yours that I'm going to wear.

*(Governor Denver is handed a specially embroidered Utopian blazer to wear as he prepares to sign HB 372: The Utopian Academy Act into law)*

GOVERNOR DENVER: Congratulations guys! You have now been signed into law.

ARTESIUS: Governor, you don't mind if we take a picture with you, do you?

GOVERNOR DENVER: Not at all!

*(Governor Denver, Artesius, Utopian parents and students pose as they take picture)*

GOVERNOR DENVER: Students be sure to keep up the great work, I want to keep reading about the awesome things you all are doing. I will be back to visit you!

STUDENTS: Thank you Governor Denver!!

ARTESIUS: Thank you Governor for your continued support to our school. We couldn't have done this without you.

GOVERNOR DENVER: Thank you Artesius for your vision and leadership.

## **ACT FOUR**

## Scene 1. “They Took Down Our Sign!”

**Abstract.** Two weeks before the start of the second school year, Rosewood city officials inform Utopian that they have violated local city codes in relation to the school’s building signage. In addition to fining the school, city officials remove the school’s banner that was previously mounted outside the building.

**Location.** Utopian Academy for the Arts (*Office of Executive Director*)

MRS. BELL (*walks into Artesius’ office*): Mr. Miller—I know it was early so you might not have noticed, but do you recall seeing anything out of place when you arrived this morning?

ARTESIUS: No—I didn’t recall anything out of place—

*(Mrs. Bell begins to look worried)*

ARTESIUS: But now you’re making me think I need to go outside and check. Mrs. Bell, you’re making me nervous by the way you’re looking.

MRS. BELL (*with looks of suspicion*): Mr. Miller I think you do need to go ahead and take a look outside. Drive out and then drive back in.

*(Artesius exits for his car to drive around the school’s campus, and returns moments later)*

MRS. BELL: I noticed that when I pulled in this morning I didn’t see our sign outside. Did it fall down?

ARTESIUS: (*hands Mrs. Bell notice*) No. (*pause*) The city of Rosewood came over this weekend and took down our sign. They left this notice on the front door. I guess we both missed it when we came in this morning.

MRS. BELL (*shakes head*): Mr. Miller, can they even do this?

ARTESIUS: No. And they’re using the pretenses that we have to have a business license in order to have any signage outside our building. On top of that...they hit us with some very hefty fines for having our sign up WITHOUT a business license.



MRS. BELL: Miller you gonna have to excuse me for my ignorance, but do we even need a business license?

ARTESIUS: Bell...there is a state law named after our school preventing them from even asking us for a business license. So to answer your question—no we don't.

MRS. BELL: They know exactly what they're doing...trying to discourage families before school starts again, have people thinking we did something wrong—What school doesn't have a sign FOR GOD SAKES?

ARTESIUS: Our school has been stripped completely naked of our identity outside of this building. They don't want folks to know where we are. Hell—they don't even want folks to know that we're here to serve them.

MRS. BELL: Be encouraged Miller.

ARTESIUS: Trust and believe that—I have to for the sake of our kids here at this school.

## Scene 2. “We Will Shut Down Their Kitchen”

**Abstract:** Rosewood city officials send code enforcement to Utopian and prompt the school to obtain a business license within a 24 hour period, or risk the interference of shutting down their food service program.

**Location.** Utopian Academy for the Arts (Mr. Miller’s Office)

*(Mr. Miller’s Office, office telephone rings)*

MS. HILL: *(on the phone)* Mr. Miller, I called to see if you were in your office, I need to come over to your office quick! The code enforcer from Rosewood just left and said we had one day to get a business license or their going to shut down our kitchen.

ARTESIUS: *(on the phone)* Yes, I’m here. Come over!

*(Ms. Hill arrives to Artesius’ office)*

ARTESIUS: Tell me what happened, what’s going on?

MS. HILL: So—Ms. Monica went outside to take the trash from breakfast this morning—When she stepped outside, she said there was a guy standing on the loading dock of our cafeteria. He asked her, “Who’s over your kitchen?” So she came to get me. In my mind, I thought this was a parent trying to check their child’s balance or something. As soon as I got to the door, he handed me *(points to violation notice)* this notice and says we have one day to get the paperwork, OR ELSE. And then he just walked off!

ARTESIUS *(reads violation notice)*: Or else?

MS. HILL: I couldn’t even ask him a question, he just darted off! Mr. Miller, why won’t they leave us alone? Do you think they can do this?

ARTESIUS: No, they can’t. Where’s your phone, we need to call the Department of Education.

*(On the telephone)*

LYNN BROWN: Good morning, thank you for calling the nutrition division of the Georgia Department of Education, how may I help you?

ARTESIUS: Hi Lynn. This is Artesius Miller reaching out to you from Utopian Academy for the Arts.

LYNN BROWN: Oh yes, how are you this morning?

ARTESIUS: Honestly Lynn, I'm not quite sure how to answer your question. We just received a visit from the Code Enforcer of Rosewood—

LYNN BROWN: They're not antagonizing you guys again, are they?

ARTESIUS: This morning the code enforcer provided MS. Hill a "violation notice" that requires us to receive a business license in one day—

LYNN BROWN: A violation notice? One day for a business license? Let me call them to see what's going on. Do you have a number?

ARTESIUS: Yes, its 6-7-8—

LYNN BROWN: Do they not know that you're a public school? Or that you operate as a non-profit? They cannot treat you guys like this!

ARTESIUS: Lynn, you and I both know that they do know the answers to BOTH of those questions.

LYNN BROWN: Let me call them, and I will call you back shortly.

ARTESIUS & MS. HILL (*on speaker*): Thank you Lynn!

(*Five minutes later*)

**Location.** *Utopian Academy for the Arts (Mr. Miller's Office)*

ARTESIUS: Hey there- So, we have a problem.

MRS. DELANCY: Let me hear it, sir.

ARTESIUS: The code enforcer from Rosewood just left here a few minutes ago.

MRS. DELANCY: For what?

ARTESIUS: He came over and gave Ms. Hill a violation notice that says we need to have a business license on file in one day.

MRS. DELANCY: A business license? Have you called Ray?

ARTESIUS: Actually, I haven't called him yet. I just got off the phone with the DOE to see if there's any validity behind this visit, and of course it's not.

MRS. DELANCY: Okay, let's go ahead and call Ray to bring him in the loop. Thank you for staying on top of this sir.

ARTESIUS: Yes ma'am. I will circle back with you to bring you up to speed.

*(Another five minutes later)*

MS. HILL: Mr. Miller, Lynn's calling back!

ARTESIUS: Okay, put it on speaker please.

LYNN BROWN: Good morning again, guys. So I've rallied a team here at the Department of Education to assist with this situation. I just spoke with a representative from the City of Rosewood. I acknowledged who I am, and the reason for my call. They indicated that the school does not need an occupational tax permit, but your food service vendor does. They did tell me that if they don't apply and get a permit within the next 24 hours, they will shut down your kitchen.

MS. HILL: Oh my God!

ARTESIUS: *(to Ms. Hill)* They won't be able to do this. You can't stress. We're gonna get this worked out.

LYNN BROWN: I would suggest that you instruct your food service vendor to apply for the permit application this morning, you don't need them to be able to hold anything against you.

ARTESIUS: Will do. Thank you again for your support, Lynn. We will call you back once we get this resolved.

ARTESIUS: Ms. Hill, please have the vendor pick up an application this morning so that this can be submitted ASAP!

*(Two hours later)*

MS. HILL: Mr. Miller, our vendor has gone over to the City of Rosewood to get the application submitted. She informed me that when she went to see the City, they informed her that they are not going to issue her an occupational tax permit unless they had a food service permit on file with the Courtland County Board of Education. But Mr. Miller, we're not even a part of the Courtland County Board of Education. This is a catch-22.

*(Artesius cell phone rings)*

ARTESIUS: This is Artesius. Hey Ray—

RAY: Hey man, sorry I missed your call earlier. I hate to hear that Rosewood seems to be giving you guys a hard time again down there.

ARTESIUS: We need your help man.

RAY: I heard back from the City's attorney and they seem to be coming really aggressive with your food service program. *(reading an email from the City of Rosewood's attorney)*. They're saying that since you all have students coming through your lunch lines paying for food, that's like them ordering food from McDonald's. Wow. I cannot believe that they just compared your food service program to McDonald's. They're also saying that since you operate a "commercial

kitchen”, you all need a fence around your dumpster. Man— I can’t believe these folks from Rosewood. This is just nonsense.

ARTESIUS: Ray, can they shut down our kitchen? I mean, they told the DOE earlier today that they would shut down our kitchen.

RAY: I would doubt very seriously they can, but I will draft a “Cease and Desist” and send over.

### Scene 3. “Why Won’t the Courtland County School Board Turn On Our Heat?”

**Abstract.** Historically, Utopian school officials have not had the autonomy to operate the school building’s HVAC systems, which have now become a challenge due to the increasingly colder temperatures with the change into winter season. The larger challenge is that Courtland County Public Schools controls the building’s HVAC system and is not willing to enable the winter settings.

**Location.** Utopian Academy for the Arts (Executive Director’s Office)

*(Students transition between classes wearing coats to stay warm because the building has temperatures that are nearly colder than temperatures outside.)*

ARTESIUS *(on cell phone with Courtland School’s Director of Facilities)*: Good morning, this is ARTESIUS—

STEVE COX *(in disgruntled voice)*: This is Steve Cox. I was asked to contact you concerning the operation and control of the HVAC units at Utopian Academy.

ARTESIUS: Thank you for calling...it’s freezing here in our building. Is it possible we can get someone to come by? It’s colder inside the school than it is outdoors.

STEVE COX: This is just a courtesy call, Mr. Miller. As I’ve stated several times in the past, CCPS Maintenance Department has no remote access or control over the heating and cooling or any other system in the facility. We’ve walked the building on several occasions with either you or members of your staff. My suggestion, is for you to contact the HVAC company called Trane, they should be able to help you—

ARTESIUS: I’m sorry, I think you might have us confused—no one from the district has been here to our school to do a walk-through. This was supposed to happen when we signed our lease but it never took place.

STEVE COX: Good luck. *(hangs up phone)*

TEACHER 1 (*looks into Mr. Miller's office*): Hey there, any luck with getting someone to see about our heat?

ARTESIUS (*nods head*): Not yet, but I'm still working on it.

TEACHER 1: We know you are. Thanks Mr. Miller.

*(Later that afternoon, after visiting each of the classrooms and offices without heat, ARTESIUS returns to his office to review several emails from Courtland County Public Schools*

*SUPERINTENDENT and board members.*

*(For performance, the following emails will be shared onstage by projector and read offstage by actors.)*

SUPERINTENDENT (*email directed to ARTESIUS*):

*"Mr. Miller, as the tenant, it is your responsibility to have repairs done on the building. I cannot fathom to understand why you insist to contact our school board members for issues that don't involve them. Instead of contacting our board members, your first point of contact should be the SUPERINTENDENT. It is my understanding that we will try to have someone from the district at the school tomorrow."*

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND (*email directed to SUPERINTENDENT*):

*"Mrs. Vandyke, this makes no sense. We have spent a whole day discussing why these children in that building don't have any heat. I just want you to know that all of these back and forth messages to that school are on email...which means that someone could request them if they wanted. The way that we have communicated with Mr. Miller and his school is embarrassing. You better remember, those are taxpayer's children in that building."*

SUPERINTENDENT (*email directed to BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND*):



*“It is my understanding that we will try to have someone from the district at the school tomorrow.”*

BOARD MEMBER 3/MS. GRAND (*email directed to SUPERINTENDENT*):

*“I am so disappointed at the attitude that we have shown to this school. I am going to have to pray over what steps I need to take regarding this attitude. As I stated before, no other board/district has such a negative attitude toward a charter school in their county other than the Courtland County Board of Education.”*

*(The next morning at 8:00am)*

**Location.** Utopian Academy for the Arts (Parking Lot)

*(While standing outside greeting late students arriving to school, he notices six vans marked “Courtland County Public Schools” arriving on campus.)*

ARTESIUS: Good morning, welcome to our school. We appreciate you all coming first thing this morning, our students will be thankful very soon.

CCPS FACILITY REPRESENTATIVE 1: No problem sir— Our boss Mr. Steve Cox is in the van. Once he hops off of his call, he will be coming over to you shortly.

CCPS FACILITY REPRESENTATIVE 2: If you don’t mind, we’re going to go ahead and get on top of your roofs so we can see what we got going on here.

ARTESIUS: No problem, please do what you have to do.

STEVE COX (*approaches ARTESIUS*): Good morning, you must be Mr. Miller?

ARTESIUS: Yes sir... that would be me.

STEVE COX: Okay. Our guys are going spend a little time on your units to see what’s going on.

CCPS FACILITY REPRESENTATIVE 2: Boss, they haven’t changed out the units up on top...these are the same units as our other schools.

ARTESIUS: We haven't touched anything up there, and honestly, we wouldn't even have the money to change out any HVAC units. (*directed to CCPS FACILITY REPRESENTATIVE 2*) Is this something that you all can do today? Can you turn the units on?

CCPS FACILITY REPRESENTATIVE 2: Yes sir—

STEVE COX (*looks at CCPS FACILITY REPRESENTATIVE 2 with disgust, but speaks to ARTESIUS*): To answer your question Mr. Miller...yes we could. But this building is not within our jurisdiction to do so.

ARTESIUS: Huh? You mean that you all just came over here for nothing?

STEVE COX: No sir, we came over here to assess the situation. We have not been given any orders to do anything to this building. I like my job, and I'm not going to be ACCUSED of doing anything with tax payers dollars that I'm not supposed to.

ARTESIUS: I'm not believing this— So you all are just here to see if we have the same units, but you're not going to turn the heat on? I have 200 kids in that building that are freezing right now.

STEVE COX (*nods head*): No sir. That would be above my pay grade and I can't make that shot. You can call the Superintendent and see what she wants us to do...but I have to take my orders from her, not you.

ARTESIUS (*dials Board Member 3/Ms. Grand on telephone*): They're refusing to turn on the heat...saying our building is not within their jurisdiction.

(*A few moments later*)

STEVE COX (*answers his ringing phone*): Yes ma'am...okay, will do. We will turn it on.

ARTESIUS: Thank God!

STEVE COX: This is the last time we're gonna be doing anything like this—Ya'll have a good day.

ARTESIUS: Thank you, Mr. Cox. If this was the last good deed, that's okay, we will take it, our kids now have heat.

#### Scene 4. “Who Triggered the Fire Alarm?”

**Abstract.** Minutes after conducting a lock-down drill at Utopian Academy, sounds from the building’s fire alarm begin to echo throughout the hallways. After investigating the number of possible causes to trigger the alarm, Artesius discovers that it was engaged by two individuals from...

**Location.** Utopian Academy for the Arts

MS. PINNINGTON (*over walkie talkie*): And that’s a clear team. We will go back to our regular schedules shortly. Listen for Mrs. BELL to come over the intercom system for students to be dismissed.

*(Exactly ten seconds later, the fire alarm sounds throughout the school building)*

ARTESIUS (*over walkie talkie*): Pinnington, is that you?

MS. PINNINGTON: No Miller, I actually thought that was you that set this.

ARTESIUS: No it’s not me—hang on for one second, let me go up to the front end to see what’s going on.

MS. PINNINGTON: Copy.

*(Artesius runs to the north end of the school’s campus, an area that’s not occupied, nor a part of Utopian Academy for the Arts. As soon as Artesius arrives, there are two gentlemen standing by the fire alarm panel. Both gentlemen are wearing polo shirts that read, “Courtland County Public Schools”)*

ARTESIUS (*to himself*): I know that they did not do this!

ARTESIUS (*to visitors*): Good morning—you all didn’t have anything to do with this, did you?

CCPS VISTOR 1: I’m not sure what you’re talking about.

ARTESIUS: The alarm that’s going off. Did you all do anything to that panel.

CCPS VISTOR 2: Oh no—

ARTESIUS: May I ask what bring you guys over here to our school?

CCPS VISITOR 1: We just came by to see if anyone was up here.

*(Artesius manages to disable the fire alarm and walks the perimeter of the school building to check for smoke or possible fires. Staff and students begin to assemble outside of the building in the rain, as if there was a drill.)*

ARTESIUS *(over walkie talkie)*: Pinnington are you still on walkie?

MS. PINNINGTON: I'm here Miller.

ARTESIUS: Copy. I'm not sure how this happened, but I am going to investigate. Let's get these kids out of the rain.

*(Students reenter building and Artesius returns to his office)*

ARTESIUS: I've pulled the camera footage and there wasn't a single soul in the hallway for this to have been done by one of the students.

MS. PINNINGTON: I know...we hadn't even cleared the lock down drill before the alarm starting going off. It had to have gone off some other kind of way.

ARTESIUS: I'm going to call over to the alarm company to see if they can help provide some insight.

MS. PINNINGTON: Okay. I'm headed to the cafeteria to check on students for lunch.

*(Moments later, Artesius is in office on telephone with alarm company)*

ARTESIUS *(on phone)*: Good afternoon, this is Artesius Miller calling from 6630 Camp Street.

ALARM COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE *(on phone)*: Let's see...Utopian Academy for the Arts?

ARTESIUS: Yes, that's us.

ALARM COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: How may we help you today?

ARTESIUS: Yes, I was calling because earlier today our fire alarm went off and I'm not exactly sure how or why this happened.

ALARM COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: It appears that it went off at 11:17AM. And we dispatched the local fire department.

ARTESIUS: That's correct. I was hoping you could tell me if there was perhaps one of our alarms pulled and you could tell me the location so we could go back—

ALARM COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: No—my notes here say that it was triggered by the main panel.

ARTESIUS: The main panel?

ALARM COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: Yes, this would be the same panel where you turn your alarm on and off at night and in the morning.

ARTESIUS: I cannot believe this.

ALARM COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: What's wrong sir?

ARTESIUS: I know who triggered our alarm.

ALARM COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: Is there anything else I may assist you with today, Mr. Miller?

ARTESIUS: No ma'am, you've been extremely helpful, I appreciate your support.

*(From his office, Artesius calls Ms. Pinnington on his cell.)*

ARTESIUS: Pinnington—I know who did it?

MS. PINNINGTON: Was it one of the kids?

ARTESIUS: No, it was the guys that came over from Courtland County Public Schools.

MS. PINNINGTON: Miller, you have got be lying...

ARTESIUS: I can't even make this up—the alarm company just told me how it was triggered. I'm reaching out to the district superintendent now and I'm going to call the police.

MS. PINNINGTON: Oh my God—Thanks for letting me know.

*(At his desk, Artesius begins to compose an email to the Courtland County Public Schools Superintendent)*

ARTESIUS *(composes message to Superintendent)*:

*"I would like to organize a meeting with you as soon as your schedule permits.*

*Additionally, I would also like to bring to your attention that this morning, at approximately 11:17AM, the building's fire alarm was set off. After speaking with a member of the security firm that monitors our fire system, they acknowledged that this was prompted from the main security panel; which is located on the front end of the property; the area that is not occupied by Utopian Academy for the Arts.*

*Immediately after I confirmed with our school's principal on whether or not we initiated the alarm as a drill, and she confirmed that wasn't the case, I proceeded to the location of the panel. To my surprise, standing at the door were two gentlemen from Courtland County Public Schools, Mr. Timothy Welch and Mr. Rob Peters. After asking both gentlemen the purpose of their visit, they said they were present to look around the campus to see if anyone was there. Because of the concern I have regarding how this situation was handled, and the irony of there being two folks present near the location of the alleged acts from CCPS, as a professional courtesy, I wanted to acknowledge that I have contacted the local police department for further investigation. As a best practice, we used this time as a drill, but given the weather conditions for today, we would have planned for a different day.*

*While I am somewhat hopeful that there was no involvement from someone of your staff, I cannot forget the first time I met Mr. Welch, which was last summer. As you might recall in the memo sent on July 30, 2014, Mr. Welch visited our school in a very unprofessional manner and it required the immediate notice to you for what took place. I have attached a copy of that memo for your review.*

*These series of acts are difficult for our school community. I am hoping that we can put such issues to rest in the very near future.*

*I will look to hear from you soon.*

*Very best,*

*AM”*

*(A few moments later, a response email is received from the superintendent)*

*SUPERINTENDENT (in a response back to Artesius):*

*“Thank you Mr. Miller,*

*It seems that the people in question were attempting to not disturb you by entering the building from the part of the building not occupied by Utopian. We had been told that others occupy the building. This was to check the occupancy of the other parts of the building. That is the only reason they were there. I am sorry for the disturbance.*

*As you know, this is our last week before the break. Perhaps a meeting in January.”*



## Scene 5. “We’re Gonna Kick You All Out of The Building”

**Abstract.** The Courtland County Board of Education is at it again. Without proper notice to Utopian school officials, the Courtland County Board of Education intends to vote to evict Utopian from its current school building; an old Courtland County Board of Education elementary school.

**Location.** Utopian Academy for the Arts (Executive Director’s Office)

MS. GRAND: Hey Artesius, I know you’re probably tired of my board and all of their foolishness—but I’m calling you because I want to give you a heads up on something they’re trying to do.

ARTESIUS: What—what could they possibly be trying to do NOW?

MS. GRAND: You need to have your parents, your staff, and all of your kids at our next board meeting and work session. We’re gonna be voting to kick you all out of that building.

ARTESIUS: Ms. Grand, tell me this is a joke?

MS. GRAND: Chile—you know I wouldn’t be joking with you and these people...they’re sick hunny. What you need to do is get one or two of your parents and run against them during this next election and get them out of office!

ARTESIUS: I don’t understand, where did this come from? And why would they even be trying to kick us out. It’s not like we’re not paying our rent or anything.

MS. GRAND: So apparently they said they reached out to you all and reached out to your attorney about your intentions on buying the building from us—and our attorney said he hasn’t heard anything back—and ya’ll missed the deadline.

ARTESIUS: This doesn’t even sound right.

MS. GRAND: But like I said, what you need to do, is have EVERYONE from your school at these next two board meetings...because it might get ugly. You know half of my board don’t want ya’ll over there in that building anyway.

ARTESIUS: I appreciate you giving me a heads up. You know, at some point this really has to stop. I'm going to call our attorney now to bring him in the loop and see what we can do.

*(Artesius emails Utopian's attorney and moments later calls him)*

RAY: Hey man—so I see that the school board is at it again, huh?

ARTESIUS: Ray, you have no idea...

RAY: So, I called and spoke with their attorney, and clearly they had intentions for making sure we never got this information about the deadline. I asked them what addresses they mailed it to, because they said they sent it to me, but they also sent it to you guys.

ARTESIUS: Ray, I haven't gotten anything.

RAY: So check this out. Instead of sending it to me...I asked what address they mailed it to, catch this—they sent it to my DAD's old work address.

ARTESIUS: Get the hell out of here!

RAY: And for you guys? I said well maybe it got lost in their front office mail or something, but it turns out that they did not send it to you current address at the school. They sent it to a P.O. Box in Mableton.

ARTESIUS: Ray—

RAY: Yeah man?

ARTESIUS: We have not used that P.O. Box since we were pre-operational. They intended for us to not—on either ends to get this.

RAY: I've already drafted a statement that I can send over to the school board's attorney if you'd like me to.

ARTESIUS: Ray, I would appreciate it. I also spoke with Ms. Grand for a while earlier about this...she's saying that we need to have everyone from our school at their next board meetings.

RAY: Well, Jessie does know the politics of Courtland County and it might mean that you need to make a little noise on this situation.

ARTESIUS: That's true—I just don't like the thought of creating unnecessary anxiety throughout our school.

RAY: I hear you, but at the same time your parents and staff need to know that what they're doing is just not right.

ARTESIUS: I can't tell you how many kids I've had come up and ask me was our school closing. I think what I will do is go around and speak to each of my classrooms before the week is out and make them aware of what's going on. The last thing I need is for them to have in their heads that their school is closing and that's not the case.

RAY: I think that's a great idea.

## Scene 6. “The Test Scores Are In!”

**Abstract.** While addressing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class one final time during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotional exercises, Artesius learns that the scores have been released for the spring 2016 administration of the Georgia Milestones Assessment.

**Location.** Local church.

*(Artesius stands behind podium to provide the address for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotional exercise)*

ARTESIUS: 8<sup>th</sup> grade class of 2016! This is it students!!

*(Cheers and applause from 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and guests)*

ARTESIUS: Our school is nowhere near perfect. But that’s why it’s call Utopian. The root word, “Utopian” means an ideal place of social perfection. Even if we don’t reach perfection as a school—we’ll get the next closest thing to it—because the bar has been set. Our school will soon be the flagship school for all charter schools not only in Courtland County or the state of Georgia, but our nation. In our spring production of the Wiz; there were characters that were often told they didn’t have heart, courage, or brain—they weren’t smart enough. What happens when someone tells you that?

*(tears begin to fill Artesius eyes)*

ARTESIUS: Despite every single challenge that has come our way; we have managed to stay on top. Despite the many blows that have thrown against us, we might stumble, but we never fall to our knees. When someone attempts to delay your education by not allowing you to attend school—strips your school's identity by not allowing it to have a sign—attempts to distract your educational experience by not turning on the heat in winter months—or interferes with your educational experience by maliciously triggering a fire alarm. What do you do? You fight. Since you’ve been at Utopian Academy for the Arts you have learned to become fighters. When someone tries to block you from receiving a free and public education—they are denying you a

civil right. Too many people have worked hard for you to have this opportunity—and we won't just let anyone come and try to take it away.

*(Artesius sees someone graciously waving their hand in the seating area. The school's principal comes to the podium and hands Artesius an envelope)*

ARTESIUS: Eighth grade class—I was just given the results from the 2016 Georgia Milestones Assessment. I want you all to be with me in this moment when I learn how our school performed.

*(Artesius opens envelope and shared the results with everyone)*

ARTESIUS: To not have equitable financial resources as other schools in our community, to withstand through severe crisis and politics of education—you guys have shown that through it all, you can still make things happen. 8<sup>th</sup> graders—you and the rest of Utopian Academy for the Arts OUTPERFORMED the district for the second year in a row! Congratulations!

*(Artesius looks to the sky)*

ARTESIUS: Thank you God for allowing this school to serve the students of Courtland County. Thank you God for giving me this vision. Thank you God for Utopian Academy for the Arts.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this autoethnography was to provide a first person account of what happens when a Black leader establishes a charter school in a predominantly Black community opposed to the school. The purpose of this study was also to chronicle the lived experiences of the researcher in the charter school authorization and start up processes, in such a way that I would be able to think critically about the phenomena experienced. To understand the processes and experiences of starting a charter school, two questions were addressed in this study: What are the lived experiences of a charter school founder and leader in a socio-political community and state? How does the leader navigate through policy, politics, and legislation?

This final chapter of the dissertation provides a summary of the findings, how the findings of the study relate to the existing literature on Blacks in education, and how these findings might inform future educational entrepreneurs seeking to start and lead charter schools of their own. I discuss the implications of the study for both practitioners and policymakers. Finally, I then recommend avenues for future research regarding starting and leading charter schools.

#### **Summary of the Study**

The journey to starting a charter school is completely aligned with the elements of qualitative research (Zeni, 2011). Qualitative research is typically conducted by insiders in educational settings to improve their own practice (Zeni, 2001). For this study, the researcher

employed the use of autoethnography as a qualitative method for narrating the lived experiences as a charter school founder and leader in Courtland County, GA. Use of the critical spirituality theory allowed the researcher, as a practitioner, to examine the lived experiences as a Black visionary educational entrepreneur, and the impact local and state politics, policies, and changes in legislation placed on the charter school authorization and start-up processes for Utopian Academy for the Arts.

The study was bound to Utopian Academy for the Arts, a small, state-approved charter middle school located in Courtland County, GA. Although the school is not affiliated in any capacity with the Courtland County Public Schools System, Utopian Academy has an enrollment zone open to the district's students; the sixth largest school district in Georgia with an enrollment of over 52,000 students. Utopian Academy for the Arts is one of two charter schools located within the Courtland County community. Utopian Academy for the Arts currently serves 270 students ages 11-14 and grades sixth through eighth.

By understanding the context for which autoethnographies are written, the researcher addressed its significance as a qualitative method for understanding the experiences of starting a charter school. In this study, the researcher served as the primary participant. The premise of this research was rooted in a combination of scholarly interests combined with professional practice. Autoethnographers "ask their readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.745.).

Data collection for the study began nearly eight years ago and continued throughout the initial composition of the dissertation. During that time frame, data was collected from a variety of sources including personal memory, public representation of the history of Utopian Academy

for the Arts, media reports, video reports of meetings, and archived documents. Each of the data sources guided the reflective process in the development of an ethnodrama .

As an educational practitioner, researcher, and professional artist, the design elements employed in arts-based educational research, were both unique and appropriate for this study. As a researcher, my goals included contributing to the limited body of literature available on the lived experiences of charter school founders who lead their organizations, and to also employ the use of an arts-based inquiry for the representation of my research. The story of starting and leading Utopian Academy for the Arts was told through an ethnodrama. Within the context of ethnodramas, the analysis and dramatization of significant selections from media reports, video transcripts, field notes, journal entries, and other written artifacts were composed into actual scripts (Saldaña, 2003, p. 218).

### **Summary of Findings**

In this study, I examined the lived experiences as a Black educational entrepreneur, through the lens of the critical spirituality theory. Critical spirituality is a combination of African American spirituality and critical theory (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012). Use of the critical spirituality theory allowed me, as a practitioner, to invoke a sense of hope for a community that lost faith in the public education system, and create equitable opportunities in education through the establishment of Utopian Academy for the Arts. Through use of this framework, I was able to highlight the impact that it played when confronted with politics, policies, and changes in legislation throughout my journey as a Black educational entrepreneur.

In the reflective process of composing an autoethnography, I emotionally recalled several adversities experienced in the process of starting a charter school. Such memories are reminiscent of the oppressions experiences by earlier Blacks in education. Had it not been for the



role of spirituality in my four-year journey of struggles and triumph to obtain charter authorization, undoubtedly, it would have been an easy decision to give up. However, conscious of my initial vision for creating a charter school, combined with the thoughts of how the school would create better academic and social outcomes for a largely Black-populated school district, I stayed in the fight. Stewart (1997) suggests that Blacks struggle with this double consciousness has caused them to hone adaptation and creativity as tools for their survival. He adds that, though the consciousness has not always led to psychological disintegration for Black people, it has rather provided a kind of creative edge over their adversities, which is often ignored (Stewart, 1997). To ensure that Blacks don't continue the cycle of adversities in my respective community, I recognized education as a platform for change; hence the vision to create Utopian Academy for the Arts. Lastly, spirituality has been manifested in faith and one's belief that "any given situation can be overcome for the better not yet" (Dantley, 2005, p.656). Such reliance of spirituality offers leaders strategies to meet the daily challenges of schools populated by predominantly black children (Dantley, 2005).

Through the design of an ethnodrama, themes from this study were derived and presented into four acts, and were theorized by the four tenets of critical spirituality. Four themes emerged from the data sources including personal recollection, public representation of the history of Utopian Academy for the Arts, media reports, video recordings of meetings, and archived documents:

1. Norms, values, and traditions influenced my decision to start a charter school.
2. I developed an educational model that was both unique and desired by the local community to be served.

3. As a leader, I was determined to eliminate educational inequities and I always remained resilient when crises ascended.
4. I promoted upward mobility for an entire community through a single school.

**Norms, values, and traditions influenced my decision to start a charter school.**

Described as “the process by which prospective and practicing leaders come to an understanding of themselves (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012); critical self-reflection involves educational leaders coming to grips with their sacred, genuine or unvarnished self” (Dantley, 2010, p. 216). A family tradition in producing educators, combined with religious values and practices from the Christianity religion; professional experiences in financial services; combined with an Ivy League master’s program, impacted my decision to start a charter school.

I consider my work in education to be a calling from God that originated from an epiphany. As an undergraduate, I flirted with career opportunities in financial services, through summer experiences with investment banks. However, it was in the summer before my senior year I understood that, although I was successful in my previous experiences, I was not fulfilling my true purpose in life, which is to engage and develop underserved communities. When educational leaders engage in such self-interrogation, they are guided down a road of liberation for the self and then for others (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012).

My educational roots extend to the rural South and date back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. My great-grandmother founded a schoolhouse for her children and other Black families in Mississippi in the early 1900’s. Due to the inequalities of access for Black students seeking literacy, the development of her school began as a necessity. Although school types have evolved from the early 1900’s to now, educational gaps of equality and access still continue.

The idea to start a charter school was a relatively easy decision. However, the decision of where to establish the charter school was initially a difficult task. I am a product of the Atlanta Public School System, and I have seen hands on the academic disparities and challenges that affect our youth. In the local community of Atlanta in which I raised, school ratings have decreased, and the educational outcomes of the students that attend those schools have changed for the worse. I wanted to support those schools and provide resources that are not traditionally available to students in low-income and underserved communities, yet resources that I saw available to students in charter schools in New York City. However, while attending Columbia University for graduate school, families in Courtland County, GA were overcoming an educational crisis, the loss of its accreditation. Of the two metro Atlanta communities, I decided to establish Utopian Academy for the Arts where I thought it could be of greatest benefit. Like my great-grandmother in the early 1900's, I saw the need to develop a school for students who were in greatest need of school choice and education reform. It was then that I recognized Courtland County was where Utopian would have the greatest macro-level community impact.

**I developed an educational model that was both unique and desired by the local community to be served.** Performative Creativity emphasizes the “development of pedagogical and leadership practices that move the school and the learning community from maintaining the status quo to envisioning a more democratic culture and a space where the legitimization of voices of difference can take place” (Dantley, 2010, p.217). As a charter school founder, I sought to restore faith back in the public education system and design an educational program that did not exist in Courtland County, GA. Following the loss of accreditation by the Southeast Accrediting Agency (SAA) in 2008, Courtland County parents petitioned for the increase of charter school options available within the district. With the exception of one charter school approved in 2009,

since this date, every charter school application that has been presented to the Courtland County Board of Education has been denied. This has resulted in parents becoming complacent, and accepting the status quo as the norm.

As a graduate student, while residing in New York City, I visited local charter schools as incubators of research for the charter application of Utopian Academy. I noted best practices in educational program designs and school operations for schools with aligned demographics to that of Courtland County. One concept of charter schools is to offer unique programming that is not available in other public schools within a given school district (Belfield & Levin, 2015). The original concept for Utopian Academy for the Arts was to become an all-male academy that specialized in the arts. I initially designed Utopian Academy to serve Courtland County's most at-risk student population, the Black male student. A combination of academic outcomes and local juvenile incarceration rates proved that this student population was in need of assistance, yet, there were minimal efforts from the local school district to intervene and support. Additionally, at the time of developing Utopian Academy, the arts were eliminated from the local public schools in Courtland County, although parents desired otherwise. With the understanding that students were in need of positive ways of expressing themselves, to minimize poor behavior, I designed an educational program that would foster creative learning environments.

Concurrent to my progress of petitioning for a charter, there were changes in policy, legislation, and laws that impacted the petitioning process, and eventual authorization of Utopian Academy for the Arts. First, changes in federal educational laws including Title IX prohibited the enrollment of only male students. Yet, to remain compliant, I revised the enrollment plan of Utopian Academy to include female students. However, the educational philosophy of single-

gender instruction remains at Utopian Academy, students are taught in gender-based classroom environments. Secondly, changes in charter school policy in Georgia impacted the eventual authorization of Utopian Academy for the Arts. As a result of the unconstitutionality of a state-level authorizer, lawmakers enabled legislation, House Resolution 1162, to allow Georgia constituents to determine if an alternative to the local school board authorization of charter schools should exist. It was during this general state election of 2012, to amend Georgia's constitution to create a state-level charter school authorizer, that Courtland County residents had the highest percentage of Georgia voters to support the legislation. Although denied locally by the Courtland County school board for three consecutive years, the new state-level authorizer allowed Utopian Academy the opportunity to serve the students of Courtland County, GA. In the first petition cycle of the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, Utopian Academy was the first and single direct beneficiary of this landmark decision, the only charter school approved out of 16 initial statewide applications.

**As a leader, I was determined to eliminate educational inequities and I always remained resilient when crises ascended.** Deconstructive interpretation is defined as the way “leaders apply a critical theoretical perspective to the ways in which they have been socialized as well as to the ways socialization process operates through major institutions of the American society” (Dantley, 2009, p.51). When a leader breaks down processes, ideals, concepts, and values (McCray, 2007, p.271), they are made aware of their positioning of certain terms and ideals.

The challenges facing educators working to improve outcomes for students, particularly Black students in low-income communities are complex and multifaceted (McCray et al., 2012). Although prior to the establishment of Utopian Academy for the Arts, there were four charter

schools that had previously existed, none of the schools experienced challenges from Courtland County leaders, as did Utopian. This was not about children, this was personal. With a loss of control over the authorization of Utopian Academy to the state, and with the loss of local control over Utopian's operation, as an independent school district, this meant war. As a school leader, I was determined to not allow the same educational inequities of access and opportunity for the Black students of Courtland County to continue, although, malicious attacks were created to minimize my efforts.

As a charter school founder, I assumed that one of the greatest challenges in the establishment of Utopian Academy would be obtaining charter authorization. Once approved however, I soon recognized that with establishing a charter school in Courtland County, the greatest challenge of all, was learning to navigate through the series of socio-political challenges established by local leaders. After learning that Utopian Academy for the Arts was approved at the state level, local school board leaders, with alliances from local city officials created numerous challenges to prevent the occupancy of Utopian Academy in its facility, an unoccupied Courtland County elementary school building. This initially began with unannounced visits by school district and city officials to Utopian Academy prior to the start of our first school year, aimed to intimidate and create anxiety amongst my staff. We were often told by school district officials that our school was not wanted and had no grounds for existence. This continued for weeks and rolled into the start of our first school year. I was forced to obtain a court ordered judgement against city and school board officials, due to their inability of allowing my students from entering our school building. As a leader, I also garnered the support of local media to bring awareness to our political adversities, which in turn, helped to gain the attention of the state's highest ranking official, the governor. Due to the oppressive acts by local school board

and city officials toward Utopian Academy, in the 2015 general assembly, state legislators passed a law named after Utopian Academy to prevent local entities from adding requirements for charter schools to occupy a facility, if the state has provided clearance.

**I promoted upward mobility for an entire community through a single school.**

“Critically spiritual leaders gather parents, teachers, and members of the community to discuss how the school can be an active partner with others in the community to see equity and fairness shaping the lives of those inside and outside of the school” (Dantley, 2010, pp. 217-218.) As a school founder, I sought to establish a community school where parents and community members were an active part in the development and decision making of Utopian Academy for the Arts. Prior to the establishment of Utopian Academy, local parents shared that they were never asked to help determine academic priorities and curriculum choices, classroom configuration preference, desire for involvement, optimal school structure and so forth.

Prior to the establishment of Utopian Academy for the Arts, Courtland County parents desired access to equitable school choice options, including access to charter schools, a common alternative to traditional public schools available to parents in other metro Atlanta school districts. When Utopian Academy for the Arts was approved by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, it created a threat to that of the Courtland County Public Schools System. No longer would it be acceptable for chronically failing schools of Courtland County to continue, because parents could withdraw and enroll their child into Utopian Academy. To discourage families from enrolling into Utopian, propaganda was spread about the school, including claims that I, as a leader was not educated and skilled to start and lead a school, students would have to submit test scores for admission, and parents would be charged tuition if their child enrolled. Additionally, our school was stripped of its identity within the Courtland

County community, when city officials removed signage bearing our school's name from our building; students were forced to endure extreme temperatures when school district officials disabled features of our HVAC's system, city and school board officials threatened to dismantle our food service program, and threats of eviction were made to remove our school community from our building.

Transformative action refers to how leaders put forth action for social change in their schools and communities (McCray, Beachum, Yawn, 2012). My ability to impact upward mobility included references by local elected officials and parents of Utopian Academy. When campaigning for reelection in 2015, Councilman Kenneth Ruffin suggested that "alternative choices for education will improve the city in so many ways. Long term, Utopian will aide in Rosewood's and Courtland County's Economic Development endeavors", (Obrien, 2015). As evidenced from findings in a dissertation on African American parent motivations to enroll their children in Utopian Academy, one parent states, "I think that Utopian will help change the community...Because it will bring parents together. And it'll bring -- really, the community together -- to realize, and open their eyes and see that there's a better way.

My goal as a school leader has also been to make a tremendous impact on both the quality of education received by the students at Utopian Academy and the people and programs of which the Courtland County community is comprised. Despite the numerous challenges, roadblocks, and barriers that were established to impact the educational outcomes and financial viability for Utopian Academy, I maintained the faith needed to endure difficult times and continued to lead my school community toward a path of perseverance and success. I led our school to overcome a financial deficit of \$552,000, stemmed by attempts from city and school board officials aimed at blocking students from attending school, and although the school has



operated on nearly half of the earned revenues as local traditional public schools in Courtland County, we have outperformed Courtland County schools consecutively on annual state-mandated assessments. “Principals who are transformative leaders are those who allow their spiritual selves to assist them in the execution of their leadership responsibilities”(Dantley, 2010, p. 215).

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study contribute to the knowledge base about Black educational entrepreneurs that start and lead schools of their own. There was an emphasis placed on the revolutionary work of a Black leader that chose to start a charter school to educate and serve Black students. Blacks have been pioneers in education for nearly three centuries. In the initial years of formal education in the South, equitable opportunities were not available to Black students seeking literacy, which in turn, influenced Blacks to start schools of their own. During the midst of slavery in southern states, Blacks created schoolhouses as a means to educate and empower the Black race (Span, 2009). Black leaders also established schools because there was a necessity for survival, access, and opportunity. In the years to follow, through the creation of common schools, Black southerners attempted to construct and maintain what they considered to be a replica of a common school system. Although much was accomplished, common schools founded by Blacks were nearly impossible to sustain due to the inability to finance a strong system. Today, Black leaders seek to establish charter schools as educational options for communities that lack school choice, structured educational environments, innovative programming, and the nurturing milieus not often found within the traditional public school setting. Above all, Black leaders that establish charter schools seek to promote the advancement and growth for Black students by offering a sound and quality education. Yet, as highlighted in

this study, Blacks have largely played the antagonistic role against the Black leader starting and leading a charter school to serve Black students. This notion of struggle and equality were overarching themes present throughout the experiences of starting and leading a charter school in Courtland County, GA.

When examining the risks, barriers, and dangers associated with early institutions that educated Blacks in the South, and the challenges experienced by the Blacks that lead such schools, there are paralleled resemblances in the story of Utopian Academy for the Arts. One of the most oppressive features impacting Black secondary education in the South was the refusal of public school facilities for Black children, by local and state governments (Walker, 2000). Although the researcher leases an unoccupied, old district facility, local school board and city officials created disturbances and ongoing challenges to prevent use of the school building by Utopian Academy.

The lack of support from local Black leaders was another primary struggle faced by the researcher throughout this study. The lack of local support from Black elected officials in the Courtland County community allowed several adverse actions against the researcher and his school. Such actions, combined with the lack of support from national civic groups, designed to promote the advancement of Black people, was emotionally discouraging for the researcher. Prior to the establishment of Utopian Academy and throughout the initial years of Utopian's existence, the NAACP, a national Black civic organization, has promoted the dissolution of charter school expansion nationally, through the ratification of a resolution by its elected executive order (Stirgus, 2016). The NAACP has presented claims that charter schools cherry pick students, expel students at higher rates than traditional public schools, and perpetuate racial, ethnic, and gender segregation (Stirgus, 2016). Despite the successful outcomes of some Black

students that attend charter schools, combined with the NAACP's historical position to garner equitable opportunities for Blacks as a whole, this notion of minimizing access to equitable options of Black students is questionable.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

This section of the chapter focuses on the implications of the findings. The implications of this study may be of interest to educational entrepreneurs seeking to start schools of their own, along with individuals and entities who have legal authority to impact charter school authorizations and school operations. It may also be of particular interest to those who are responsible for informing recommendations for charter school approvals and denials, and those preparing to assist new school founders seeking to launch their newly approved charter schools.

#### **Practitioners**

Research indicates that the process of starting and leading a charter school in Georgia can be arduous and can include political experiences that make it difficult in the authorization and start-up processes (Gilbert, 2013). With the understanding that norms, values, and traditions influenced the researcher to start a charter school, future educational entrepreneurs might resonate with similar ideals to begin the process of school founding. This study revealed that when a Black community is accustomed to the status quo, and Black elected officials are resistant to change, extreme measures can be taken to prevent the addition of a new school within that same community. Unforeseen and unnecessary barriers were created by local school board and city officials to undermine the existence of the researcher's school, as a result of the loss of local control. Due to the loss of local control, there were sudden and reoccurring adverse actions by local officials that included the delayed start to the first school year, unannounced and

harassing visits by school board and city officials, removal of signage bearing the school's name, threats of evictions, and attempts to prevent school meals from being served to students.

Individuals seeking to start and lead charter schools should also be prepared for the difficulties with petitioning for a charter, the many facets of school leadership, and the politics of education associated with charter schools. The journey to charter school authorization is no easy task, it requires a level of commitment to the students and communities it will serve. While some charter school founders might receive authorization after applying once to an authorizer, the reality is that many charter school founders apply for multiple petitioning cycles before their charters are actually approved. Charter school founders that become school leaders must be prepared to assist all students in attaining higher levels of academic achievement regardless of their ethnic, language or socioeconomic subgroups (Moyer & Clymer, 2009). Lastly, in order for charter school founders to be effective in charter school leadership, individuals need to possess political skill (Ferris et al, 2002). Challenges will occur, and crisis might take place. It is how leaders lead their schools during such difficult moments that determine their efficacy.

Researchers have stated that an important way to be effective in organizational settings is to develop and use one's social and political competence and to build on the ability to persuade, influence, and control others. When leaders use political skill, it enhances their effectiveness and ability to lead and control their respective organizational environments, and it also assists their abilities to position themselves to take advantage of opportunities, develop strong and beneficial alliances, and influence others to support their organizations (Ferris et al., 2002).

### **Policymakers**

Research that tends to highlight challenges experienced by individuals that start charter schools indicate that common challenges stem from state versus local control matter. Data from

this study suggests that the loss of local control in the authorization of charter schools, combined with the loss of local control in the operations of charter schools had a direct correlation of challenges for the charter school and leader. The lack of interest and support from local leaders, combined with weak enforcement of established Georgia charter school policies, allowed local school board and city officials to dictate and delay the process of charter authorization for Utopian Academy for the Arts. Although authorization from the state provided the level of autonomy needed to operate as an independent charter school in Georgia, it also meant reduced revenues from the state, elimination of local tax funding, and lack of student support services and resources made available to other district schools including special education, transportation, and food services.

There were however, aspects of charter school policy in Georgia that supported the development of Utopian Academy for the Arts. This included the establishment of a new state-level authorizer, by way of Georgia House Resolution 1162, and changes in funding for state-approved charter schools through Georgia House Bill 797. Charter school policy should aim to re-evaluate for how charter schools are approved in Georgia, and how school founders and leaders are supported in the start-up processes. This study revealed that although given the legal authority to approve and/or deny charter school petitions, some charter authorizers in Georgia including local school boards neglect to follow expectations set forth by state policymakers and chooses to deny charter schools applications regardless of the desired community need, uniqueness of proposed educational model, and potential economic impact. Future policies should include oversight and governance trainings to provide further guidance so authorizers can fully understand their responsibilities with proposed and existing charter schools within their network.

## **Future Research**

The ability to share the chronicled lived experiences of leaders who have founded and led schools of their own, has remained an important topic for educational researchers interested in charter school leadership. Although there are studies that highlight the backgrounds of some Blacks that have established schools to serve Black students, the research on Blacks that founded charter schools to serve primarily Black students is limited (Gilbert, 2013). However, these are stories to be told. As I conclude this study, I recognize that there are other areas that can enhance the topic and further contribute to the research. Such areas will strengthen the practices of new charter school founders and leaders, those interested in the research of charter school founders that lead schools of their own, as well as policymakers whose decision-making impacts charter schools. The following are suggested areas related to this study that will ultimately contribute to research and practice:

- Future research on this topic should examine the perceptions of Blacks that are opposed to charter schools.
- Future studies should employ mixed qualitative approaches (i.e. interviews, case studies, etc.) to examine the experiences of charter school founders who lead their schools.
- Future research should provide a deeper examination of the backgrounds of those that start charter schools, and the relationship, if any, with leadership preparation programs.
- Future studies can explore what support systems are in place to support new Black charter school founders and leaders.
- Future longitudinal studies can explore the long-term effects that oppositions, if any, from local, state, and national Black groups have on the charter school leader and the school's stakeholders.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

There is much to be said about the individual that seeks to start a school as a means of helping others. The vision that was bestowed to the researcher of this study was calling from God that initiated as an epiphany. This study highlighted the work of a young, Black man that was committed to the growth and advancement of an entire community of Black people through the establishment of a new charter school. With no personal ties to Courtland County, GA, beyond the fact that the community was comprised of a largely Black student population, the researcher managed to start a school despite unpredictable and ongoing oppressions to limit his success.

The role of educational leadership by Blacks in communities that serve predominantly Black students requires certain qualities from the school leader: a commitment to the education of Black children; a compassion for, and an understanding of, their students and the communities in which they worked; and a confidence in the ability of all Black children to learn (Lomotey, 1990). Although often told that due to his young age, and inexperience of years as a professional educator, that his efforts were not desired nor needed; the researcher stayed committed to serve the students of Courtland County, GA. An educational and economic problem had been identified. The researcher understood that the only way to restore parent's faith in the local public school system and to prevent the mass exodus of local businesses from the community, great schools had to exist. Despite the adversities, agonies, and attacks from local Black leaders, the researcher remained resilient and steadfast, for he knew that the outcome of his school would reshape values and norms of local families in Courtland County, GA.

I created a nonprofit business to develop an institution of learning. I created jobs as a means of supporting a local economy, while also providing a quality education to students of this

community. I have given my energy, efforts, and time to the organization that I created, only fourth to that of God, my family, and myself. I have given blood, sweat, and tears to a community in which I am neither a native nor resident. I have been verbally and emotionally victimized, I have received threats against my life and my school community. As a professional educator, I am a social worker, humanitarian, and servant leader. I am a man of strong-willed faith who knows that despite any challenges and obstacles that might come my way, through belief in God, I might endure pain and heartache in the process, but I know I won't fail. This is God's work, and because of this, there will be success. Despite the oppressions initiated by local leaders, and the related attacks and pitfalls experienced by the students attending Utopian Academy for the Arts, lined up outside everyday are scholars ready to receive an education, for the students of Courtland County know, that even in the midst of their worst struggles, their forefathers knew that part of their advancement and growth began with a sound education.



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