ABSTRACT

RIEL, VIRGINIA P. When Charters are the Choosers: A Supply-Side Analysis of Charter School Choice. (Under the direction of Dr. Toby L. Parcel).

This dissertation examines the recruitment of prospective families to three charter schools with varied organizational structures. Prior research disproportionately considers how parents choose schools. My study contributes to the literature on charter school choice by analyzing school personnel decisions as well as their interactions with prospective and current families, understanding these as the supply-side of school choice. Supply-side factors complicate the basic assumption that families can simply choose a school in the same way that they would select any other consumer good. Supply-side factors that I identify in this study include the location of a charter school, its marketing image, available transportation, meal affordability, and expectations for involvement. Race and class also shape access to charter schools when personnel give preferences to white and upper-class parents, or high-status parents feel more comfortable in a charter school due to their ability to fulfill its expectations. I find that the ways in which personnel locate charter schools and draw from surrounding areas, market charter schools, and build expectations for parents shape how families gain access to charter schools.

Despite their varied organizational structures, histories, and marketing techniques, the three charter schools in this study all tailored their recruitment to the pool of prospective families they wished to attract. Chapter two investigates the extent to which charter school recruitment drew on residential demographics. I find that personnel recruited from predominantly white areas of their districts, beginning with their siting decisions. Even in the community-oriented school, Garrison, personnel worked to appease local white parents by allowing a preference for residing in the neighborhood in which the charter school was located.
Chapter three examines the various recruitment strategies that personnel used to attract prospective families to the three charter schools. The forms of marketing that personnel adopted depended on how the schools were managed and organized as well as what their pool of prospective families needed. Drawing on organizational literature, I find that the network school worked to cultivate an elite image to recruit students, while the community-oriented school worked to be ordinary and serve students through necessary services. In fact, the latter looked more like a traditional public school with full-sized buses delivering children across county lines and offering free meals for breakfast and lunch. Meanwhile, the hybrid charter took on the persona of a fun, resort-like business, enticing families with exciting events and catchy merchandise.

Chapter four examines how charter school personnel recruited and retained prospective families as well, focusing more exclusively on the development and maintenance of expectations between charter school personnel and parents. Despite the schools’ organizational differences, they were markedly similar in the extent to which personnel made efforts to build expectations among prospective parents in order to recruit them. While also a source of pressure for school personnel, keeping families happy was part of how these charter schools retained them.
When Charters are the Choosers: A Supply-Side Analysis of Charter School Choice

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, for whom educational choice has always been a topic of interest, inquiry, and debate. In particular, I dedicate this work to my mom, who first believed in me, taught me to deconstruct the social world, and showed me how to be different and what it means to be strong.
Virginia Riel was born in Bladen County, North Carolina in a hospital ten miles west of her hometown, White Lake. She attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and American Studies in 2015, with highest honors and highest distinction. Virginia began graduate school at North Carolina State University in the fall of 2015. She earned a Master of Science in Sociology at North Carolina State University in 2017. She passed her doctoral preliminary exam in 2018 and began working on her dissertation. During her time at North Carolina State, Virginia has worked as a research assistant to Dr. Toby L. Parcel, and she has taught two courses, Principles of Sociology and Current Social Problems. Her recent research projects focus on racial microaggressions in school, the processes that create academic tracking and its consequences for high school students by race, the spatial and disciplinary organization of students within schools by race, and, most recently, the development and consequences of the school choice movement— in particular, charter schools. Her work has appeared in the journals Sociology Compass, Race Ethnicity and Education, and Virginia Law Review. She also has a forthcoming publication in The Journal of Negro Education.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

School choice has gained prominence as a strategy that will give parents more educational options from which to choose the right fit for their children. A relatively new vehicle for school choice is the charter school, originating in the late 1980s. Today, charter school enrollment continues to grow. Charter schools in the United States more than doubled over the past twenty years; the share of public school students attending charter schools consistently increased as well (National Center for Education Statistics 2019).

The charter school is a publicly funded, privately managed form of schooling that permits organizations to independently charter a K-12 institution. To apply for permission to open a new charter school, framers must justify to the state their plan for the school, including target populations. The protocol for applications depends on the state in which they are submitted, but most applications emphasize the need for a school alternative in order to induce competition with local schools. Many prospective charter schools also mention their intent to recruit a diverse student body commensurate with the racial and socioeconomic demographics of the local school district (Mickelson, Giersch, Nelson, and Bottia 2018). However, in states like North Carolina, charter schools are not required to be representative of the traditional public school student population (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.45). Prior studies have not considered the extent to which charter school recruitment goals, in terms of school composition and services such as transportation, compare to the realities of their recruitment and enrollment practices.

Charter schools vary by their organizational structure. The first charter schools were mission-oriented, meaning their originators targeted disadvantaged students and provided educational opportunity through innovative teaching methods (Fabricant and Fine 2012). Many of these charter schools were community based and pedagogically driven, while others were part
of networks composed of multiple charter schools. Charters have acquired increasingly more remote management orientations, with companies located across the country operating networks of charter schools rather than single entities. In contrast to a focus on innovative and inclusive pedagogy, one community at a time, charter schools’ efforts have become more consumed by marketing as those run by for-profit companies expand their footprint (DiMartino and Jessen 2018; Horsford, Scott, and Anderson 2019). Few qualitative studies have compared various organizational forms in terms of their approaches to recruitment. For example, it would be helpful to understand how personnel in charter schools with different organizational structures situate themselves in relation to other schools with which they compete or compare.

Charter schools are also part of the larger movement to privatize schools. Their development is motivated by an ideological push for deregulation and privatization (Gumus-Dawes, Luce, and Orfield 2013). Though publicly funded through tax dollars, private management companies and their appointed boards govern them. This arrangement contrasts elected school board management in traditional public schools. As a result, charter school advocates tout flexibility and freedom from bureaucratic regulation (Fabricant and Fine 2012).

Charter schools allow families public school choice outside of residence-based assignments. Rather than choosing a home on the basis of a school district, charter schools decouple neighborhoods from school assignments, offering an opportunity to circumvent residential boundaries (Lubienski and Weitzel 2010). In most states, families can apply to a charter school anywhere in their residing state, even if it exists outside their district boundaries. However, few studies have considered how residence plays a role in charter school recruitment, from decisions about where to site a charter school to what kinds of services personnel choose to offer and how they decide to market those services.
Since the decision to enroll in charter schools and other forms of choice belongs to families, school choice is typically regarded from their perspective. Scholars typically frame analyses of school choice in terms of how families choose schools (Ball and Vincent 1998; Bell 2007, 2009; Bulman 2004; Frankenberg 2018; Holme 2002; Olson Beal and Hendry 2012; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000; Weiher and Tedin 2002). They also study residential decisions on the basis of neighborhood school assignment (Goyette 2008; Lareau and Goyette 2014). Overall, these prior studies focus on how families navigate the educational terrain and often neglect how “schools, rather than parents, can control the school choice process” (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016:295). Although important for understanding school choice for parents, these studies neglect the ways that schools might select students and parents who fit their ideal type of family by sending messages about who belongs in a given school, or more subtly who feel comfortable with meeting its expectations for involvement. It is also unclear from previous research what kinds of variation in marketing tactics emerge in the recruitment process.

Selection processes are better understood by researchers at the college level and for private schools. In contrast to other schools of choice, it is more widely recognized that student selection into colleges and elite private schools perpetuates stratification by race and class. This allows families to reproduce advantage across generations (Karabel 2005; Stevens 2007). However, few studies examine how these processes play out in younger grades. This dissertation examines the selection processes that shape charter school choice.

Understanding selection processes in charter schools is important for sociologists and social scientists because, as charters have grown in numbers and have received more political backing from local, state, and federal governments, they have accelerated the exit of white
parents from traditional public schools. This contributes to the isolation of minority students in
district schools (Renzulli and Evans 2005:401). Students left behind in traditional public schools
are likely to be poor, racial minority, and lower achieving (Wells, Scott, Lopez, and Holme 2005;
see also Goldhaber, Guin, Henig, Hess, and Weiss 2005).

In this study, I analyze recruitment in three organizationally distinct charter schools in
North Carolina that opened or expanded within five years of my fieldwork. Unlike charter
schools with established reputations, expanding charter schools need to grow enrollment and
recruit families to do so. Student populations of NC charter schools are disproportionately white
compared to their respective districts (Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein 2016). Students also come
from relatively educated households (Ladd et al. 2016). These findings raise questions about
North Carolina charter school selection in particular. These schools are thus prime locations for
studying how charter schools, through various actions relating to recruitment, shape selection.

Research Questions

In chapter two, I investigate the following questions. (1a) How does recruitment to
charter schools align with neighborhood boundaries? (1b) How do charter schools’ different
organizational structures influence these recruitment approaches? Finally, (1c) how do
recruitment decisions, such as where a charter school initially locates, reflect the market of
prospective families from which they hope to attract?

I analyze the following questions in chapter three. (2a) Through which processes do
charter schools construct images of their schools to recruit families? (2b) How do they situate
their schools in relation to others? Moreover, (2c) how do charter schools differentiate their
marketing depending on their organizational structure?
In chapter four, the final data chapter, I examine the following questions. (3a) How do various types of charter schools create expectations for families? (3b) How do these expectations develop and evolve throughout the recruitment process? (3c) How do these expectations shape the relationships between families and charter school personnel during the enrollment process and beyond?

In addressing these research questions, I engage with three theoretical issues. First, my look at the siting of charter schools addresses how their recruitment practices, beginning with decisions about where to locate, relate to neighborhood boundaries, given that neighborhoods are stratified by race. While charter school enrollment is supposedly available to families regardless of residence, charter schools can also recruit from local areas (Mommandi and Welner 2018). Thus, I use the concept of white habitus to explain how the three charter schools in my study worked to secure white spaces for families. Rather than framing white habitus through people’s individual actions by virtue of their status group memberships, I consider how institutions can protect and reinforce white habitus. Second, my examination of organization-level impression management in three organizationally distinct charter schools contrasts with the typical analysis of families choosing schools. Personnel craft messages about charter schools, via their marketing, by comparing to other schools and advertising services. I view these marketing decisions as organization-level impression management because they have the potential to target families for whom the services fit. Impression management strategies can also reflect the varied approaches of school leaders, who envision charters as similar to public schools, more like private schools, or a hybrid of the two. Finally, my focus on expectations in charter schools investigates how personnel create expectations for involvement, as early as parents’ first visit to a charter school or its website. I consider the implications of these expectations for activating
class-stratified social and cultural capital. I also consider how the conceptualization of parents as consumers in charter schools shapes the relationship between families and personnel, particularly when personnel feel they must accommodate parents’ wishes in order to encourage student enrollment and receive maximum funding per child enrolled.

**Organization of the Chapter**

In this chapter, I first situate this study in others about social reproduction in school. Second, I detail the growth of charter schools and review their significance in the context of choice, distinguishing between types of charter schools. Third, I describe some of the dynamics of charter school operation. I then provide context for the study by placing it in the history of North Carolina charter schools, which are my specific objects of inquiry. Further contextualizing, I provide a brief overview of each of the three charter schools in this study. I conclude the chapter by summarizing the data chapters that follow it.

**Social Reproduction and Student Recruitment**

Despite the assumption that schools provide a mechanism for opportunity and mobility, sociologists often argue that schools are vehicles for the reproduction of status. Rather than engines of mobility, schools can recreate existing inequalities (Holland 2014; McNamee and Miller 2014; Tyson 2003). Through studies at various levels of schooling, scholars examine the processes by which advantage is reproduced across generations.

Selection processes are evident in private boarding schools and independent schools (French 2018). First, knowing something about a school is a prerequisite to applying for admission as families must first possess knowledge that a school exists before seeking to enroll their children in it (French 2018:8). Then, they configure its fit with their lives. Schools also play a role in selection. For decades, private boarding schools used screening processes to
“weed out” students who did not fit the prep school image, such as groomed physical appearance (Cookson and Persell 1985:55). Even for students being evaluated before admission to selective public schools, personnel value eloquence, confidence, and ease associated with middle-class socialization (Evans 2020; see also Lareau 2011). In particular, evaluators of prospective students to a selective public school in Evans’ (2020) recent study preferred students who could use standard English and maintain eye contact while discussing their accomplishments.

Colleges are well-documented sites of social reproduction as well. At the college level, Karabel’s (2005) study of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton shows hidden logics in admissions. As he argues, elite students’ admission to prestigious Ivy League colleges has never been solely merit-based. Admission often operates through a complex web of connections, with children of alumni, also known as legacies, disproportionately gaining admission over non-legacy candidates (Karabel 2005; see also Hurwitz 2011).

Institutional and familial ties affect admission into prestigious schools. As Stevens (2007:85) explains in his book Creating a Class, “the mechanism through which [socioeconomic] privilege is rendered an admissions advantage is not discrimination. It is information.” Elite parents work to gain priority in college admissions by enrolling their children in the right summer camps and volunteer activities. They wield their resources to bolster their children’s resumes, but they do so on the basis of crucial information about how to get accepted. Typically, parents obtain this information from schools of interest or learn from having attended similar kinds of institutions. To spread useful admission information, elite colleges even disseminate it to guidance counselors at certain high schools as part of their efforts to recruit families with enough financial support to meet tuition budgets (Stevens 2007).
Schools further shape access through their current student populations. While school marketing may insist that students are represented across racial and socioeconomic groups, the typical student who finds comfort at a selective college is white and from a high-income family as colleges in particular cater to affluent white families (Stevens 2007). Just as these ideas shape families’ interest and students’ likelihood of admission at a college (Stevens 2007:177), typical students in charter schools are likely to be those whose families seek out the school, like what they observe, understand the admissions process, and follow it through to enrollment. In states like North Carolina, charter school students are disproportionately white and come from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds (Bonner, Stancill, and Raynor 2017; Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein 2016). Families who choose charter schools are likely those who find support from school personnel and whose lives align with how the schools are organized.

Charter School Recruitment

Selection processes facilitate entrée to charter schools. Much of the formal information that parents obtain from charter schools is at open houses, which schools can hold during evening hours and may be restrictive for parents who perform shift labor or have inflexible work hours. Through setting high expectations or even requirements for families’ involvement, charter schools indirectly work to recruit students while discouraging disadvantaged families (Jabbar 2015; Jennings 2010; Wilson and Carlsen 2016). Through the planning of an enrollment cycle, personnel make decisions about when to post information about application deadlines, leaving many parents to “learn the inflexible rules of the charter school lottery game” on their own, or through those with whom they are familiar (Lareau et al. 2016:291).

Other mechanisms shape access to charter schools for families from different class backgrounds. Requiring uniforms can also place demands on families (Jennings 2010), as well
as emphasizing a strict academic approach on their websites (Wilson and Carlsen 2016). Placing priority on academics and attitude in their mission statements could further shape enrollment (Lubienski and Lee 2016). These marketing decisions have the potential to create a selection effect whereby some families see their children fitting in while others likely will not.

Selection processes can be more overt in charter schools too, with school personnel creating and cultivating messages about which families belong. Despite open enrollment policies, some charter school personnel do not view all families as an equally good fit for their school; in fact, some personnel would rather avoid advertising spaces than enroll students who they consider “less-capable” (Jabbar 2015:649).

Selectivity into schools has a long history of reproducing racial and class inequalities. However, selectivity mechanisms are overlooked and hence relatively unknown in charter schools, with a few recent exceptions (DiMartino and Jessen 2018; Jabbar 2016a; Jabbar 2016b; Jennings 2010). Especially in new charters, personnel must actively recruit students to garner enrollment and, at a minimum, construct an image that school leaders believe will appeal to the families they wish to target.

**Charter Schools in the United States**

**Growth of Charter Schools**

The charter school is a relatively recent invention in the history of American schooling, even called an experiment in school choice (Lubienski and Weitzel 2010). Developed in the 1980s, reformers intended that charters remain free from the regulations that apply to traditional public schools (Gumus-Dawes, Luce, and Orfield 2013). In the view of reformers, reducing regulation allows more flexibility for innovation in charter schools, specifically through development in curriculum and teaching styles (Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2013).
Advocacy for charter schools is typically traced to educational reformer Albert Shanker. Building on an original idea in Ray Budde’s (1989) essay “Education by Charter,” Shanker expanded the concept of agreed upon, teacher-led, and innovative programs to whole schools (Nathan 1996). Shanker advocated that charter schools could serve as innovation laboratories through emphasis on individualized learning—while also promoting racial and socioeconomic diversity in school through the availability of choice (Fabricant and Fine 2012).

Charter schools complicate the traditional dichotomy between public and private schools. They are technically public, in that they do not charge tuition and are funded by tax dollars, but they are like private schools in that they do not follow public school curricula. Many charter schools also contract out private services, such as the rental of building facilities, and some are managed by private companies. Moreover, charter schools are not accountable to local school district boards of education. Though approved by the state, charter schools have their own boards of directors instead of elected school boards (Belfield and Levin 2005:27). This mimics private schools and preparatory boarding schools, wherein boards composed of business leaders and alumni manage educational decisions (Cookson and Persell 1985:109). Distinct from a locally elected board of education, members of these charter school boards are typically appointed by the companies that manage them or sometimes are locally elected, depending on their organizational structure.

**Types of Charter Schools**

Variation in charter schools emerged over time, especially with regard to their organizational type. Early “mom and pop” or autonomous charters focused on enhancing achievement among disadvantaged students by employing seasoned educators and using community-based and culturally- or pedagogically-specific techniques (Fabricant and Fine
Cookie-cutter styles characterize *network* charters, whose management is removed from the communities they serve. These charter schools often apply a one-size-fits-all approach to education (Fabricant and Fine 2012:25). Network charters in particular have placed more emphasis on the language of market opportunity, constructing parents as consumers (Henig, Holyoke, Brown, and Lacireno-Paquet 2005). A *combined* charter begins as either a network or autonomous school before converting to another type or changing management in some way and thus may have elements of both types.

**Dynamics of Charter School Operation**

Charter schools are managed by non-profit or for-profit companies. About 12% of charter schools in the United States are run by for-profit companies (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools). Often referred to as charter management organizations or CMOs, these companies call the shots and regulate most, if not all, charter school activity (Ertas and Roch 2014; Fabricant and Fine 2012). Some CMOs are autonomous and community-based, while others are part of an extensive network of charter schools. Charter schools in large networks strive for the most uniformity across the schools they manage, especially in terms of their “look and feel” (DiMartino and Jessen 2018:32). CMOs cultivate the image of each charter school through the creation and maintenance of their respective websites, social media pages, and tangible marketing materials. However, some CMOs are more hands-off in their approach to managing the school.

CMOs typically influence the “look and feel” of charters through their organization of staff on the ground. After obtaining approval from the board of directors, a management company hires a director for a new charter school, who serves the role of both principal and superintendent. The director then hires staff, including someone to fill the title of enrollment
manager. This job is critical to the recruitment and enrollment process, especially in network charter schools which place more emphasis on marketing compared to autonomous charter schools. While the responsibilities for enrollment managers can vary by school, they each manage any information related to enrollment, such as students’ applications and records.

In some charter schools, enrollment managers plan community events. They also give tours to families and answer application-related questions by phone and email. Once families apply to a charter school, enrollment managers process their paperwork and offer admission to accepted families. They then move families through the registration process until enrollment is complete. In competitive charter schools, some families are not accepted—even after they attend school events, get to know personnel, and apply online or in person. In these cases, enrollment is determined by a lottery, which is held at the school or conducted virtually. For families who are not chosen, the enrollment manager then places them on a waitlist. If the lottery has passed and a school has remaining seats, personnel will make offers of admission to families after they complete the application process. Newly developed or expanding charters have the opportunity to offer spaces to any students who apply, at least until the schools become more established and desirable.

**Context for the Study**

**The History of NC Charters**

The requirements and parameters of charter school policy vary by state. Thus, student selection processes are best understood at the local level, where they are subject to state policy and oversight. North Carolina state law originally mandated diversity by requiring that charters eventually reflect the racial demographics of their surrounding areas. However, a 2013 law
eliminated the mandate and softened the language about diversity (Bonner, Stancill, and Raynor 2017). According to current state law (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.45):

Within one year after the charter school begins operation, the charter school shall make efforts for the population of the school to reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the general population residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located or the racial and ethnic composition of the special population that the school seeks to serve residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located.

Thus, although the law says that charter school personnel “shall make efforts” to reflect the racial composition of their respective school districts or surrounding areas, it is not mandatory that a charter school’s student population matches its local demographics.

White students and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds increasingly make up charter schools in North Carolina. Since 2011, when the General Assembly raised the statewide one-hundred charter school cap (Marchello 2019), North Carolina charter schools almost doubled in number and became disproportionately composed of white students, compared to the demographics of their local school districts (Ladd et al. 2016:540). North Carolina charter school students are more likely to come from families with college-educated parents (Ladd et al. 2016:542). Thus, because of such social selection, North Carolina is an exemplary location to examine the processes through which charter schools influence their student enrollments (Mickelson et al. 2018).

Some questions about recruitment to charter schools remain unanswered. We still lack understanding of how charter school personnel justify what charter schools offer families. In particular, we lack information about how charter school leaders situate their school in relation to other charters. Furthermore, we do not know through which processes school personnel
construct an image of their particular charter schools in coordination with which families they see fitting the school. In this study, I examine student recruitment, enrollment, and retention through efforts of personnel at various levels of the organizational structure in three charter schools—a network-based school that I call Excellence Academy, an autonomous, self-declared “non-CMO” school that I call Garrison Charter, and a hybrid that began as a network-based charter school but was acquired by a management company with lighter oversight. I call the third school Ridgewood Prep.

**Excellence Academy**

A new suburban charter school, Excellence Academy offered kindergarten through eighth grade classes at the time that I studied it. Approaching Excellence Academy, its austere appearance was immediately noticeable. Its new brick exterior was matched by its pristine interior, neatly painted and decorated. It was a modest building with an even smaller parking lot. In the immediate area was a grocery store, located in a strip-mall style shopping center, as well as an apartment building. The area also featured several nearby schools within a twenty-minute drive, with which Excellence directly competed. Some schools in the immediate vicinity were traditional public and charters, while a few others were private schools.

Excellence Academy emphasized several themes on their website to entice families’ interest in the school. They advertised as a tuition-free school valuing flexibility, service, and enrichment outside of the classroom. During an interview, the director Lisa—a white woman in her forties—defined the school by its flexibility to innovate and adjust to individual child needs, which she argued was disallowed by the restrictive curriculum in traditional public schools. “Disillusioned” with the public school system and its lack of flexibility after working there as a teacher and administrator, she applied to Excellence on a whim and got the job as director.
Parental involvement was a central part of how the school operated and recruited families. The school’s website highlighted parental involvement as important to their mission. Parents were required to volunteer at least twenty hours each year and to track their hours online. Also available on their website was information about how parents could monitor their child’s performance, including grades and attendance. Parents were expected to provide or organize transportation for their children, as it was not provided by the school.

As a network charter, Excellence Academy was managed by a remote organization, in this case a large one called Inspired, Inc. A for-profit management organization, Inspired, Inc. managed more than fifty charter schools across the United States. “Corporate,” as school personnel at Excellence called the organization and its staff, controlled almost every aspect of the school, including outreach to current and prospective families. For example, they monitored the school’s social media pages. While Excellence staff could email photos and share events with Inspired, Inc., and often did, the management company’s leaders allowed or disallowed all content—whether posts, events, or photos. I found out about the school’s information session that prompted my first observation through a post on their publicly available Facebook page. Frequently, they posted content on social media to broadcast events and spotlight teacher and student accomplishments. They also updated the page to share photos from the events after they occurred.

Inspired, Inc. also set all estimated figures for student enrollment, including the “goal” and “cap” numbers. These numbers dictated how many students Excellence Academy planned to enroll (goal) and how many they must enroll to obtain the projected funding per classroom (cap). While the school had to reach the cap, at least in theory to pay its staff, they need not reach the goal. The management company assigned responsibility of keeping track of all
information surrounding recruitment, admission, and enrollment to the employee titled “enrollment manager” at each of the schools that it operated.

The enrollment manager at Excellence Academy, Alyssa—a black woman in her late twenties—was responsible for multiple jobs throughout the school. Not only did she conduct tours for families and facilitate their registration process from application to enrollment, but she also managed student information for both newly enrolled students and former students who transferred elsewhere. She obtained academic and health records for new students when the schools they last attended did not automatically send them. Moreover, she forwarded all information about students who did not recommit to attend Excellence Academy for the next academic year to their new schools. Alyssa considered data management to be a central part of her job. Before working at the school, she worked in data management elsewhere. This work trajectory led her to employment at Excellence Academy, her first encounter with a charter school. I met her as the intensity of her job was at its peak.

**Garrison Charter**

At the time that I studied it, Garrison was a kindergarten through twelfth grade school. It was an autonomous or mom and pop charter school managed by a board composed of community members, parents, and teachers. Without a company appointing or suggesting members, community members attended a meeting to elect Garrison’s board. Rather than relying on a company to finance the school, local donors provided small donations to supplement the school’s per-pupil allotment from the state and local school districts, which is lower than funding for public schools.

My first visit to observe Garrison Charter marked an immediate and stark contrast to Excellence Academy. As a rural school, Garrison was far removed from any new apartment
buildings, luxury shops, or boutique grocery stores. For almost twenty miles, I followed the meandering roads and crossed over small bridges covering creeks. I passed more farms than I could count. Trees lined the roads. I observed many trailer homes, some of which had small bicycles parked outside, marking signs of childhood play.

On long drives to Garrison, I also noticed several old pickup trucks. Some looked like they still worked, but others had not been moved in months or years. The grass grew up beneath them. Abandoned barns also appeared frequently on these drives, some tucked behind a house or beyond a pasture. I noticed horses and cows, and even a few goats. I lost count of churches. Many were small, modest structures. I observed only one shop near the school—a convenience store. Closer to the school, I noticed modest-sized bungalows. During my first visit, I reached a stop sign, took a wrong turn, and had to turn around to head in the right direction. There were few signs to direct out-of-towners.

As I approached Garrison for the first time, I thought “this is a big community charter.” It was a large building with an expansive parking lot filled with buses. Compared to Excellence, a small brick structure without transportation, it looked sizeable and more like a traditional public school. I saw that the buses were leaving to deliver students home at the end of the school day, traffic had stopped several yards away from the school. Across an open field, I waited far enough away from the police stopping traffic to allow room for the buses to turn out. Buses headed in both directions away from the school. I counted at least ten of them. Later, I learned that twelve buses provided transportation to Garrison’s students, many of them beyond the immediate county borders.

Like the director at Excellence, however, the director of Garrison was a seasoned educator who worked in the traditional public school system for twenty years, first as a teacher.
and then as an administrator. The director, who I call Todd, was a white man in his fifties. Larry, the financial director and a white man in his forties, also had long held ties to the education system, with several family members having worked in education in the same community—before and after Garrison existed as a charter school option. Through them and personally, he witnessed Garrison’s expansion.

Garrison grew from a school dispersed between various community buildings and churches to its brand-new brick structure. As Larry put it, “we never thought we would be here,” especially since there was no school structure when the charter was approved. He said that community members applied to the state, knowing it was a “long shot,” but the charter was granted. He then explained that the school had trouble getting loans because the land was first leased, rather than owned. The school was located where it was because the board had leased it from an “old established family in the area,” but the family would not allow the school to own it. Two years before my fieldwork, leaders at the school decided to go to the family a third time to ask to buy the land, and they permitted the purchase of the land. This allowed them to get a larger loan to pay for an addition to the school because they were quickly outgrowing the original structure, which would require repair because it was modular. As Larry explained, “even if we kept it well maintained, it wouldn’t have served us in the long term.” In particular, they lacked enough classroom space to expand their high school enrollment, something that the addition allowed. They finished the addition, a large brick structure, at the time my fieldwork began.

As enrollment continued to grow, Garrison needed someone to manage enrollment data. Hired a couple of years before my fieldwork, the enrollment manager Dan mainly processed student data rather than recruiting within the community. But he did console families when
enrollment uncertainties arose. Meanwhile, other personnel were concerned with elevating achievement, particularly meeting the needs of students with special needs. At a board meeting, the school’s director, Todd—a white man in his fifties—explained that the school had been identified as performing in the bottom 5% of all state schools for two subgroups, students with disabilities and black students. The board members looked wide-eyed and somber. Todd explained that oversight would continue for three years, during which period they had to improve for those subgroups. As a white board member Gabe warned, “do you feel that? That’s Darth Vader.” By this, he meant that the school was being closely watched and that, due to low achievement, it was possible that their end was coming if the state decided to shut them down. Gabe continued, “we have to focus on achievement for these subgroups. That’s the game, and we have to play the game. Not many things will get your charter revoked, folks, but this is one of them.” Recruiting good teachers and elevating achievement were the main concerns at Garrison during the time of my fieldwork. But some of their efforts to enhance achievement were also community recruitment events, such as a family night at the school to share a meal and tips for improving test scores.

**Ridgewood Prep**

Ridgewood Preparatory was a rural charter school offering kindergarten through eighth grade at the beginning of my fieldwork. They added a ninth grade during the course of my study. Approaching the charter school, it appeared less isolated than Garrison, though still rural. It was located a few miles away from a major highway, and it was closer to a major grocery store and other conveniences such as chain and local restaurants. As I drove closer to the school, I passed several residential developments with mid-sized manufactured housing. There were also several trailer homes and a few fields with seasonal crops and farm equipment.
The school originated as a hands-on network charter school, like Excellence, but was converted to a hands-off network charter school. Thus, the school combines aspects of autonomous and network charter school models. According to Nathan, the original management company “shut [Ridgewood] down, took their money, and left town. Then they wanted [the school] to pay [the management company] x amount of dollars.” This amount included annual fees that the management company expected Ridgewood to provide in compensation for their services. The school leadership was reluctant to work with a management company unless they would allow more transparency and flexibility, meaning more open communication between the board and the company as well as the flexibility for personnel to make their own decisions about the school functions, including recruitment.

Due to their new arrangement having a hands-off management company, the local community was able to assume more control of the operations of the school. Nathan was the most involved director of the three charter schools in this study. For marketing purposes, he attended community events and even religious services. He attended all committee meetings at the school. He also circulated carpool to greet families and interact with students. As he emphasized, he was known in the community as a long-time educator and proponent of education.

School personnel and board members were loosely connected with management. The board chair who I call Kate—a white woman in her thirties—referred to the company as their “landlord.” Unlike Excellence, personnel at Ridgewood were not intensely monitored and were also less responsive to management concerns. Leaders of the school listened to landlord advice only when it was beneficial to them. For example, the company strongly advised the school to appoint a local attorney to its board, which it did. Board members took turns participating in
webinars hosted by the management company, and they shared notes with other board members, administrators, and board meeting attendees. However, they generally viewed the company’s influence as optional. In particular, Ridgewood personnel and board members inquired about school property related matters, but generally they made decisions about recruitment strategies and practices. Ridgewood’s management company helped them financially at the beginning. However, for the past few academic years they had been on their own.

Recruitment ideas at Ridgewood were coupled with concerns about space. At the beginning of my fieldwork, school leaders were deciding whether to add a ninth grade for the upcoming school year or to wait another year due to space constraints. The director, Nathan, announced at a board meeting that they were planning to add a grade every year. He explained “ninth grade was approved and we can go all the way to twelfth” but that the board needed to discuss “options for where to place [students].” Personnel obtained prices for modular options—building units constructed off-site at a faster pace than conventional on-site construction. However, they were going to cost too much to rent them.

Nathan suggested that the school could partner with the community college for space. Though it was possible, he was unsure if the college would allow it. Kate said they needed to explore more options beyond the expensive modular buildings. Later, the board received million-dollar estimates for constructing a new facility, and they began to feel pressured to commit to a construction plan because it could take two years to build. Without it, they would be unable to expand the school beyond ninth grade. But they were also conscious of an already sizeable debt that they accrued from getting enrollment numbers wrong for the prior year, amounting to more than two hundred thousand dollars. Rather than firing teachers, they took on the debt to finance normal school operations.
Although personnel claimed to do little marketing, Ridgewood hosted some recruitment events. Their festival was advertised on social media and on their website as an opportunity for families to learn about the school. As Kate put it, “we want those who have already applied and also to use it as a marketing event for other families.” At the event, they showcased student awards, science projects, and art projects. Students performed martial arts, played the drums, and even took part in a Zumba dance activity with the physical education teacher. The event offered current and prospective families the chance to purchase school spirit wear, such as t-shirts, sweatshirts, and car magnets. Unlike the other two schools in this study, merchandise worn or advertisements displayed in public places served as central marketing techniques for Ridgewood. They also had a highway billboard for a couple of years before the board decided that it was not worth the cost and that word-of-mouth worked better for recruitment anyway.

Even in January, Ridgewood was still enrolling students. Nathan said he “got a call from a parent who wanted to bring a kid over, a seventh grader.” Recalling, he told them “bring them over.” He said Ridgewood was “still taking in with hopes they stay and bolster numbers.” Following the end of the lottery, by May, they had almost reached their goal for the next year’s enrollment. It would be the first time that they met their enrollment goal since the school changed management organizations and leadership.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

My dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter two provides historical context for debates about the purpose of charter schools, in particular the extent to which they were meant to serve immediate communities or provide choice regardless of residence. In that chapter, I contrast the community-oriented and locally managed charter school with the other two charter schools, which were profit-oriented and remotely managed. I find that the three charter schools used
different tactics to draw from their neighborhoods and recruit primarily white families. These recruitment decisions began with where to site the schools.

Chapter three delineates two approaches to studying charter schools. I contrast a demand-side approach that considers why and how families choose schools with a supply-side approach that concentrates on the images of charter schools that shape student enrollment by working to create particular impressions among prospective families. I present findings about how each school in the study worked to create impressions to recruit students, even contrasting their approach to traditional public schools or in some cases comparing themselves to traditional public schools in order to appear more accessible.

Chapter four considers the expectations that charter schools established for parent involvement and the implications for enrollment as well as privileged parents’ entitlement within the school. It also examines school personnel efforts to keep families happy in order to retain their children’s enrollment and hence their funding.

In chapter five, I provide a conclusion. I summarize findings across chapters and discuss some implications of charter school recruitment. I discuss specific contributions to theory as well. Finally, I compare the ideals with the realities of charter schools, and I consider what this study suggests about broader changes in K-12 education with the growth of school choice.
Chapter 2: Providing Choice for Everyone, or Preferences for Local White Families?
How Charter School Recruitment Draws on Neighborhood Boundaries

Charter schools emerged in the 1990s to provide another form of choice for families who had few. Since then, charter schools have grown across the United States. In North Carolina, which is the focus of this study, the number of charter schools in operation doubled in the past ten years from less than one hundred in 2009 to about two hundred in 2019, and the state approved ten additional charters to open in 2020 (Hinchcliffe 2019).

Charter schools have also fueled re-segregation in many states. Charters can segregate students between schools by race (Bifulco and Ladd 2007; Fiel 2013; Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2013; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Seamster and Henricks 2015). Charter schools can exacerbate segregation by attracting white students who exit from traditional public schools (Renzulli and Evans 2005). This contributes to black students’ isolation in majority-minority schools as they increase in share over time (Fiel 2013).

Charter schools have elements of neighborhood schools, but they are also intended to be available to families regardless of where they live. In North Carolina, residents can apply to any charter school in the state even those outside their district boundaries (Department of Public Instruction 2019). Circumventing home ownership and neighborhood school attendance, charter school policies permit enrollment without regard to residence (Lubienski and Weitzel 2010). At the same time, original charter school advocates envisioned them as community centers, organized and led by local parents, teachers, and community members (Nathan 1996). This implies that people from local neighborhoods would be involved in the creation and operation of charter schools, even though student enrollment is intended to be freed from neighborhood constraints. Moreover, while anyone can enroll in a charter school, personnel can still make siting decisions that recruit from local areas (Mommandi and Welner 2018).
Prior research largely neglects how charter school recruitment relates to neighborhoods in non-urban spaces. Scholars understand charter schools as part of the larger pattern of re-segregation between schools (Bankston, Bonastia, Petrilli, Ravitch, Renzulli, and Paino 2013; Garcia 2008a; Renzulli 2006; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Riel, Parcel, Mickelson, and Smith 2018; Rotberg 2014; Sohoni and Saporito 2009). In theory, student enrollment in charter schools occurs irrespective of neighborhood. However, it is unclear based on prior research how charter school recruitment processes relate to traditional neighborhood boundaries of student enrollment.

To fill this gap, this study investigates recruitment in three charter schools. I ask the following research questions. First, how does recruitment to charter schools align with neighborhood boundaries? Second, how do charter schools’ different organizational structures influence these recruitment approaches? Finally, how do recruitment decisions, such as where a charter school initially locates, reflect the market of prospective families from which they hope to attract?

This chapter is based on a qualitative study of three non-urban charter schools. While two of the schools in the study were profit-oriented charter schools, I refer to the third charter school as “mom and pop,” an independently managed charter school without ties to a for-profit company. In this chapter, I develop a contrast between the community-based school, Garrison Charter, and the two others in the corporate realm, Excellence Academy and Ridgewood Prep. The corporate schools were managed by for-profit companies that were remotely located but retained varied levels of local control. While Excellence had remote management at the national and regional level, Ridgewood retained more local control especially through the actions of their board. Having no association with a private management company, Garrison was a mom and pop charter school managed by local parents and leaders within its community. It originated as a
traditional public school before being converted to a charter school in order to avoid consolidation with district schools.

This study contributes to the literature on school re-segregation by informing about the processes through which three charter schools sited and recruited in predominantly white areas of their districts. Typically, scholars conceptualize re-segregation in terms of people making white flight happen—white urban residents fleeing the city for suburban neighborhood schools and white rural residents resisting desegregation by sending their children to private schools or closing public schools altogether (Bonastia 2009, 2012; Ryan 2010). Some scholars examining parents’ choices of charter schools have also construed their enrollment decisions as white flight (Garcia 2008a). Scholars give less attention to how schools facilitate white flight.

To understand charter school recruitment in the three schools, I adopt the concept of habitus. Theorized by Bourdieu (1984) and elaborated on by Bonilla-Silva (2018) in terms specific to race, habitus refers to class- and race-inflected predispositions that shape how people behave, interact, and view the world, including their preferences for school compositions (Burke 2012). However, I extend the concept to consider how charter schools can protect and reinforce white habitus by securing white spaces for parents. Despite emphasis on parents’ choices that constitute and contribute to re-segregation, only a few studies have examined how charter school personnel reinforce status distinctions and reproduce inequality by securing white educational spaces (Garcia 2008a; Jabbar 2015; Renzulli and Evans 2005). But even these studies neglect the residential aspects of school choice. This study aims to fill that gap as well.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I introduce the neighborhood school as a model in U.S. education. Next, I review aspects of school choice in general and charter schools in particular. Then, I explain the motivation for charter schools, including the perspectives of early
advocates. I also review variation in charter schools and how they have changed over time. After reviewing my methods, I then present my findings. First, I summarize findings about siting for the three charter schools and the racial implications of their recruitment practices. Then, I divide the findings between the mom and pop charter school and the corporate charter schools to detail each of the school’s recruitment histories and decisions. I find that recruitment in three charter schools was attuned to the neighborhoods in which they were located. In fact, both the mission- and profit-oriented schools in this study made efforts to recruit and appease local white parents. To conclude, I consider to what extent recruitment in the three schools draws on an original idea of charter schools—community-based institutions that provide unfettered choice for all families, regardless of residence.

The Neighborhood School

The neighborhood school is a powerful educational model in U.S. society (Parcel and Taylor 2015). Evoking nostalgic images of children walking to community schools close to their homes, they are attractive options for families who desire geographic proximity between home and school and tightknit social networks with neighbors. However, the siting of neighborhood schools historically created tensions between those who valued proximity to home and those who preferred availability of school amenities such as large sports complexes, which more remote facilities allowed (McDonald 2010). With the construction of cafeterias in schools and the growth of bus transportation for students, the necessity of neighborhood schooling waned. As McDonald (2010:189) put it, “schools no longer needed to be within walking distance of where students lived.” Since cafeterias supplied meals for students and buses transported them, students no longer needed to return home for lunch or walk home from school in general.
Despite changes in their necessity, historical ideas about the attractiveness of neighborhood schools continue to shape siting decisions. While siting decisions have occurred at the local level with the discretion of school district leaders since the 1960s, the Council of Educational Facility Planners International or CEFPI, has continued to publish an influential series of guidelines for school planning. Their guidelines featured increasingly flexible requirements for school design over time, for example, by failing to issue minimum size recommendations in recent decades (McDonald 2010). Planning scholars attribute this increased flexibility to critics’ of CEFPI, who argue that size requirements limit the creation of neighborhood schools since it relegates schools’ siting to the “edge” of many communities (McDonald 2010:190).

Neighborhood schools remain popular for various reasons. In particular, they offer the potential benefit of tightly knit community members and school personnel. These ties can facilitate communication between families and schools that could promote students’ learning (Parcel and Taylor 2015). Having children attend schools in their own neighborhoods also eases some of the pressures involved with managing both realms as parent experience longer work hours and commutes (Parcel and Taylor 2015). Thus, families still opt to send their children to neighborhood schools. In fact, for most families, neighborhood public schools remain the default choice (Lareau and Goyette 2014).

Neighborhood schools can also facilitate segregation. Housing segregation divides people by race between neighborhoods, and neighborhood schools reflect local demographics (Charles 2003; Massey and Denton 1993; McDonald 2010; Rothstein 2017). Redlining in particular played a role in the racial segregation of neighborhoods, as the federal government would not insure loans in areas populated by people of color (Rothstein 2017). Such government
policies allowed white families to obtain insured mortgages in highly valued, all-white areas while relegating families of color, particularly African Americans, to neighborhoods with lower home values and the rental market. Today, families often use school assignments as criteria before selecting a neighborhood in which to buy a house, if they have the capability and financial means to do so (Holme 2002; Lareau and Goyette 2014). Such neat ties between school and housing selection have consequences for school funding. In particular, these decisions tend to divide neighborhoods with an elevated property tax base from lower SES children who would benefit from resourced public schools (Lareau 2014).

**White Habitus**

Neighborhood boundaries are paramount to understanding racial inequality in school attendance. Since residential boundaries write racial inequality into space, school attendance boundaries can mimic these divisions (Finnigan and Holme 2018:368). In fact, parents frequently use the racial composition of neighborhood schools to make decisions about where to purchase a residence; even if the schools are lower in quality, white families purchase homes in areas with more white neighbors, and thus students (Liebowitz and Page 2015).

By choosing a whiter neighborhood regardless of school quality, white families exhibit efforts to protect what Bonilla-Silva (2018:121) calls white habitus—a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (see also Bourdieu 1984). Foremost among these preferences have historically been whites’ avoiding black spaces and promoting in-group solidarity through residential and social decisions that protect them from racial outsiders (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006). However, prior research about white habitus focuses more on people’s individual actions by virtue of their status group memberships rather than how
institutions protect and reinforce white habitus (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2006; Burke 2012). This study uses the concept of white habitus to analyze charter school recruitment.

**The Charter School**

The charter school is a recent national experiment in school choice (Lubienski and Weitzel 2010). Since the 1990s, its evolution has permitted organizations to independently charter K-12 institutions. Charter schools in particular can provide choice for families, disconnecting a student’s residence from their school assignment.1 In most states, families can apply to a charter school anywhere in their residing state, even if it exists outside of their district and county boundaries. This allows families to circumvent residential boundaries of school assignments (Lubienski and Weitzel 2010).

At the same time, charter schools are also intended to serve immediate communities. The charter school began with educational reformer Albert Shanker, who brought attention to and expanded on ideas in Ray Budde’s (1989) essay “Education by Charter.” While Budde focused on innovative teacher-led programs within schools, Shanker expanded the idea to the creation of entire schools around terms that were set and agreed upon by parents and community members rather than remote actors (Nathan 1996).

More recent advocates of charter schools also frame them as opportunities for parents and community members to get involved in the education of local children. Nathan’s (1996) book *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education* identifies parents, teachers, and community members as organizers of charter schools. This model, which is attuned to community control, imagines schools “as sites for local stakeholders to create spaces

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1 “Any child who is qualified under the laws of this State for admission to a public school is qualified for admission to a charter school…Admission to a charter school shall not be determined according to the local school administrative unit in which a student resides” (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.45).
responsive to their particular and idiosyncratic educational and social needs” (Scott and DiMartino 2010:173). This model assumes that providing individualized education will also promote more equitable school access for students from various social backgrounds.

Beyond their residential implications, charter schools were intended to be sites of innovation (Shanker 1988). Early ‘mom and pop’ or autonomous charter schools focused on enhancing achievement among disadvantaged students by employing seasoned educators and using community-based and culturally-specific techniques (Fabricant and Fine 2012). In theory, charter schools could serve as innovation laboratories through emphasis on individualized learning while also promoting racial and socioeconomic diversity in school through the availability of choice (Fabricant and Fine 2012). As advocate Joe Nathan (1996:17) put it, charter schools provide the opportunity to create an “entrepreneurial spirit in education.” Parents and community members can create new ways of learning that best suit the students who need it most. This devotion to serve prospective families seeking alternatives to traditional public schools also requires attention to unique strategies for helping students whom traditional schools do not adequately serve (Schneider et al. 2000).

In contrast to the community charter schools led by parents and teachers, non-community groups can also be granted charters. These charters are run by private companies, some of which are for-profit. Often referred to as charter or educational management organizations—CMOs and EMOs—these companies call the shots and regulate most, if not all, charter school activity (Ertas and Roch 2014; Fabricant and Fine 2012). Accordingly, these privately managed charter schools follow a market model of schooling that embraces private-sector practices (Scott and DiMartino 2010; see also Chubb and Moe 1990). Charter schools contract with outside companies to provide various services like special education, physical education or therapy,
security, testing, and food services (Scott and DiMartino 2010). These charter schools increasingly embrace profit-oriented management arrangements in which companies can financially benefit from their investments (Horsford, Scott, and Anderson 2019). In North Carolina, some charter schools that are supposed to be non-profits are essentially run by for-profit companies and have even shown to channel profits to one network founder (Kelley 2015).

In profit-oriented charter schools, recruitment to charter schools is part of company strategy. Each additional child enrolled in a charter school provides additional per-pupil funding. To raise revenue, charter schools want to recruit the maximum number of students that their physical space can allow. However, some charter schools might avoid enrolling students who are more expensive to educate such as disabled students. In their study of Michigan charter schools, Ertas and Roch (2014) find that EMO managed charter schools were less likely to enroll low-income students than charter schools not managed by EMOs. Contrasted with other forms of charter school management, profit-oriented charters are also located in higher-income areas (Miron and Nelson 2002).

As profit-oriented management organizations take on a greater share of the charter school sector, recruitment has become a franchise activity for charter schools that exist in a large network of other charter schools. Scott and DiMartino (2010:171) argue “this is a pivotal era in charter school reform, where early visions of a movement characterized by community-centered and teacher-initiated schools are giving way to more market-driven and corporatized schools.” Contemporary forms of charter school management are more corporate, strategic, and remote from the communities that the charter schools serve compared to charter schools’ roots in community-centered schooling.
Methods

The charter schools in this study were organizationally distinct. One was a mom and pop charter school managed and governed by community members. The second was a network charter school managed by a national, for-profit company. Finally, the third was a hybrid that was first managed by a national for-profit corporation but was later acquired by a company that allowed more local control. Another important distinction between the hybrid and network models is that the network charter school developed as a replication of a current charter school model, while the hybrid was not a replication of another charter school. Studying three organizationally distinct charters allows inferences regarding whether organizational form promotes different recruitment strategies, or the extent to which such strategies are in common.

I collected observational data in three charter schools over the course of 14 months and 30 field visits. I spent a total of 120 hours pursuing fieldwork, half of which was time spent driving to the field sites. Totaling more than 40 school affiliates, participants included directors, enrollment managers, assistant directors, receptionists, disability specialists, a finance director, a public relations coordinator, an after-school coordinator, teachers, parents, community members, and members of the charter school boards. In addition to observing within administrative spaces of the school and during recruitment events, my fieldwork involved attendance at charter school board meetings. I also observed open houses, school tours, a festival, community relations and PTA meetings, a lottery night, and a family night.

To clarify observations and hone my understanding of recruitment at the schools, I conducted in-depth interviews with directors and enrollment managers to garner more detail about their recruitment processes and enrollment practices. These interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours. I collected and analyzed written materials as well, including school pamphlets,
advertisements, social media pages, official websites, and applications for prospective students, as well as the charter applications submitted to the state’s charter school advisory board prior to their opening. In this section, I review the context of the study, research design, sampling and recruitment techniques, and my approach to data analysis through coding and memoing.

**Context for the Study**

The requirements and parameters of charter school policy vary by state. Thus, student selection processes are best understood at the local level, where they are subject to state policy and oversight. North Carolina state law originally mandated diversity by requiring that charters eventually reflect the racial demographics of their surrounding areas. However, a 2013 law eliminated the mandate and softened the language about diversity (Bonner, Stancill, and Raynor 2017). According to current state law (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.45):

> Within one year after the charter school begins operation, the charter school shall make efforts for the population of the school to reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the general population residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located or the racial and ethnic composition of the special population that the school seeks to serve residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located.

Thus, although the law says that charter school personnel “shall make efforts” to reflect the racial composition of their respective school districts or surrounding areas, it is not mandatory that a charter school’s student population matches its local demographics.

Racial and class stratification between charter schools and traditional public schools is increasingly evident in the state. In 2011, the General Assembly raised the statewide one-hundred charter school cap (Marchello 2019). Since then, student populations of North Carolina charter schools are disproportionately white compared to their respective districts (Ladd,
Clotfelter, and Holbein 2016). Students also come from relatively better educated households (Ladd et al. 2016). Thus, because of such social selection, North Carolina is an exemplary location to examine the processes through which schools influence their student enrollments (Mickelson et al. 2018). Recent findings about North Carolina’s charter school population raise questions about student selection into charter schools in the state, especially the processes that shape which families enroll in them. As Wilson and Carlsen (2016:25) note, charter school segregation “raises questions not just about how parents choose schools, but also how schools appeal to different families” (see also Evans 2020).

**Research Design**

I employed observational, interview, and qualitative content analytic methods to study charter school recruitment and marketing. I used jottings and field-notes derived from observation in three charter schools, as well as their marketing materials, to examine the processes through which these charters shape student enrollment. One of the critiques of using interviews as the sole method of collecting data is that participants’ words may not reflect their actions or might depict ideals rather than realities (Charmaz 2014:78). Interviews also lack the context in which participants act. Observation help to fill this void by providing real time insight about recruitment efforts in three charter schools with varied organizational structures.

**Sample Characteristics**

After reviewing the websites and demographic information of twenty charter schools within the same state, I selected three charter schools on the basis of their varied management structures. I distinguished charter schools that are locally managed from those that are remotely managed and follow an established pattern for charters within a network; I call the former “autonomous” charters and the latter “network” charters. Other charters offer more hybrid
models of management, and I call those “combined” charters. While one of the charter schools in this study developed from within the community and is autonomously managed (Garrison), another was founded by an educational management company operating a network of more than fifty charter schools (Excellence). The third charter school originated as a hands-on network charter school, like Excellence, but was converted to a hands-off network charter school with management having less control over school activities (Ridgewood). This meant that community members were able to have more discretion in operating the third school.

Each of the schools was developed or expanded within five years of the study. Recently expanded schools added a grade or grew their enrollments due to changes in space or funding. I selected charter schools that opened or expanded in the past five years in order to examine contexts in which schools must actively hone their image or at least promote it in order to recruit students to populate their classrooms. All of the three sampled charters were in the same state, North Carolina, and thus were subject to the same state-level legislation about school choice.

The charter schools differed in their proximity to urban areas. Two of the three schools—Garrison and Ridgewood—were in rural areas, though they differed in degree. While Garrison was a remote rural school more than thirty miles from an urban area, Ridgewood was a distant rural school because it was within twenty miles of an urban area (Brown and Schafft 2011:62). Ridgewood was still rural, but it was in a more populous area with major grocery stores and other shops nearby. The closest shop to Garrison was a convenience store about one mile away. In part due to their locations, Ridgewood had some competition with a nearby charter, nearby private school, and traditional public schools, while Garrison had limited rivals—a traditional public school for primary, middle, and high school levels and a small private school. In North Carolina, charter schools tend to open in rural areas (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and
Wang 2011), which makes these important though less convenient to study. As Logan, Minca, and Adar (2012:297) state, “nonmetropolitan schools tend to be overlooked in the segregation literature.” Most studies of school inequality examine urban and increasingly suburban context. Meanwhile, Excellence Academy was a suburban school. Unlike the other two schools, in the immediate area of Excellence were several stores and apartment buildings. In short, it looked like a typical suburb.

Transportation availability differed between the schools. While Garrison provided free transportation for students, Excellence had a few parent-led options like a carpool and a private bus, and Ridgewood relied on parents and carpool between families. Tables 1 and 2 compare other relevant characteristics of the three charter schools and their surrounding communities, including market orientation, organizational type, location, and origination date.

Table 1. School Characteristics: Market Orientation, Organizational Type, Location, and Origination Date Range to Denote Years in Operation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter School Name</th>
<th>Market Orientation</th>
<th>Organizational Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Originally Started*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garrison Charter (K-12)</td>
<td>Mission-oriented</td>
<td>Autonomous/Mom and pop</td>
<td>Remote rural</td>
<td>&gt; 4 years prior to fieldwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence Academy (K-8)</td>
<td>Profit-oriented</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>&lt; 3 years prior to fieldwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridgewood Preparatory (K-8)</td>
<td>Profit-oriented</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Populous rural</td>
<td>&gt; 3 years prior to fieldwork</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* While the schools originated at different times, they were all in the process of expanding Enrollment. If they were not newly developed, they expanded as a result of new building families that allowed space for more students. Ranges are listed for original dates in order to protect school identities.
Table 2. School and Community Characteristics: Racial and Socioeconomic Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter School Name</th>
<th>School’s Racial Composition</th>
<th>Immediate Community’s Racial Composition*</th>
<th>School’s Free or Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Immediate Community’s Median Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garrison Charter (K-12)</td>
<td>Predominantly white (&gt;70%)</td>
<td>&gt; 80% white</td>
<td>About 50% of school population</td>
<td>&lt; $45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 10% Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 10% black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 5% Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence Academy (K-8)</td>
<td>Predominantly white (&gt;50%)</td>
<td>&gt; 60% white</td>
<td>About 10% of school population</td>
<td>&gt; $90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15% Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 10% black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 10% Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridgewood Preparatory (K-8)</td>
<td>Predominantly white (&gt;70%)</td>
<td>&gt; 70% white</td>
<td>About 30% of school population</td>
<td>&lt; $55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 20% black</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>&lt; 5% Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 5% Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ranges provided for immediate community’s racial composition in order to protect school and community identities.

**Participant Recruitment and Data Collection**

I aimed to garner understanding of the setting and build rapport with school personnel. Because it was important to be familiar with the experiences and situations being studied, I wanted the school personnel to be comfortable with my presence (Charmaz 2014). However, I also recognized the need to be conscious of how participants perceive me and to balance being too distant and too comfortable (Charmaz 2014; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006).

My research process began with a phone call to each school to explain my study and arrange a preliminary visit. When first interacting with personnel and parents at the school, I asked for verbal consent to participate in the study. The IRB approved verbal consent for observational data collection, so I read a statement informing the participants of the purpose of the study and asked for their consent to be included in it. For interviewees, I obtained their signatures on consent forms. In field-notes, which I documented from my time at the school to write field-notes after each visit, I used only pseudonyms or descriptions to replace their names.
Table 3 lists participant characteristics, including their positions relative to the schools as well as their race, gender, and age.

Table 3. Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>School’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>School Position</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
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<td>Financial Director</td>
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<td>Kevin</td>
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<td>Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
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<td>Late-30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Enrollment Manager</td>
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<td>Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
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<td>Man</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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<tr>
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<td>School Position</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Ridgewood</td>
<td>Community member</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Late-60s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data Analysis**

I considered data collection and analysis as iterative processes rather than separate phenomena. The interview data did not speak for themselves; analysis involved a process of deconstruction and interpretation from the moment the data were collected (Holstein and Gubrium 2002:125). Data analysis began with constant comparison between data and emerging categories, moving back and forth between data and theory (Charmaz 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I incorporated an abductive approach to data analysis, which incorporates existing studies to recognize a finding as surprising; this approach allows theory to be present in order to create empirical puzzles (Timmermans and Tavory 2012:177). Throughout the process of data analysis, I looked for surprises. I worked to defamiliarize myself with the data and revisit it while looking for variation over time and across instances and sites (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Simultaneously, I looked for discoveries within the data and searched for ways to make sense of them using existing theories.

I merged grounded theory and abductive approaches to data analysis, rejecting the view of coding as purely inductive or deductive. I used open and focused coding to make sense of the data. For open coding, I read the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, line-by-line, and created codes that conveyed action based on emerging themes. This allowed me to place data into categories and conceptualize what was happening (Charmaz 2014). Open coding helped to identify initial patterns of recruitment, after which I moved to focused coding and reassessed various codes. Coding in light of the literature, I developed more thematic codes about how personnel worked to portray the school and approached recruitment more generally (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). I worked back through the data and looked for repeated codes, building on
ideas rather than events or occurrences. I gave particular attention to implicit meanings through close examination of data (Charmaz 2014).

In this process of focused coding, I composed analytic memos to organize my thinking about what was happening in the data. During memoing, I took into account the school setting. I also built on initial memos to explore patterns identified about recruitment techniques during earlier fieldwork, comparing observational with interview data. Furthermore, I used integrative memos to link codes and assess particular themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011:193). As I pieced together the various forms of data, I avoided writing overly descriptive narratives or using predetermined theorizing to structure my analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Findings

The Mom and Pop Charter

Garrison was an autonomous or “mom and pop” charter school, meaning that it was managed by a board composed of community members, parents, and teachers rather than an external company running the school. Formed by community members without the help of a management organization, Garrison Charter converted an existing neighborhood school to a charter school. However, the new charter school lacked a site at the time that originators applied to the state for permission to open the school. The original community school was closed as the district moved toward consolidating the former neighborhood schools’ student populations into more central facilities. While Garrison’s leaders tried to purchase the original school, the local school district’s board refused. Therefore, Garrison’s leaders sought permission to lease a plot of land from a local family, and the family granted their wishes. The new location for Garrison was only a mile from the original community school.
Garrison had trouble getting loans because the land was first leased, rather than owned, and they did not have a management company to finance the facility for them. Independently, the school leased the land from a local family. However, the family would not allow the school to own it. Two years before my fieldwork, the family permitted the purchase of the land. This allowed the school to get a larger loan to pay for an infrastructural addition because the student population was quickly outgrowing the original structure, which would require repair because it was modular. Also, the school lacked the space needed to expand their high school enrollment, which the addition allowed.

Garrison’s personnel proudly acclaimed its grassroots operations, and they promoted their community-based management to recruit families. Larry, the school’s financial director, emphasized that those in control of the school “are given equal weight in making decisions.” He was committed to the participation of community members in school governance and elections. In fact, community members attended a meeting to elect Garrison’s board. As Larry put it, “anyone can pay the $5 membership and come to vote for the board.” Moreover, board members being community insiders cultivated a feeling of closeness between parents, personnel, and community members.

Garrison’s board composition was somewhat irregular compared to other charter schools in the state, something Larry recognized. In other North Carolina charter schools, boards composed of members working in finance and business were more common. Realizing this, Larry said that the school feared resistance from the state about having teachers on the board because it was viewed, at least by other charter schools, as a conflict of interest. However, he argued “it was important to us.” The state determined that they were allowed to keep teachers on the board. In Larry’s view, since their governing body was elected, it was also representative of
the people who “have a stake in what happens at the school.” In contrast to Garrison, he envisioned other charter schools having less control over their daily activities and decisions because they needed to request permission from an outside company. At least in theory, the board members making decisions at Garrison were those most directly affected by them.

To deal with student recruitment concerns, Garrison had a public relations coordinator, Deb, who also worked part-time as a teacher. However, her job tasks primarily involved student achievement concerns. Rather than focusing on community outreach, Deb devoted much of her time to teacher recruitment at the time of my research. For example, she was working on crafting a flyer to recruit a new math teacher. Larry recommended that she emphasize Garrison’s relatively close proximity to the beach and the reasonable cost of living, as he hoped these would be enough to entice education certified teachers. The assistant director, Kevin, planned to attend career fairs for several North Carolina colleges in order to find a math teacher to teach higher level courses, as they had trouble recruiting and retaining math teachers. He requested a stipend, which could be advertised at the job fair as a “sign on bonus.” The board debated various possibilities for a stipend, ultimately deciding on $3,000 spread out over three payments.

**Avoiding Consolidation**

At the time Garrison’s charter was approved, there was an ongoing battle between the historic Garrison community school and the local school district. The local school district was undergoing consolidation of its various neighborhood schools into one elementary, one middle, and one high school. Garrison parents and community members resisted consolidating with district schools. As Dan, the enrollment manager, explained:

> The people here had a local community school forever, and they didn’t want to give that up because the [Garrison] community was a very close-knit one…they didn’t want their community absorbed into a larger group…they wanted a
traditional community school where it had a true family feeling. And I think that’s what they’ve tried to continue.

Garrison’s resistance to consolidation resulted in its seeking its own community charter school. And that charter was granted. Other historical examples of resisting consolidation often involved freedom of choice plans that were intended to stall desegregation efforts; as Bonastia (2015) discusses, often urban-suburban consolidation tensions gained more attention than consolidation in rural areas (Ryan 2010). By starting Garrison as a charter school, community members circumvented the prospect of moderately diverse district public schools. However, school staff maintained that the resistance to consolidation was more about keeping their community school intact than fear of racial outsiders.

Leaders in the traditional school system within the same district feared how the charter school’s enrollment would affect the nearby rural school district. The local district was already struggling financially. Dan, the enrollment manager, described these tensions between the charter school and district schools:

There has been a very longstanding tension between [the local school district and Garrison]…the [county] district being panicked and furious about this school when they decided to expand to an eighth grade, or K-8, and start adding a high school. They said [Garrison] was going to kill their schools. They said dozens of teachers were going to lose their jobs…I mean it got nasty.

Garrison opened its high school anyway. Soon after, they made building plans to accommodate the high school students.

**Expanding Access**

With the addition of a high school, a newly constructed building, and its accompanying debt, Garrison continued to need higher enrollment numbers. While the school historically
served its immediate community, in order to grow enrollment, personnel decided to expand access for families outside the community. For example, in neighboring towns, they began to use road signs and movie theater advertisements to entice families’ interest in the school. These efforts to expand were relatively recent as they began less than five years prior to my fieldwork.

Although Garrison originated as a community school attended only by locals, its personnel recognized that charter schools were intended to draw from a larger pool of families than proximate neighborhoods. The school’s financial director, Larry, articulated the goal of charter schools more generally as allowing “choice regardless of residence.” Therefore, Garrison worked to expand transportation to students by bus, ultimately extending across four counties. Some students even took a bus that used a ferry to reach their school and home destinations each day. At the same time, the school relied on the support of local community students, which still accounted for almost half of their enrollment, in addition to the slightly larger majority of students who were bused from other school districts.

Having succeeded in opening the charter school and expanding access, school personnel tried to perpetuate a community feel in order to recruit students and maintain local support for the school. Thus, Garrison personnel tried to balance maintaining a community-based school while drawing from other neighboring communities. However, this was not an easy task in light of the school’s origins. Some community members, including the enrollment manager, Dan, worried about costs of the expansion for the school’s community orientation:

Now, they lost some of that [community feel]—to be honest—when they had to expand… But they had to do it for fiscal reasons. They just weren’t getting the money, so that’s when they opened up and started drawing from [local counties], you know the other counties they could draw from. It was a survival mechanism. The phrase I’ve heard was that “we’ll grow our way out of our trouble,” that they were in financial trouble. The enrollment had plateaued. It’s not that big an area.
Demographics have changed in the last [few] years. Families do not have as many children. Most young people, like, young families for the most part are moving out of here because there’s not a lot of work. So in order to get more children, they had to open up.

As Dan conveyed, though it might have moved the orientation of the school away from Garrison’s community, the expansion was necessary to maintain financial viability.

Some school personnel struggled the tension between having a school that is both community-oriented and open to enrollment from all families. In particular, personnel grappled with honoring what they perceived as the central aim of charter schools—to expand access despite zip code—because it divided attention from the community surrounding the school, and community members took notice. As Larry elaborated,

Charter schools are not supposed to have attendance zones…having a small environment was supposed to be a big thing for us, but more than half of the students in this school are from outside the county.

He described this situation as “a dilemma.” The original plan for the school was to cater to the needs of the immediate community, and local support for the school was based on that promise. Therefore, Larry felt conflicted about how to balance serving the immediate community with the need to subscribe to what he perceived to be a goal of charter schools in general—giving families “a choice” without residential preference. By attending school choice events at the state level, such as rallies in the state’s capital of Raleigh in a mall adjoining the legislative building, Larry learned that other charter school leaders encouraged family choice regardless of residence.

**Putting White Neighborhood Parents First**

Expanding enrollment to community outsiders created tension for school personnel at Garrison, as some parents opposed the expansion. In particular, the expansion permitted the
enrollment of black students who did not live in the predominantly white community surrounding Garrison. They were bused from neighboring counties with more diverse student populations. As Dan, the enrollment manager, explained:

There’s an element that doesn’t like the expansion…[The expansion] has led to tension because they are bringing kids from communities that have different values. And what’s happened I think too is that in some regards, when they went as a regional school, this became a school of last resort for some children. At least, I think that. Especially middle school, we get an awful lot of kids coming from certain districts. Usually, these kids are in academic trouble or disciplinary trouble…I think there is a group that is unhappy with that, and I get it. They have had a very high performing school over the years, and when the profile of the student population changes, that’s going to change. And they’ve had some difficult years…It was different. It was change, and people aren’t good with that. They just aren’t good with change.

Dan elaborated on how parents in particular responded to changes in achievement. As he put it, “they will blame that change in the rating on the students, you know, [imitating parents] ‘we weren’t scored like this before. It’s these kids.’” He continued, “there had to be a reason. It had to be those kids, those kids that weren’t like they were [before].”

While school personnel wanted to save the school from financial trouble,² they did not intend to draw from districts with higher proportions of nonwhite students. They wanted more students like the ones in their community, namely white ones. As Dan conveyed, some parents disapproved the expansion to other districts. In order to placate local white parents’ concerns about student demographics, Garrison included a question in their application about residence

² “Since the passage of charter school authorizing legislation in 1996, 58 charter schools have closed or relinquished their charters” (Stoops 2020). This corresponds to a closure rate of 22.8%. Charter school closures occur for financial or academic reasons.
that allowed them to prioritize families who lived within the boundaries of the original community,\(^3\) which was more than 80% white. For grades in high demand, those neighborhood parents received priority status and, if they applied in time, were bumped to the top of the list.

Personnel faced the prospect of losing support of local white families, and everyone needed someone to blame. As Todd put it, “well you would think that community support and achievement would go hand in hand.” At the same time, he also recognized that some charter schools draw from advantaged neighborhoods and therefore do not have the same achievement problems. Bringing up Excellence Academy by its actual name, he complained about suburban charter schools with the financial backing of a corporation:

- It is no wonder that their test scores are better than ours…A lot of it comes down to socioeconomic status, and schools like that are recruiting kids from well-to-do families.

As Todd put it, they were located “right in suburbia.” Rather than blaming meager resources or teacher shortages, white community members and administrators blamed student demographics. Meanwhile, Excellence and other suburban charter schools had the advantage of higher-income families, making it easier for them to perform and stay in operation. At the same time, Todd lamented their lack of access to transportation.

Garrison expanded access to students outside the community by providing transportation to students outside the district. As a result of their successful recruitment outside the neighborhood, locals became upset about the changing demographics and achievement record of what they considered to be their school. Personnel worked to appease local white families and

\(^3\) The state permits this preference: “Admission to a charter school shall not be determined according to the school attendance area in which a student resides, except that any local school administrative unit in which a public school converts to a charter school shall give admission preference to students who reside within the former attendance area of that school.” (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.75).
retain their support by giving them preference in the student lottery. However, the tension between community members and outsiders reflects a contradiction in charter school recruitment, striving to be both tailored to the community and small as well as open to the public. In the next section, I discuss two schools together due to their similarities as corporate charter schools. In both corporate charters, personnel also recruited by drawing from proximate white communities, beginning with decisions about where to site and what kinds of programs to offer.

The Corporate Charter

Located in a high-income white suburb, Excellence Academy was managed by a remote, for-profit company. Its management company was called Inspired, Inc., and it assigned responsibility of keeping track of all information related to recruitment, admission, and enrollment to the employee titled “enrollment manager.” The enrollment manager at Excellence, Alyssa, was busy transferring students’ records at the time my fieldwork began. Importantly, she also tracked the school’s current and predicted enrollments.

Reporting to the management company consumed Alyssa’s time as well. She submitted daily reports updating Inspired, Inc., which she called “corporate.” These reports indicated the current number of students who had applied, been accepted but had not responded to an offer, accepted an offer to attend but had not begun registration, partially registered, and fully registered. Fully registered students reached the end of the “enrollment marathon,” meaning they were ready to begin the school year after reconciling any outstanding academic, health, or personal records. Checking every box from initial recruitment to complete enrollment remained within Alyssa’s job description. While she interacted more directly with the company’s regional marketing team, corporate operations at the national level dictated enrollment goals. They also

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4 Charter schools have the same health requirements as traditional public schools (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.75).
provided financial support when enrollment was low and thus per-pupil allotments from local and state governments were lacking, helping the school to avoid firing staff. Before its current management company, a remote, for-profit company managed Ridgewood. The original management company “started several schools” as its director, Nathan, put it with disdain. According to Nathan, the prior company also “shut [Ridgewood] down, took their money, and left town.” Three years before my fieldwork, a new management company purchased the entire Ridgewood Prep property and thereafter charged the school to rent the property. For this reason, the board chair Kate and others referred to the company as their landlords. Once the new management company took over, they maintained the site of the prior charter school. Ridgewood’s board worked to receive state approval for the construction of a new facility. Subsequently, a pristine brick building was constructed on the site of the former charter school, now with new management and a fresh exterior.

Ridgewood Prep was also managed by a for-profit company but one with less control over school operations. Ridgewood originated as a hands-on network charter school, like Excellence, but converted to a hands-off network charter school. After being purchased by a different company, their new organization still relied on a corporate financing but maintained more local control. Rather than obtaining guidance about recruitment from a company, Nathan led most of the school’s recruitment efforts on his own, visiting local events to draw attention to the school.

Like Excellence, Ridgewood was sited in a predominantly white area, but its pool of prospective families was less advantaged economically and more rural. Ridgewood was sited in a disproportionately white part of its county; in fact, the town in which Ridgewood was located was the whitest town in the surrounding area, with more than 70% of residents identifying as
white compared to only about 60% in the county as a whole. As I will discuss in the section that follows, recruitment at each of the two corporate schools built on their geographic base of local white parents by working to recruit them.

**Choosing and Tailoring to the Market**

At the time of its application to the state advisory board, Excellence had not identified a facility to house the school. Ultimately, its management company—Inspired, Inc.—chose a suburban location, financing the facility’s construction through a private developer who leased the facility to the management company. The state’s Department of Public Instruction also had to approve the lease of the facility by certifying that the building satisfied all safety and accessibility requirements.

Leaders chose a relatively wealthy suburban neighborhood on purpose. Traditionally, Inspired, Inc. ran charter schools in low-income urban areas. However, the school originators proposed Excellence as a test for their company’s ability to compete in a suburban area and, importantly, to try their organizational model on a new population—privileged families. In contrast to other schools managed by the same for-profit company, Excellence was intentionally sited in a relatively wealthy area. The median listing price for nearby neighborhoods ranged from about $300,000, the least expensive neighborhood, to more than $800,000, the most expensive neighborhood. Siting close to expensive neighborhoods can be considered a signaling device for families looking for schools based on perceived academic quality. According to the director, Lisa, the management organization chose the area to experiment with a different population. This was risky but also less expensive; while Excellence spent more money on marketing compared to charter schools operated in low-income areas, they spent less on amenities like transportation since the school did not provide buses and local parents likely
would not require them. Thus, where a charter school locates can be considered part of its recruitment strategy.

At Excellence, recruiting students took into account the local area’s demographics as a high-income, predominantly white suburban community. Personnel encouraged parents to place sign advertisements for the school in their front yards to entice other parents from their neighborhoods. The signs were available for pick-up in the school’s main office.

Beyond neighborhood-based recruitment, other recruitment efforts targeted high status families in the area. For example, school personnel created a gifted program to attract families. The assistant director, Pam, explained, Excellence tended to attract “privileged families”—specifically “more high-income households with stay-at-home moms” compared to a traditional public school. In order to attract more families, they developed a gifted program for each grade level to begin the next school year. In theory, this permitted a separate space for advanced learners in each grade to attend class. Although they worked on plans for the gifted program for more than a year, personnel still had not configured the plans with existing space. Nonetheless, they used the gifted program to recruit families who wanted a challenging academic environment and flaunted the program at recruitment events without giving any details about logistics.

Finding the right number of qualified teachers and amount of designated space proved difficult and left them with the recruitment pitch but without any implementation for an entire school year.

The assistant director Pam emphasized that recruitment techniques, like creating a gifted program, vary by location. Emphatically, she said that recruitment is “a lot harder when surrounding schools are good” because it is more difficult to lure those families. As she explained, location matters but mostly in terms of the socioeconomic composition of surrounding
traditional public schools—the class backgrounds of students who populate the schools. Within a higher poverty area, specifically a “Title I school,” a charter school would “not need a gifted program” to attract families, Pam articulated. She argued that just emphasizing academic standards and support would be enough. In other words, starting a charter school in areas with a higher percentage of low-income families would not require amenities like a gifted program to be attractive. In other areas across the country where Inspired, Inc. operated lower income charter schools, all personnel had to do to recruit students was promise to uphold academic standards and to offer an alternative to traditional public schools. Unlike these other charter schools with enrollments filled by lower income families, Excellence adapted its recruitment to its high SES environment made up of mostly white families to compete with other schools in the area. Since parents tended to have financial resources, Excellence did not need to provide transportation to families in order to attract them.

No buses filled the parking lots at Ridgewood either. During my first visit to the school, I arrived at 2:00 PM and the carpool had already started. Within a few minutes, cars were wrapped around the entire school. I learned from the director that carpool continued until 4:00 PM on most days. Without buses, families had to deliver their own children to school or coordinate with other families. As the director, Nathan—a black man in his fifties—put it during an interview:

They have to drive. That’s saying something. [Parents] actually get up in the morning, bring their kids to school, and then they pick them up. So, look, we don’t have transportation. [We are] probably never going to have transportation, which is not bad. That’s another thing you have to worry about is transportation. You have to worry about buses. You know, you got to have a bus garage.
Ridgewood’s application to the state advisory board outlined plans to provide bus transportation to school for students who needed it, stating that transportation would not be a barrier to enrollment. In the application, school leaders claimed that personnel would advertise the possibility of bus transportation in order to assess the need for school-provided transportation. Yet, I never heard mention of transportation options aside from carpool during recruitment events. Even though personnel promised to provide transportation for students who could not otherwise attend Ridgewood in their application to the state, after just a few years in operation, they abandoned those plans. In contrast to personnel at Garrison who expanded transportation beyond county boundaries, Ridgewood’s director viewed providing transportation as more of a hassle than it was worth.

Similarly to Excellence, administrators and board members at Ridgewood Prep also played on residential decisions to entice prospective families to the school. During a board meeting at Ridgewood, the board’s chair Kate said that she devised a new marketing idea that would involve realtors. She proposed that the school host local realtors for a night so they could learn about the school; “we could give them cards that they could then share with families buying houses in the area.” She suggested to the board that this would give realtors “a chance to feel what it’s like here,” adding “people in the past were pretty impressed,” in reference to other times that community members were exposed to the school.

At the same meeting, the board’s chair proposed adding a new member to the board who would help extend their recruitment to a neighboring town in a different county. The prospective board member, Kyle, indicated that he knew nothing about charter schools but heard about the school from another board member, whose child attended the same daycare. In minutes, board members unanimously supported his addition to the board. As Kate put it, the board hoped that
by adding him they want to “expand those connections and help us out there.” That area, too, was a desirable place from which to recruit students. Like Ridgewood’s local demographics, its racial composition was predominantly white. With about 70% of residents being white and about 15% being black, the targeted community and surrounding county had low proportions of black residents and high proportions of whites compared to the county in which Ridgewood was located, which was more than 30% African American. While parents certainly choose to enroll in a charter school and may do so to consolidate their racial or class advantages, recruitment decisions like locating in a predominantly white area can serve to protect parents’ white habitus by setting up the school for them. Prior studies of white flight neglect the extent to which schools as institutions can play a pivotal role in securing predominantly white spaces by virtue of siting and other recruitment decisions (Garcia 2008a).

Responding to Recruitment Decisions

Parents responded to the school’s preexisting arrangements. At Excellence, some parents who were not part of the neighborhood chose the school to avoid reassignment. During a private tour, a white mom and dad of first grade twins, Linda and Elliot, explained that they lived more than forty-five minutes away without any traffic. When Alyssa asked why they were interested in Excellence, in addition to a smaller environment, the mother indicated that changes in their new school district’s student assignments could result in a school reassignment for the twins in the next year or two. Shaking her head in disapproval, Linda insisted that the family just wanted some consistency for a few years, especially after moving halfway across the country.

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5 Reassignment remains prevalent in some parts of North Carolina to reduce segregation, distributing students more evenly between schools rather than having their attendance zones align with racially divided neighborhoods. However, with the Supreme Court decision in Parents Involved (2007) to disallow race as a factor in reassignment, districts can only use factors like free or reduced lunch composition, a proxy for socioeconomic status, or test scores to reassign students.
(Parcel and Taylor 2015; Parcel, Hendrix, and Taylor 2016). Thus, these parents drove at least forty-five minutes one-way to avoid reassignment.

At Ridgewood, white parents were also willing to transport their children beyond city limits to a whiter area—in this case a rural area surrounding the county seat. The board chair at Ridgewood, Kate, said to a white mother during a community relations meeting with regard to why parents stopped showing up for meetings “I get it. I have to drive 30 minutes here, so trust me I get it.” She too chose Ridgewood over traditional public schools in her district, which had significantly more black students. This illustrates that parents with resources will drive distances to protect white habitus.

**Discussion**

Through their siting decisions, charter schools begin the process of recruiting students, before families ever attend any recruitment events. Where charter schools are sited occurs for a variety of reasons; for example, it can be based on the prior establishment of a charter school facility. For Ridgewood, the previous existence of a charter school under different management provided the site of a new charter school. On those grounds, Ridgewood leaders expanded the original facility to build a new brick structure.

Charter school siting can also depend on the willingness of school boards to rent or sell land previously held by traditional public schools. In Garrison’s case, converting the neighborhood school to a charter school did not guarantee a location for the school since the local school board denied their request to use the neighborhood school’s original facilities. Thus, Garrison leaders had to start anew, contracting with local landowners to lease a plot on which they constructed school facilities and eventually purchased the land to further expand their
facilities. In Garrison’s case, the charter school originators intended to target the surrounding area in order to replace their former neighborhood school.

Charter school siting can be even more deliberate than these examples illustrate. Excellence personnel described efforts to test their network model on a new population—racially and socioeconomically privileged families. Originators intentionally sited in a high income, predominantly white area with the intention of recruiting those students.

Across all three schools, personnel worked to protect white habitus. Garrison prioritized the needs of local white parents. In particular, they began by converting their original predominantly white neighborhood school to a charter school. In doing so, community members avoided consolidation with moderately diverse schools in their district. Even after expanding access to families outside the community, particularly other districts that had higher proportions of black students, Garrison’s selection procedures allowed a preference for students whose families currently lived within the neighborhood boundaries. Being a predominantly white community, this approach to recruitment allowed students from outside the community to fill necessary seats—who also pleasing local white parents who were concerned about how students from outside the district were changing Garrison’s composition to become less white and lowering its achievement record.

Excellence and Ridgewood also prioritized the needs of white parents who lived close to these schools, promoting diversity in name but not in practice. At Excellence, recruitment decisions such as the distribution of yard advertisements to current parents and the creation of a gifted program worked to target local privileged families. At Ridgewood, while the use of realtors to distribute school information targeted local white community members, the recruitment of a new board member from a white neighboring community also drew on the
potential of recruiting white prospective families. Moreover, both Excellence and Ridgewood sited in the whitest parts of their districts. At both the schools, the lack of transportation further created conditions under which neighborhood families or more resourced families could select the schools. For parents who traveled farther to transport their children to the corporate charter schools, they were avoiding areas with higher proportions of students of color in favor of a whiter school in a whiter neighborhood.

Charter schools as an educational model purport to serve students regardless of location. However, factors like transportation and lottery preference favor local white parents across the three charter schools that I studied. By lacking free buses, Excellence and Ridgewood did not offer transportation to school for students outside the immediate neighborhood, relying instead on parents who were willing to transport their own children or arrange carpool. By giving neighborhood parents a preference in the lottery, Garrison too relied on local parents, replacing the former neighborhood school. Therefore, my findings speak to distinct ways that the charter schools reinforced neighborhood boundaries by siting and recruiting in ways that drew on proximate and predominantly white areas.

Charter school recruitment decisions, such as where to site a school and what kinds of programs to offer, reflected the market of white parents that charter school personnel worked to attract. Personnel at Excellence—a corporate charter—were most forthcoming about these efforts, but even those at Garrison—the mom and pop charter—worked to appease local white parents by giving them a lottery preference. By prioritizing local parents to secure white educational spaces, personnel protected white habitus. Therefore, white habitus can be cultivated at the institutional level by charter schools through decisions and actions of their personnel.
This chapter contributes to the literature on re-segregation by informing about the processes through which three charter schools recruited students. By deciding to locate in predominantly white areas, the three charter schools’ originators targeted a local pool of families. In the years that followed, personnel worked to attract and appease local white parents, even when they simultaneously worked to increase the enrollment of students from other counties. Prior studies demonstrate that a significant portion of white parents avoid majority-minority schools, as white parents across a variety of school districts perceive schools with more black students as low quality, especially when the proportion of black students increases over time (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Goyette, Farrie, and Freely 2012). Prior studies also suggested that charter schools in particular play a role in the re-segregation of students between schools (Bankston et al. 2013; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Riel et al. 2018). However, there was little research until now regarding the extent to which charter school recruitment decisions disrupt traditional residential boundaries of school enrollment and how recruitment decisions relate to racial composition of neighborhoods.

Conclusion

A common way to exercise choice with regard to public schools is through residential decisions. This avenue of choice has historically disadvantaged parents who could not afford to live in neighborhoods with the most resourced schools. Charter schools were premised on the notion that they could solve this limitation, serve disadvantaged students, and better allocate public funds to parents who opt in. However, the ways in which recruitment in these three charter schools worked in practice was not so simple. Concerns about protecting parents’ white habitus overwhelmed the careful consideration of social differences that help charter schools realize the ideal of cultural responsiveness for diverse student populations (Bulman 2004).
This study underscores some hidden aspects of charter school recruitment. In particular, I find that personnel can marshal organizational resources to protect white habitus. Beyond the decision-making power of individual parents, charter school personnel’s ability to locate and identify target populations allows them to tailor their school siting and services to their own needs. This study also shows variation in how charter school siting occurs depending on the organizational form and history of a charter school. While scholars have illustrated the ways that institutional policies shape access to housing and assignment to neighborhood schools, prior research about white habitus in charter school context primarily considered it from the perspective of parents choosing a whiter school, not schools targeting white neighborhoods. Historically, whites have embodied white habitus through residential and social decisions (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2006). But white habitus is more than the actions of advantaged group members. Institutions continue to play a role in cultivating white space and promoting the status of predominantly white institutions, but these processes are often subtle, overlooked, and attributed to other goals, such as the desire for higher test scores or an obligation to serve the local community.

In theory, charter schools are supposed to be available regardless of residence. But place did not simply lose its cachet with the advent of charter schools. As Lubienski, Gulosino, and Weitzel (2009:604) argue, “physical place itself carries connotations about prestige and position in a market hierarchy, as indicated by the real estate maxim ‘Location, location, location.’” Despite differences in the three schools’ organizational structures, they similarly used racialized neighborhood demographics to make decisions about recruitment. Siting of charter schools and other location-based recruitment decisions, such as whether to create a gifted program or to encourage realtors to distribute school information to their clients, have the potential to create a
new version of neighborhood-based schools or, at the very least, to attract white parents who were willing to drive significant lengths to avoid reassignment. As Nathan (1996:5) argued, charter schools can, if misused, “create more problems than they solve.” It is worth asking how far charter school reforms will extend without sacrificing equity and abandoning the original promises of choice.

In future studies, scholars should examine recruitment to charter schools in other regions, such as the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district of North Carolina. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, schools quickly re-segregated by race and SES once the public schools were declared unitary; scholars attribute this re-segregation to neighborhood segregation (Mickelson et al. 2018). Understanding the extent to which charter school siting and recruiting relates to neighborhood boundaries in the Charlotte area would glean insight about another educational market in the state of North Carolina. By analyzing application materials and other archival documents in tandem with observations of school events, researchers could compare the ideals of charter schools with their recruitment practices in a locale with an established record of residential segregation.
Chapter 3: Managing Brands, Creating Impressions: How Charter School Leaders Build Reputations of their Schools

Parents are commonly viewed as the ones in control of the school choice process. After all, parents apply to schools on their children’s behalf. Parents are even construed as consumers or customers who are assumed to be engaged in comparative shopping between schools (Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000). As the story goes, parents shop around for a school, physically and virtually, until they determine the right fit for their child. Charter schools also claim to have no pre-admission requirements; parents must only complete an application to the school. If the number of applications exceed seats, personnel use a lottery to select students among those with submitted applications.6

However, charter schools also shape enrollment through recruitment strategies and tactics. In particular, schools distribute information and work to influence their school’s image through marketing (Betts, Goldhaber, and Rosenstock 2005). Although families can ostensibly apply to any charter school, recruitment decisions send messages to families about whether the school will fit with their own lives (Bulman 2004; Makris 2018). These messages appear in a variety of forms including mission statements, official websites, social media pages, and flyers. Personnel also market to families during recruitment events held at charter schools.

Marketing is not just a neutral tool for recruiting families. By promoting ideas about a school’s services and expectations, personnel can target advantaged families (Jabbar 2015; Mommandi and Welner 2018). They can also skirt the prospects of disadvantaged students’ enrollment; Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, and Henig (2002) have documented that, at least in Washington, DC, charters run by for-profit charter schools were more likely to avoid

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6 In the lottery, charter schools often give preferences to siblings of enrolled students and the children of employees or board members. These students are bumped to the top of the pool of families, or the waitlist if the lottery has already occurred.
admitting students with special needs and language barriers compared to charter schools without profit-oriented management. However, it is unclear how these recruitment strategies emerge in North Carolina, a state with an increasing proportion of charter schools run by remotely located, for-profit companies. It is also unclear through which processes charter schools create an institutional image that might influence which families are attracted to the respective schools. Finally, we lack information about how charter school leaders situate their school in relation to other schools.

In this chapter, I answer the following research questions. First, through which processes do charter schools construct images of their schools to recruit families? Second, how do they situate their schools in relation to others? Third, how do charter schools differentiate their marketing depending on their organizational structure?

As I argue, charter school marketing can be considered a form of organization-level impression management. In particular, charter school personnel can use marketing techniques to create a public image of a charter school as well as to situate a school in relation to others, whether private, traditional public, or other charter schools. This study examines three organizationally distinct charter schools—one exists in a national network of charters run by the same for-profit company, another is entirely autonomous and community-based without any management company, and the third is a hybrid that began as a for-profit, network charter school but was later acquired by a smaller, more hands-off for-profit entity that allowed more local control of the school. I find that the network charter school in this study marketed to prospective families by comparing the school to private schools, particularly through trying to seem elite and even exclusive. I find that recruitment to the hybrid school involved impression management strategies to depict the school as a fun, resort-like business. I find that personnel in the
autonomous charter school compared their services to those offered in traditional public schools as they marketed free meals and transportation to attract families. They even critiqued network charter schools for their failure to provide services that lower SES families needed to enroll.

I begin by using the existing literature to compare approaches to studying school choice, juxtaposing a focus on families’ choosing schools with schools’ recruiting families. Next, I theorize recruitment techniques as a form of organization-level impression management since charter schools shape prospective family impressions about what they can provide their children. Then, I review my methods, and I present my findings for each charter school in the study. I conclude by discussing what the differences between the charters schools’ recruitment strategies mean for students and their families, who are increasingly defined as consumers and customers. The findings contribute to existing theory about brand management in charter schools.

Current Perspectives and State of Knowledge on School Choice

Choosing Schools: How Families Navigate School Choice

The existing literature about school choice disproportionately considers the perspective of families choosing schools (e.g. Ball and Vincent 1998; Bell 2007, 2009; Bulman 2004; Frankenberg 2018; Frankenberg, Kotok, Schafft, and Mann 2017; Holme 2002; Olson Beal and Hendry 2012; Pattillo 2015; Pattillo, Delale-O’Connor, and Butts 2014; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000), a demand-side approach to studying school choice. Scholars also focus on how families’ choices create schools stratified by race and class, primarily through the exit of white and socioeconomically advantaged families from traditional public schools (Denice and Gross 2016; Garcia 2008b; Reardon 2011; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Roda and Wells 2012).
Scholars attribute the lack of racial diversity in charter schools to parents’ choices of schools. White families’ decisions to avoid poor, majority minority schools are paramount to understanding school segregation in general (Billingham and Hunt 2016) and charter school segregation in particular (Renzulli and Evans 2005). Despite white parents’ claims to support school diversity in the abstract, many nonetheless choose schools with whiter demographic makeups for their children (Roda and Wells 2012). Black families’ choice of Afrocentric charter schools also helps to explain some racial segregation between traditional public and charter schools (Fabricant and Fine 2012). Afrocentric charter schools were popular and well-known in the early years of charter schools. However, newer or more recently developed charter schools in North Carolina are disproportionately white (Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein 2016; Mickelson et al. 2018). Scholars have not investigated the forces operating to facilitate this shift toward whiter charter schools using qualitative methods.

There are also class differences in how parents access schools. Families with greater resources are capable of transporting children to and from school and providing other volunteer assistance in ways that families with fewer resources cannot (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014:161). Parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not have access to the same valuable information about quality of schools, creating class differences in the make-up of schools of choice (Bell 2009). Meanwhile, higher income parents use their contacts with vast information and prestige to facilitate school choice (Bell 2009), information that lower income parents may not have.

The focus on school choice from parents’ perspectives has been reinforced by the assertions of prominent scholars in the area. Theorizing in the class-based tradition of examining the relationship between homes and schools, Lareau (2000:11) argues that research needs to
consider how families “can—and do—bring themselves into alignment with the standards of ‘gatekeeping institutions’ responsible for social selection.” Consistent with her call, most research has considered this relationship from the perspective of families rather than schools. This prevailing emphasis on family choice illuminates one side of the school choice story but usually overlooks the school actors who shape families’ decisions to enroll their children in schools. At the same time, Lareau (2000) recognizes that parents receive messages from schools that facilitate feelings of comfort and proximity or discomfort and distance. Her recent research considers the effect of charter schools on families as well (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016).

**Marketing Schools, Targeting Families: How Schools Influence Enrollment**

In contrast to a focus on how families choose schools, I take a supply-side approach. This orientation to studying school choice examines how charter personnel’s actions shape their enrollments (Wilson and Carlsen 2016). Consistent with other recent work in this vein, I consider interactions between charter school personnel and families pivotal to understanding how those schools recruit families as well as how families decide to apply and eventually enroll (Jabbar 2016a). From an organizational perspective, it can also consider how organizations are often designed to distribute resources along racial lines, investigating differences in formal policies and actual practices as they relate to inequality (Ray 2019).

We can learn about marketing in particular as a selection mechanism from studies of these dynamics in higher education. Colleges and universities work to construct institutional images in order to shape how prospective students and their families will compare the school to others (Han 2014:124). For example, college admissions offices directly market to students and their families by mailing advertising materials. They indirectly target them through entrance standards, as well as through the students who appear on their advertising materials (McDonough
Indirect marketing sends subtle messages about who attends and hence belongs at the school.

Primary and secondary schools of choice are spaces in which selection processes unfold as well (Evans 2020). Selection into charter schools occurs through varied mechanisms, including marketing and recruitment (DiMartino and Jessen 2018; Jabbar 2015; Mommandi and Welner 2018). For example, a charter school’s website can attract or discourage families depending on their mission statement, goals, and expectations for families. The method by which charter schools distribute information is also consequential for enrollment—whether by email, phone, or word of mouth (Mommandi and Welner 2018). In order to learn about charter schools, parents often access a school’s website. Then, parents usually attend community meetings during which school personnel present information about charter school application and enrollment (Eckes and Trotter 2007). Importantly, families must first learn that the meetings are happening—either through social media, official websites, friends and family, or some combination—before they attend them.

Throughout an enrollment cycle, recruitment decisions can take various forms and influence access to charter schools. Prior to enrollment, registration timing such as priority deadlines can discourage access to charter schools for racially and economically disadvantaged families and even trigger disengagement (Fong and Faude 2018; see also Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016). Some charter school leaders avoid marketing or advertising open spaces to disadvantaged students (Jabbar 2015; Jabbar 2016b). School personnel can influence enrollment by distributing materials about new charters in English, which discourages applications from non-English speaking families (Welner 2013). Other mechanisms include enforcing a strict uniform dress code or offering weekend classes (Jennings 2010), thus potentially discouraging less advantaged
families. Charter school personnel also counsel out students who are not deemed as a good fit (Jabbar 2015). Post-enrollment, testing and disciplinary treatment can select out academically and economically disadvantaged students (Mommandi and Welner 2018). Some scholars argue that such actions stratify students between schools by “cropping off,” or excluding through various means, low achieving students, low-income students, and students with special needs and language barriers (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, and Henig 2002).

Charters schools can also use marketing techniques that attract high achieving and socioeconomically advantaged students. This phenomenon is referred to as “cream skimming” (Jabbar 2015). It can include mailing advertisements to whiter and richer neighborhoods to the neglect of low-income neighborhoods with more residents of color (Mommandi and Welner 2018). Other mechanisms include recruitment from particular schools and by word of mouth (Eckes and Trotter 2007; Wells, Holme, Lopez, and Cooper 2000). Curricula can tailor to gifted students as well, thus attracting families with academically advantaged students (Eckes and Plucker 2005).

**Managing a School Brand**

Organization-level impression management refers to the processes by which organizations work to manage the impressions of outsiders. Scholars study how organizations make efforts to be viewed as legitimate and defend their existence through external support (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, and Suchman 2017; Meyer and Scott 1983; see also Aldrich and Rueff 2006). As Highhouse, Brooks, and Gregarus (2009:1482) explain, external audiences hold particular images about organizations “when maintained over time [as] interactions develop into a general impression, reflecting the respect or admiration with which an organization is held.”
Schools also work to portray public images, and personnel efforts to seem appealing to families can be considered part of a school’s organization-level impression management. School leaders actively manage the perceptions of outsiders, some of whom may be potential “consumers”—a term that has come to describe parents and students choosing a school (DiMartino and Jessen 2018; Teske, Schneider, Buckley, and Clark 2001). Universities increasingly strive for a luxury brand to attract consumers. From steam rooms, heated pools, and lazy rivers to golf, yoga, game rooms, ice-skating rinks, and movie theaters, some colleges have become sites of resort-style living that aim to draw in potential consumers (Selingo 2013; Wotapka 2012). In Posecznick’s (2017) study of college marketing, he discusses the detail with which every word, image, and color choice is made to cultivate a desired impression about the institution.

Organization-level impression management promotes schools’ efforts to bolster their numbers of applications (Stevens 2007:238). In the college context, touring desirable-looking dorm rooms projects an appealing image of a school, as do the events around which family visits are orchestrated (Stevens 2007:235). As Stevens’ (2007) study of a selective liberal arts college reveals, admissions officers even control who speaks on behalf of a school in order to maintain positive depictions of it.

Charter schools’ place in research about organization-level impression management has been under-developed. As organizations seeking community acceptance, charter schools send distinct messages about which services and opportunities they offer prospective families. Central to recruiting families is to make a charter school brand seem desirable and, in some cases, exclusive. There is some evidence that charters deliberately create images that convey status (Wilson and Carlsen 2016). For example, projecting an elite image can attract high
achieving students to a charter school (Hernández 2016; Jabbar 2016b). Especially in competitive environments, charter schools work on their image to enhance desirability. DiMartino and Jessen (2018) argue that ramped up marketing and recruitment efforts in charter schools recently outpaced changes in teaching practices or pedagogy. In other words, charters are doing more to change their exterior image than to alter their interior functioning—centrally for the purpose of attracting families.

The messages school personnel convey to families shape the way that families perceive charter schools, both at the individual and community level. Impression management techniques might also overlap with a school’s efforts to distinguish itself from others with which it may be in competition—whether private, traditional public, or other charter schools. When competing with other schools to recruit students, charter school companies strive for brand differentiation, separating what one charter offers compared to other schools, whether traditionally public or private (DiMartino and Jessen 2018). Often, charter schools are marketed similarly to private schools. For example, they may tout strict academic standards, extra-curricular opportunities, and parental involvement or require uniforms (Lubienski 2007). Unlike private schools, charter schools offer families these options without requiring formal tuition, only “informal tuition” such as fees and volunteering requirements (Mommandi and Welner 2018:67).

But charter schools cannot stray too far from the beaten path. Some theorists suggest that the rules and norms evidenced in traditional forms of schooling are difficult to avoid even in new contexts like charter schools (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer and Ramirez 2000; see also Lubienski and Lee 2016). Following these established norms at least to some degree allows school leaders to develop a credible reputation among consumers—in this case, parents. Thus, for charter schools that introduce new forms of organization, such as individualized learning,
they must also align themselves with other institutional standards in order to be considered legitimate. This suggests that charter schools may identify with some aspects of public schools while distancing from others, and much of this depends on the structure of the school and hence their approach to marketing. As Cucchiara (2016:125) emphasizes, “when it comes to the marketing of schools, the immediate social context is critical.”

*Context for the Study*

The requirements and parameters of charter school policy vary by state. Thus, student selection processes are best understood at the local level, where they are subject to state policy and oversight. North Carolina state law originally mandated diversity by requiring that charters eventually reflect the racial demographics of their surrounding areas. However, a 2013 law eliminated the mandate and softened the language about diversity (Bonner, Stancill, and Raynor 2017). According to current state law (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.45):

> Within one year after the charter school begins operation, the charter school shall make efforts for the population of the school to reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the general population residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located or the racial and ethnic composition of the special population that the school seeks to serve residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located.

Thus, although the law says that charter school personnel “shall make efforts” to reflect the racial composition of their respective school districts or surrounding areas, it is not mandatory that a charter school’s student population matches its local demographics.

Racial and class stratification between charter schools and traditional public schools is increasingly evident in the state. In 2011, the General Assembly raised the statewide one-hundred charter school cap (Marchello 2019). Since then, student populations of North Carolina
charter schools are disproportionately white compared to their respective districts (Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein 2016). Students also come from relatively better educated households (Ladd et al. 2016). Thus, because of such social selection, North Carolina is an exemplary location to examine the processes through which schools influence their student enrollments (Mickelson et al. 2018). Recent findings about North Carolina’s charter school population raise questions about student selection into charter schools in the state, especially the processes that shape which families enroll in them. As Wilson and Carlsen (2016:25) note, charter school segregation “raises questions not just about how parents choose schools, but also how schools appeal to different families.”

**Methods**

The charter schools in this study were organizationally distinct. One was a mom and pop charter school managed and governed by community members. The second was a network charter school managed by a national, for-profit company. Finally, the third was a hybrid that was first managed by a national for-profit corporation but was later acquired by a company that allowed more local control. Another important distinction between the hybrid and network models is that the network charter school developed as a replication of a current charter school model, while the hybrid was not a replication of another charter school. Studying three organizationally distinct charters allows inferences regarding whether organizational form promotes different recruitment strategies, or the extent to which such strategies are in common.

I collected observational data in three charter schools over the course of 14 months and 30 field visits. I spent a total of 120 hours pursuing fieldwork, half of which was time spent driving to the field sites. Totaling more than 40 school affiliates, participants included directors, enrollment managers, assistant directors, receptionists, disability specialists, a finance director, a
public relations coordinator, an after-school coordinator, teachers, parents, community members, and members of the charter school boards. In addition to observing within administrative spaces of the school and during recruitment events, my fieldwork involved attendance at charter school board meetings. I also observed open houses, school tours, a festival, community relations and PTA meetings, a lottery night, and a family night.

To clarify observations and hone my understanding of recruitment at the schools, I conducted in-depth interviews with directors and enrollment managers to garner more detail about their recruitment processes and enrollment practices. These interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours. I collected and analyzed written materials as well, including school pamphlets, advertisements, social media pages, official websites, and applications for prospective students, as well as the charter applications submitted to the state’s charter school advisory board prior to their opening. In this section, I review the context of the study, research design, sampling and recruitment techniques, and my approach to data analysis through coding and memoing.

**Research Design**

I employed observational, interview, and qualitative content analytic methods to study charter school recruitment and marketing. I used jottings and field-notes derived from observation in three charter schools, in coordination with their marketing materials, to examine the processes through which these charters shaped student enrollment. One of the critiques of using interviews as the sole method of collecting data is that participants’ words may not reflect their actions or might depict ideals rather than realities (Charmaz 2014:78). Interviews also lack the context in which participants act. Observation help to fill this void by providing real time insight about recruitment efforts in three charter schools with varied organizational structures.
**Sample Characteristics**

After reviewing the websites and demographic information of twenty charter schools within the same state, I selected three charter schools on the basis of their varied management structures. I distinguished charter schools that are locally managed from those that are remotely managed and follow an established pattern for charters within a network; I call the former “autonomous” charters and the latter “network” charters. Other charters offer more hybrid models of management, and I call those “combined” charters. While one of the charter schools in this study developed from within the community and is autonomously managed (Garrison), another was founded by an educational management company operating a network of more than fifty charter schools (Excellence). The third charter school originated as a hands-on network charter school, like Excellence, but was converted to a hands-off network charter school with management having less control over school activities (Ridgewood). This meant that community members were able to have more discretion in operating the third school.

Each of the schools was developed or expanded within five years of the study. Recently expanded schools added a grade or grew their enrollments due to changes in space or funding. I selected charter schools that opened or expanded in the past five years in order to examine contexts in which schools must actively hone their image or at least promote it in order to recruit students to populate their classrooms. All of the three sampled charters were in the same state, North Carolina, and thus were subject to the same state-level legislation about school choice.

The charter schools differed in their proximity to urban areas. Two of the three schools—Garrison and Ridgewood—were in rural areas, though they differed in degree. While Garrison was a remote rural school more than thirty miles from an urban area, Ridgewood was a distant rural school because it was within twenty miles of an urban area (Brown and Schafft
Ridgewood was still rural, but it was in a more populous area with major grocery stores and other shops nearby. The closest shop to Garrison was a convenience store about one mile away. In part due to their locations, Ridgewood had some competition with a nearby charter, nearby private school, and traditional public schools, while Garrison had limited rivals—a traditional public school for primary, middle, and high school levels and a small private school. In North Carolina, charter schools tend to open in rural areas (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang 2011), which makes these important though less convenient to study. As Logan, Minca, and Adar (2012:297) state, “nonmetropolitan schools tend to be overlooked in the segregation literature.” Most studies of school inequality examine urban and increasingly suburban context.

Meanwhile, Excellence Academy was a suburban school. Unlike the other two schools, in the immediate area of Excellence were several stores and apartment buildings. In short, it looked like a typical suburb. It also featured multiple schools within a twenty-minute drive, with which it directly competed. Some schools in the immediate vicinity were traditional public and charters, while a few others were private schools. It had the highest level of competition with other schools for enrollment. Table 4 compares relevant characteristics of the three charter schools and their surrounding communities.
Table 4. Comparison of School Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter School Name</th>
<th>Organizational Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Competition with other schools</th>
<th>Racial Composition</th>
<th>Free or Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellence Academy (K-8)</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Predominantly white (&gt;50%)</td>
<td>About 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrison Charter (K-12)</td>
<td>Autonomous/ mom and pop</td>
<td>Remote rural</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Predominantly white (&gt;70%)</td>
<td>About 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridgewood Preparatory (K-8)</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Populous rural</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Predominantly white (&gt;70%)</td>
<td>About 30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All three schools opened or expanded within the five years prior to data collection. Racial and socioeconomic estimates are based school documents.

Transportation availability differed between the schools. While Garrison provided free transportation for students, Excellence had a few parent-led options like carpool and a private bus, and Ridgewood relied on parents and carpool between families. Table 5 compares the goals outlined in mission statements, website content, and applications to the charter school advisory board, which is the state organization that reviews proposals and grants charters. Table 6 compares the programs and services available at each of the three schools.

Table 5. Comparison of Charter Schools’ Goals: Parental Involvement, Racial Diversity, and Socioeconomic Diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter School Name</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Diversity</th>
<th>Racial Diversity</th>
<th>Transportation For Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridgewood</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. Comparison of Available Programs and Services: *Gifted Program, Specialist Availability, and Transportation Availability*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter School Name</th>
<th>Gifted Program</th>
<th>Disability Specialist(s)</th>
<th>Free Transportation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridgewood</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Recruitment and Data Collection**

I aimed to garner understanding of the setting and build rapport with school personnel. Because it was important to be familiar with the experiences and situations being studied, I wanted the school personnel to be comfortable with my presence (Charmaz 2014). However, I also recognized the need to be conscious of how participants perceive me and to balance being too distant and too comfortable (Charmaz 2014; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006).

My research process began with a phone call to each school to explain my study and arrange a preliminary visit. When first interacting with personnel and parents at the school, I asked for verbal consent to participate in the study. The IRB approved verbal consent for observational data collection, so I read a statement informing the participants of the purpose of the study and asked for their consent to be included in it. For interviewees, I obtained their signatures on consent forms. In field-notes, which I documented from my time at the school to write field-notes after each visit, I used only pseudonyms or descriptions to replace their names. I also eliminated school identifiers. All participants were observed and questioned informally through direct contact. Table 7 lists participant characteristics, including their positions relative to the schools as well as their race, gender, and age.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>School’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>School Position</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Late-50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Financial Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
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<td>Man</td>
<td>Mid-20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Man</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
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<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
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<td>Man</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
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<td>Man</td>
<td>Early-50s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
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<td>Pam</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Race</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-30s</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Early-40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</table>
**Data Analysis**

I considered data collection and analysis as iterative processes rather than separate phenomena. The interview data did not speak for themselves; analysis involved a process of deconstruction and interpretation from the moment the data were collected (Holstein and Gubrium 2002:125). Data analysis began with constant comparison between data and emerging categories, moving back and forth between data and theory (Charmaz 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I incorporated an abductive approach to data analysis, which incorporates existing studies to recognize a finding as surprising; this approach allows theory to be present in order to create empirical puzzles (Timmermans and Tavory 2012:177). Throughout the process of data analysis, I looked for surprises. I worked to defamiliarize myself with the data and revisit it while looking for variation over time and across instances and sites (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Simultaneously, I looked for discoveries within the data and searched for ways to make sense of them using existing theories.

I merged grounded theory and abductive approaches to data analysis, rejecting the view of coding as purely inductive or deductive. I used open and focused coding to make sense of the data. For open coding, I read the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, line-by-line, and created codes that conveyed action based on emerging themes. This allowed me to place data into categories and conceptualize what was happening (Charmaz 2014). Open coding helped to identify initial patterns of recruitment, after which I moved to focused coding and reassessed various codes. Coding in light of the literature, I developed more thematic codes about how personnel worked to portray the school and approached recruitment more generally (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). I worked back through the data and looked for repeated codes, building on
ideas rather than events or occurrences. I gave particular attention to implicit meanings through close examination of data (Charmaz 2014).

In this process of focused coding, I composed analytic memos to organize my thinking about what was happening in the data. During memoing, I took into account the school setting. I also built on initial memos to explore patterns identified about recruitment techniques during earlier fieldwork, comparing observational with interview data. Furthermore, I used integrative memos to link codes and assess particular themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011:193). As I pieced together the various forms of data, I avoided writing overly descriptive narratives or using predetermined theorizing to structure my analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Findings

Striving for Elite Status: Recruitment at Excellence Academy

At Excellence, personnel strove to create an impression of elite status, through both direct and indirect means of recruitment. During the beginning of my fieldwork at the school, I asked how Excellence fit into the spectrum of schooling from public to private. The enrollment manager, Alyssa, assured me that Excellence was “better than public schools.” Alyssa was a black woman in her late twenties who started working at the school less than a year before my fieldwork began. Describing the enrollment process to parents on a tour, Alyssa also referred to Excellence as “the academy.” Using the term academy is a more common practice for private schools than public schools.

Other school personnel distinguished Excellence from a traditional public school. During a meeting with the director and assistant director, the assistant director, Pam—a white woman in her thirties—referred to the school as “a private school without the tuition.” The director Lisa agreed. To appear like a private school meant differentiating and elevating their status above
traditional public schools. Similar to private schools, Excellence did not provide transportation for students but instead expected parents to arrange it on their own. Parents organized their own carpool system, which Excellence personnel insisted was not affiliated with the school. However, in their application to the state advisory board, Excellence outlined their transportation plan as facilitating carpools and providing transportation to students.

Part of the school’s recruitment strategy involved personnel’s boasting about available extracurriculars. In an information session during my first visit to the school, Lisa listed various extracurricular activities to encourage families to choose Excellence. From ballet to robotics, she excitedly touted a long list of after-school activities. “They can learn to code,” she told families at the event. As we passed the computer lab on a tour, Alyssa also used coding as a selling point, in addition to other options like sports and physical education. Extracurriculars available at Excellence provided opportunities for students to boost their resumes from a young age, as school personnel reminded parents that college admissions officers value after-school involvement.

**Conveying Exclusivity**

Excellence personnel tried to build interest in the school by making it seem elite and even exclusive. While an annual lottery apparently decided which students would obtain a seat in the school, it was far less competitive than personnel made it seem. Even when the school needed more students to reach enrollment goals, Excellence personnel led parents to believe that there were limited seats available. In fact, students who were chosen during the “lottery” obtained seats that had never been filled by students in previous years. Thus, the lottery was a device conveying exclusivity that did not exist. A highly anticipated event around the school, the lottery was less competitive than school personnel made it seem, with some grades having minimum
waitlists or none at all. Excellence personnel were focused on accumulating interest in the school by maintaining the idea that limited spots were available even in the presence of remaining spots. Even after the school posted lottery results, their social media pages warned of “limited” space available to promote an impression of scarcity.

From the school’s and management’s perspectives, parents need not know that the school did not reach capacity. In fact, they thought it advantageous not to disclose exact numbers of enrollment availability by grade level. As Alyssa explained, “I can’t say ‘hey we have one hundred seats open:’” it would “ruin the surprise.” Yet, even three weeks before the first day of school, Excellence still accepted students. For example, Alyssa wished that she could “squeeze in another kid into a class with 18 kids.” As she reminded, “funding is directly linked to student enrollment numbers.” Keeping enrollment as high as possible ensured that they could pay staff members and avoid firing teachers. Just as school personnel at Excellence were trying to maintain the outside perception that they were in high demand and hence selective, they were also working to fill every seat they could to obtain needed per-pupil funding.

In order to seem desirable, personnel at Excellence also made parents wait to learn whether their child had been accepted, even though the school offered rolling admission for grades without a waitlist. Their corporate management decided on the tactic of waiting to deliver offers, and school personnel complied. Once students were accepted at Excellence, then the “waiting game” began, as Alyssa called it. She explained that the school did not want to seem eager by distributing offers too soon following applications. As she put it, “I don’t want to make it seem like we are desperate, so I give them a little time and then surprise them.” I asked why she needed to send an offer at all if there were still open seats; naively, I inquired, “can’t they just enroll?” Rolling her eyes as if there was something I did not understand, she said “it creates
Even in the presence of excess space and needing to fill it, personnel knew that instant confirmation of acceptance would deny their opportunity to appear selective and for parents to build interest as they waited for a response. By setting up an opportunity for parents to “chase” the school rather than the school seeming too eager, they created an elusive aura.

**Boasting Alumni Accomplishments**

Another way of attempting to enhance interest in the school, and an example of organization-level impression management, was through boasting accomplishments of school alumni. Even though Excellence was only five years old, students who first attended the school were in middle school, high school, and even their first year of college by the time I began my fieldwork. The school used this to their advantage. During an information session, Lisa invited a former student to stand up and “tell interested families about what [Excellence] added to your education.” Wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and flip flops, a teenage blonde girl with a messy bun humbly walked toward the director. As she looked out to the crowd, smiling, her braces were visible from the back of the room. She talked about the Spanish curriculum in particular—how she was able to fulfill college requirements for foreign language before she even began high school. She discussed the pride with which she referred to her former school and the academic advantage that it gave her.

This compares similarly to recruitment at elite private schools. Khan (2011:65) describes similar dynamics from his fieldwork in St. Paul’s School, his own alma mater; “as alumni return they are introduced by way of their long lists of achievements; current students (and their checkbook-wielding parents) are made well aware of what the alumni are doing with their lives and how St. Paul’s helped nurture such invariably fantastic success.” Excellence Academy also engaged in this kind of boasting about former students, while conveying their preparedness and
esteem for having attended Excellence. This tinge of prestige sent a message to families about the ostensible caliber of student that attends a charter school like Excellence Academy.

**Lacking Transportation for Students and Ignoring Communications**

Excellence signaled an image of elite status in additional ways, such as lacking free transportation and ignoring communication with families who sought academic specialists for students with disabilities. At the end of the tour that followed Lisa’s information session, one black mother Sonia confided in another parent, saying that she lived too far to carpool with other parents, who lived in relative proximity to one another. As she explained, she would need to use the interstate and battle an hour or more of traffic if she expected to send her child to Excellence. Furthermore, her daughter had an IEP and required some extra attention and tutoring.

During a follow-up visit, I asked Alyssa what happened to Sonia, the black mother who tried to get in touch with the specialist because her child has an IEP. Though the parent emailed her repeatedly, Alyssa told her that she had no other information to give about which types of tutoring and help the specialist provided because it was not part of her job, and she had enough to worry about already. Furthermore, the specialist for students with disabilities, Terry, did not come into the office during summer months, so Alyssa could not ask her questions in the office. She told the mother that Terry, though out of the office, could respond to inquiries by email. Thus, families who had concerns about getting accommodations for their child in the upcoming school year could only obtain information from the specialist in person or by phone once she returned for the beginning of the school year, which was a few weeks before the first day of school. This presented a hurdle for families who were considering Excellence but needed academic accommodations, a less than encouraging sign of the support that the school would provide their children.
Transportation constraints concerned other parents as well. Following an information session and tour six months later, a black dad and Latino mom, Mary and Joe, approached Alyssa to learn more about transportation options. Alyssa told them that the parent-led bus would cost one thousand dollars a year per family. This triggered hesitancy, as the couple glanced at one another, so Alyssa recommended carpooling with other parents. Although the parents lived relatively close, as they explained, they would have to find others in their neighborhood or surrounding area with which to carpool. Alyssa encouraged “if you know anyone that goes here, you can carpool with them and work that out.” Ultimately, arranging transportation was up to them.

**Treating the School like a Business: Recruitment at Ridgewood Prep**

Ridgewood Prep took on the brand of a fun, resort-like business. As its director Nathan—a black man in his fifties—emphasized during a board meeting that I observed, “the school should be treated as a business.” He explained that a seminar hosted by their management organization recently reminded him that the school needed to mimic a business.

At Ridgewood, recruitment efforts were strategic and orchestrated in ways that maximized attention from current and prospective families. Nathan attended community events, performances, and religious services to motivate interest in the school. Rather than an enrollment manager or a public relations employee, Nathan retained marketing activities in his own position. With the hope of retaining families’ commitment to the school, he also walked through the carpool lines and visited classrooms to appear as a familiar and friendly face. Nathan believed that his public presence boosted support for the school because some parents remembered him from his time as a teacher and administrator in local traditional public schools.
Promoting the School Image

The most prominent example of treating the school like a business evolved through the community relations committee’s planning of a festival at the school. Led by the board’s chair who was also a parent, Kate, the festival at Ridgewood was devoted to showcasing student talents, interests, and opportunities. At the festival, personnel also sold advertising materials like t-shirts, sweatshirts, and car stickers and magnets. Although the event catered to families of current students, it was also intended to be a marketing event. At a board meeting, Kate described the event as being for students and their families, adding “we want those who have already applied and also to use it as a marketing event for other families.” She added “anybody can come.” Ridgewood’s community relations committee worked to create signs that volunteers could physically display and verbally advertise during carpool. They also discussed the festival as an opportunity to advertise the school’s developing preschool and its other amenities, like a spa night and a movie night for families.

At the same time, the school’s leaders recognized that Ridgewood’s appearance mattered. They offered families the opportunity to trade in old, worn out car decals with new ones. They also orchestrated the construction of a new brick structure to enhance public perception of the school. With regard to competing for student enrollment, Nathan said “this building helps. People see this building and they’re just like ‘hm, it’s nice.’ It looks more like a bank.” He added that:

[In the first few years] the building drove a lot of people away because it wasn’t being built…they didn’t want to put their kids in a school and then have to take them out and put them someplace else. So it was imperative that we started a ninth grade here.
Nathan was referring to the plan to add additional grades so that students could matriculate from any grade to high school graduation without changing schools. This was also promising for families who wanted siblings of different ages in the same school. Having succeeded with adding a ninth grade to the school, Nathan’s plan was to continue to grow the school through twelfth grade.

**Choosing and Cultivating a Brand**

Branding the school also included choosing the right nickname for its merchandise. Ridgewood leaders wanted community members to recognize a nickname for the school that matched their brand. As they discussed potential designs for a school logo that would be printed on stickers and distributed to current or prospective families, the board chair Kate insisted “we would want prep or preparatory on there, not just [Ridgewood].” Ridgewood, similarly to Excellence, took on a prep school persona, which leaders wished to depict to the public. Also like Excellence, leaders at Ridgewood did not view their school as being akin to the county schools but rather as a distinct and superior entity.

Another aspect of Ridgewood’s recruitment involved the construction of a sports complex, which allowed additional branding through donor naming rights. During a meeting, Ridgewood’s board proposed the idea of creating a sports complex that would generate revenue for the school. Steven—a white man in his seventies—announced during a board meeting that he would like the board to consider proposed plans to create a sports complex beside the school. He said that it could bring more attention to “this side of town,” which was less developed than the area around the county seat. As he explained, they were in the process of locating donors through giving them naming rights. He said that every post and dug-out could have a different name and funder attached to it. As he cautioned,
If you have donors in mind, please do not contact them yet because we need to make sure that we can get this local permit before moving forward with financial plans. So please just wait but remember who you were going to ask for money…

Steven suggested that being associated with donor names could give the school brand recognition. He conveyed that tournaments could not only bring revenue for the school but also be used “as a recruiting tool.”

The school would get a percentage of the proceeds for each revenue-generating event such as tournaments. But the school would not have to bear the cost of upkeep. As Steven explained, “parks [and recreation] would maintain the fields.” He emphasized “this could make you a bunch of money.” Nodding, Mindy—a white woman on the board—said “we won’t have to worry about enrollment numbers.” A white mother, Shelby, asked if the public was going to be able to use the park since it would technically be a public park. She asked, “I just wonder, is that going to be safe?” Steven responded that “it would technically be public, so anyone could use it.” He continued, “but some parts of the complex would be locked up at different times depending on if they were in use.” He reminded as he returned his glance to the board “but parks will maintain it all.” The school could thus gain financially without the hassle of maintenance, profiting from the sports complex with the help of public investment.

Ridgewood personnel also wanted the school to appear less rule-oriented than traditional public schools. While discussing an upcoming marketing event, the board debated whether or not to include an information session. Stacy, an assistant administrator, said that it would be “a good idea to do an information session” so that parents could be “in the loop.” Nathan let out a sigh and said he didn’t think they should do that because “it is too structured.” He continued, “we don’t want to be too structured like public schools.” Nathan said that parents could “just read the manual” without being overwhelmed with information. They decided to create some
brochures and maybe a power-point presentation that could run in one of the main hallways or conference rooms while parents circulated the school. That way, they would not be forced to listen but could opt in to learning more about the school. By identifying the rule-oriented structure of traditional public schools as a problem in the existing system, personnel at Ridgewood worked to set themselves apart from other schools in an effort to recruit students.

**Appearing Ordinary: Recruitment at Garrison Charter**

In contrast to the network charter schools, personnel intentionally compared Garrison to traditional public schools. During an open house, a young teacher, Samantha, reassured a parent, Amelia, that Garrison was in fact a public school after the parent described her son’s troubles with bullying in traditional public schools. Samantha emphasized that Amelia’s son would be safe at Garrison, noting the appeal of their smaller classroom sizes, but she nonetheless took the opportunity to remind Amelia that Garrison was still public. This reassurance matters because it reflects a marketing technique; Garrison treated its public quality as an asset in recruitment because it allowed personnel to compare, rather than contrast, their environment and services to traditional public schools. Given Garrison’s resistance to consolidate with district schools, this distinction matters. As the enrollment manager Dan explained, the charter school emerged from efforts to avoid consolidation, severing itself from district schools. Furthermore, Dan elaborated, local traditional public school personnel and their supporters continued to oppose Garrison’s growing enrollment, arguing that its expansion would divert money from traditional public schools in the immediate and surrounding counties, which were already underfunded and struggling. Thus, marketing Garrison as a public school also avoided having parents view the charter school as an alternative, and potentially deleterious, school form.
As a locally operated and managed school, Garrison was less strategic about its marketing to prospective families. In fact, personnel at the school scarcely used the word marketing to discuss how the school recruited students. Its recruitment approach was simple; it only offered a few events for prospective families over the course of an academic year. One event was a family night, and the other was an open house event offering tours of the school.

**Encouraging Enrollment**

During its busiest time, the beginning of a new enrollment cycle, Garrison advertised their enrollment season as “open enrollment.” Even at the end of July, three weeks before school began, Garrison posted on their social media pages that there was “still time to register.” The post also mentioned available spots in multiple grades, including kindergarten. Since personnel anticipated open spots for every grade, Garrison’s process offered parents the opportunity to enroll their children for the next academic year. However, they did not place students on any sort of waiting list. When I asked if the school holds a lottery, the director, Todd, said that the school only holds a lottery “if applications exceed the number of seats.” Unlike Excellence, which emphasized limited availability, personnel at Garrison marketed the school as open enrollment.

Todd emphasized that Garrison offered a full lunch program. Since its inception, Garrison provided free or reduced meal options for qualifying students to receive a subsidized rate for breakfast and lunch. However, during the course of my fieldwork, the school expanded meal access even further. In a summer update to their website, Garrison announced that it would be rolling out a free breakfast and lunch program for all students.

Administrators are pleased to announce a school wide free breakfast and lunch program beginning with the upcoming school year. All elementary, middle and
high school students will receive breakfast and lunch at no charge…There are no applications to fill out - every student will automatically receive free meals.

Having spent his career in the public school system, Todd described Garrison in relation to traditional public schools. He emphasized the need for programs like subsidized meals in order to recruit low income families. Other staff shared this sentiment. As the financial director Larry posited, Garrison “resembles a traditional public school, especially from the outside.” The multiple full-sized yellow school buses parked by the school signaled an obvious parallel. Garrison offered transportation, even to kids in three other counties. During an open house, Amanda—a white teacher—explained, “buses transport kids all the way to [town in another county],” which was a fifty-minute drive. Another city to which the buses transported students required more than one hour of driving in the opposite direction.

*Maintaining Independence*

Although it had become increasingly common for charter schools to contract with private companies for test preparation and other services, Garrison personnel resisted outsourcing services. Instead, the school hired employees independently. Todd said that some charters hire cleaning companies instead of salaried janitors, but he disagreed with the practice and found it inconsistent with their school’s model. Shaking his head, he said he thought it was a bad idea to “try to save money by cutting the least paid employees.” As he put it,

> We are grassroots. We are not an EMO (Education Management Organization)…just a little while ago, someone was calling me about financing this or that. I told them no thank you. We finance our own transportation, maintenance, finances, and everything, but financial institutions (still) call us.

The financial director, Larry, expressed similar sentiments. As he put it, Garrison was a “self-contained and self-provided entity.” When I asked him about the advantage of Garrison’s
model, he said that the school’s organization allowed independence, adhering only to the board rather than a management organization. In fact, the proliferation of educational services and privatization of other charter schools’ management frustrated him. He tried to attend conferences and other events focusing on charter schools, as he was interested in instructional techniques and charter school advocacy. However, he found that most of these events became filled with vendors distributing information about available services for charter schools. In addition to merchandise for marketing charter schools, they offered “all kinds of services.” He explained that “other charter schools outsource their finances.” Garrison chose to have their own finance director. The financial director had family ties to the school and never intended to work there, but, after learning about the school’s need for a finance director, decided he would apply.7

Contrasting with Network Charter Schools

Rather than marketing against traditional public schools, Garrison’s director, Todd, contrasted their model with other charter schools that he viewed as less accessible. During my first visit, Todd said that Garrison offered opportunities for families to access the school without barriers to enrollment, contrasting the school with network charter schools. Referring to Excellence Academy by its real name as an example, he referred to it as a “McCharter.”

Todd contrasted Garrison with network charter schools in general as well, which he viewed as harmfully selective and even discriminatory. Todd emphasized, “[McCharters] act like they are open,” meaning accessible, even though they do not typically provide transportation. Rhetorically, he asked “who is able to take advantage of a school like that?” He looked over at the assistant director Samuel, grinning. Samuel agreed with him. Todd elaborated, “they are trying to be private schools; they don’t have Title I students.” Todd also

7 Employees at Garrison exhibited greater loyalty to the organization compared to the other charter schools in this study. When discussing the school, personnel made it sound more like a beloved family business than a school.
criticized network charter schools for their cookie-cutter marketing, comparing the schools to “pre-packaged TV dinners.” He continued,

I don’t appreciate the schools that—we like to call them McCharters—they are, well, discriminating. They don’t provide transportation and have limited lunch options for poor kids. When you have a school like that, you are going to get the families with the where-with-all to attend.

He added that they genuinely try to provide services that will help students who struggle socioeconomically by, for example, recently hiring a new counselor. When I asked Todd what attracted parents to the school, he said that the school had:

- a large special needs population. I think that is an attraction…smaller environments like this school have fewer distractions and thus can be more attractive for families with special needs children.

Todd expressed interest in promoting access for children with special needs as well as lower SES children. He appeared similar to the charter school leaders in Eckes and Trotter’s (2007) study who feared that privileged families’ interest in charter schools could thwart their mission to provide opportunities for disadvantaged students considered to be “at risk” in traditional public schools.

Distancing their school’s practices from profit-oriented charter schools, Garrison personnel focused on setting estimates for enrollment but only for purposes of maintaining the school. As Todd explained, personnel had to obtain enrollment numbers early enough to submit them for funding estimates. Even though low enrollment was an issue for the school, Todd said it was “out of their control. “As with many rural areas,” Todd argued that population growth had simply “stalled.”
The recruitment approach at Garrison reflects another type of impression management, appearing ordinarily public. In particular, Garrison worked to make itself appealing and amenable to economically disadvantaged parents by taking into account its local demographics. Without transportation or lunch, for example, parents would select out of the applicant pool, and personnel recognized this. As Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein (2016:544) argue, “charter school suppliers have incentives to target their product toward particular segments of the market, with the segments often defined by the socioeconomic and racial backgrounds of the students.”

Moreover, Garrison’s approach to recruitment worked with its intended audience. Low-income white parents in particular found comfort at Garrison. One parent, Amelia, sought a seat for her son during an open house. He had been bullied previously and thus she homeschooled him for several years. Yet she trusted Garrison personnel to take care of him. Another parent, Karen, was confused at the same open house when her daughter’s name did not appear on the door of any fifth-grade classrooms. Instead of placing them on a waitlist, the enrollment manager Dan immediately enrolled her daughter in a class—something Karen conveyed with her thumbs up as she left his office, calling him a “wizard.” Recalling this incident, Dan remarked

That’s fun. It’s nice to help people. You get the young parents who are bringing their child into kindergarten, and that’s scary for them. You know, to hand your child off to people you don’t know. You don’t know if it’s a good school. You don’t know if they are nice people, um, so you try to make that easy for them. You try to make it comfortable…What probably happened with that mom, who thought her child had a seat, was I probably just screwed up. You know. I mean, when they come in, I just tell them “what did I screw up?” And then, “we can fix it.” You know, because what are you going to do, get defensive? And then they [would get] nervous and afraid because their kid can’t come here.
Unlike the recruitment strategy personnel used to convey exclusivity at Excellence, personnel at Garrison worked to create a comfortable environment for parents and to minimize their feelings of suspense. In turn, parents could feel relieved when they learned that they had not erred in the enrollment process and instead, as Dan described, be enrolled on the spot. From Dan’s perspective, he was just doing his job to enroll students—rather than delaying their acceptance.

**Discussion**

The three charter schools in this study used recruitment strategies that reflected various ways of persuading families to choose their school. In its competitive environment, school administrators at Excellence felt compelled to entice newcomer families, specifically through efforts to make the school desirable. This required that Excellence personnel recruited families by conveying exclusivity even when they had plenty of spots available. At the same time, recruitment at Excellence was not necessarily consistent with its stated goal of socioeconomic diversity, with fewer than 10% of enrolled students receiving free or reduced lunch. Also in contrast to the goals stated in their application to the state advisory board, Excellence did not provide any free transportation to students or offer transportation services during recruitment events. With the relative success of marketing by comparing the school to a private school for its first few years, Excellence personnel seemed to abandon the idea of being socioeconomically inclusive in favor of creating suspense.

Meanwhile, the leading personnel at Garrison took a different approach. Garrison, as a rural school without a growing population, needed more students to meet enrollment goals and fill their new building addition. Thus, they could not necessarily appear exclusive or in high demand in the ways that Excellence did, nor did personnel want to make the school appear elite. In contrast to Excellence, personnel at Garrison actively worked to make the school more
appealing to low-income families, such as through providing free meals and transportation. At least in part, this approach to recruitment can be attributed to the socioeconomic composition of the school’s immediate community. Garrison’s marketing strategy can also be attributed to the needs of its student population and personnel’s vision for the school as, ultimately, a public school. Furthermore, Garrison’s marketing reflected its position as an independent school, accountable to the community rather than a private company. Personnel also differentiated Garrison from network charters, which its director referred to as “McCharters” and considered limiting in their services.

Ridgewood’s recruitment also appeared distinct in some ways, but like Excellence in others. Recruiting students at Ridgewood coincided with treating the school like a business, including setting up fun events and amenities that would entice families. Ridgewood personnel also worked to preserve a prep school image through their merchandise logo selection, which intended to mold outsider impressions of the school as Ridgewood Prep. Using a new sports complex as a marketing tool also highlights Ridgewood’s approach to recruitment—treating the school like a business. In this way, Ridgewood’s marketing was even more profit-driven than Excellence. By relying on public taxpayer investment of the sports complex without the hassle of maintenance, the school could realize private profit and marketing benefits simultaneously.

As organizations in which personnel work to manage impressions of outsiders, charter schools are a previously overlooked location for the study of organization-level impression management. Prior studies of school choice disproportionately focus on the decisions and resources of parents rather than those of school personnel whose job is to shape their impressions. However, school decisions are not one-sided. In fact, focusing on schools’ choices shows that parents are not in complete control of their children’s enrollment outcomes. Through
distinct forms of marketing, charter school personnel make recruitment decisions to create an impression for prospective families. Personnel can present their charter schools as elite and exclusive, full of amenities, or like a traditional public school in order to recruit families.

Increasingly, parents are treated as customers of educational institutions. As Selingo’s (2013:31) book *College (Un)Bound* documents, college campuses increasingly look like resorts with luxury amenities. So too are charter schools working to recruit families through the availability of fun amenities, such as spa and movie nights at Ridgewood. At the same time, rather than relying on top-down marketing from its management organization like Excellence did, Ridgewood maintained some local control over its recruitment practices. Amidst its business strategies, the school’s director still made efforts to be visible in the community in order to recruit prospective families to join their school. The branding of network charters as elite or prep schools coincides with declining private school enrollment; Ewert (2013) documents that growth in charter schools has contributed to declining private school enrollment. Charter schools thus appeal to parents who might otherwise enroll their children in private schools.

**Conclusion**

In myriad ways, schools work to bolster both their numbers and the impression that they are worth being sought after. Charter schools can work to estimate enrollment and fill seats in ways that mimic business practices. While Excellence strived for an elite status associated with private schools and remained focused on appearing exclusive, Ridgewood’s organizational model allowed personnel to maintain ties to the community and be more involved in grassroots recruitment efforts with its business-like approach. At Garrison, personnel marketed in ways that appealed to socioeconomically disadvantaged families and local community needs, such as through transportation and free meals. Thus, charter schools do not brand themselves identically
but rather fit themselves on the spectrum from traditional public to elite private, depending on the needs of their communities and their recruitment goals.

Differences in how charter schools portray themselves create a self-fulfilling cycle for interested families. A charter school attracts those who fit the mold and deter those who do not. Excellence, a charter school that cultivated elite status, tended to attract high income families. Meanwhile, Garrison adjusted its marketing to meet the needs of lower income families who were likely to choose the school given their local demographics. These decisions are not accidental. Creating and marketing a brand in education involves intentional oversight by personnel and stakeholders, such as board members and parents, and these brands play a role in how prospective families perceive the school.

Charter schools have fueled the proliferation of school marketing, even for the elementary years. As schools of choice and their competition with other schools become more prevalent, families can no longer wait until their children seek out colleges to be confronted with different brands. This is likely to change the ways that parents must engage with the school search process, even creating pressure to make the right choice as more options appear at younger and younger grades. The marketing approach to education also places increased pressure on parents to choose the right schools for their children and to navigate the educational terrain, using recruitment tools and amenities as indicators of their relative fit.

Running schools like businesses reflects a broader change in recruitment to educational institutions, including colleges. For some colleges, marketing a variety of amenities has become a common practice, from activities such as golf, yoga, and ice-skating to spa features like steam rooms, heated pools, and lazy rivers (Selingo 2013; Wotapka 2012). Personnel carefully choose the words, images, and colors represented in marketing materials to cultivate a desired
impression about a college (Posecznick 2017). Admission personnel’s decisions to give tours of desirable-looking dorm rooms and to control who speaks on behalf of a college also illustrate forms of organization-level impression management (Stevens 2007). However, a key difference between charter school and college marketing is that colleges do not usually purport to be open enrollment, instead requiring a series of application steps before enrollment commences, so it is unsurprising that colleges work to build their number of applicants, funds, and attention. Scholars and the public generally recognize that applying to college is time consuming and requires knowledge of how the process works (Stevens 2007). In contrast, advocates of charter schools claim that they give parents more power and choices; thus, creating a similarly obfuscating process or targeting parents through particular services is more surprising in charter schools (Jabbar 2016b). Particularly for charter schools, understanding different forms of marketing and their consequences for enrollment by race, class, and ability helps to inform how educational marketing has shifted with the growth of this new school form. As the share of profit-oriented charter schools and other profit-based educational institutions grows over time, we are likely to see increasingly targeted marketing depending on the population that originators and personnel wish to serve and the extent to which they are able to build their funds while recruiting students.

Future research should examine how personnel in other schools of choice make decisions about recruitment, particularly how personnel market to compete with school alternatives. Recruitment to traditional public schools is one potential context for future inquiry. As marketing of traditional public schools has become more common, future studies should examine how personnel in traditional public schools respond to the marketing by competing schools of choice. A study incorporating interviews with school personnel and observations of school
events might ask: how do traditional public school personnel situate their services in relation to alternatives like charter schools?

The findings of this study suggest that marketing in other schools depends on the pool of families whom originators and personnel wish to target. Traditional public schools in low-income areas might use needs-based services to attract families, while high-income area schools might employ more status-oriented amenities as recruitment tools. As with the charter schools in this study, there is likely variation within school types depending on their histories and locations. Future studies would help establish the extent to which marketing in K-12 education has influenced other forms of schools, such as traditional public schools, as they compete with schools of choice for students.
Chapter 4: Building Expectations and Keeping Customers Happy: How Charter School Leaders Recruit and Retain Families

Parental involvement is central to K-12 schooling, but it is particularly salient in charter schools. From first glance at most charter school websites, parental involvement appears as a major aspect of the school or is at least mentioned as part of their missions. Once parents visit charter schools for recruitment events, they learn more about the expectations and requirements for volunteering. In most charter schools, families’ participation is not only encouraged but also expected (Jennings 2010). However, volunteer expectations can vary considerably between charter schools. While some charter schools require attendance at information sessions prior to enrollment, others mandate a designated number of volunteer hours per academic year, and these volunteer requirements can amount to a cost for parents (Lubienski, Gulosino, and Weitzel 2009).

Expectations for involvement can include required or recommended activities and responsibilities for parents in a charter school. I call these expectations for volunteering involvement expectations. These involvement expectations can include supervising a fundraiser, contacting donors for a school project such as a sports facility or building addition, planning a social event, landscaping and other school improvement, decorating the hallways of a school, recruiting other families to attend an event or apply to a school, arranging cards or gifts for staff appreciation, coaching a team, providing snacks or transportation to athletic groups, hosting a homeroom, helping with financial or health records, locating vendors for a school festival, collecting surveys about the school from other parents, leading the students responsible for producing an annual yearbook, or ordering spirit wear. At the schools that I studied, these were activities in which parents were engaged, thus fulfilling involvement expectations.
Charter schools have an interest in recruiting parents who will be involved. First, having involved parents helps to assure that children will remain enrolled. In turn, consistent enrollment allows a charter school to maintain its per-pupil allotment from the state. Every public dollar of funding allotted to charter schools depends on students applying, enrolling, and staying for at least a certain period, usually two to three weeks. Additional funds depend on affluent donors or volunteerism of parents who can reach upper echelon sponsorship. Involved parents also help with recruiting other parents and volunteering for events and fundraisers (Tedin and Weiher 2011). Expecting parents’ involvement reflects a shift toward viewing parents as consumers, and the growth of privatization overall; personnel can maximize profits by using parents’ labor because they do not have to pay anyone to landscape, coach a sports team, market the school, or fulfill other duties. Thus, charter schools can further benefit from parents as laborers in the school, treating the school like a business.

Recent developments in charter school choice raise questions about involvement expectations for families. We know that parental involvement allows socioeconomically advantaged parents to provide academic, social, and career support benefits for their children in college (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018). In K-12 traditional public schools, we also know that parental involvement is often encouraged. However, prior research has shown that administration maintains control of parental involvement, sometimes even ending volunteer programs when parent-volunteers become overbearing and entitled (Lareau and Muñoz 2012).

It is well-documented that charter school parents are, in fact, involved. Compared to parents who do not enroll their children in charter schools, parents who choose charter schools

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8 These involvement expectations have implications for mothers in particular (Parcel, Hendrix, and Taylor 2016). Women are still considered the primary caretakers of children and are expected to closely and intensively monitor their children’s whereabouts (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011; see also Scarborough 2019).
have higher levels of social capital, which includes their school involvement with Parent-Teacher Organizations (PTO) and other volunteer activities (Tedin and Weiher 2011; Schneider et al. 2000). However, the processes through which charter school personnel recruit involved parents or encourage the involvement of parents are unclear.

It is also unclear from prior research how parental involvement expectations shape the relationship between families and charter schools. While scholars studying college have done so, prior studies of charter schools have not examined the extent to which meeting involvement expectations influences families’ enrollment, or whether charter schools provide the “infrastructure” for parents to utilize resources to their advantage (Hamilton et al. 2018:112). In particular, little research has been devoted to how involvement expectations shape access to charter schools and how they alter dynamics between parents and schools. This study fills that gap by examining how three charter schools developed expectations for families’ involvement in order to recruit prospective students.

In this chapter, I ask the following research questions. First, how do various types of charter schools create involvement expectations for families? Second, how do these involvement expectations develop and evolve throughout the recruitment process? Finally, how do these involvement expectations shape the relationships between families and charter school personnel during the enrollment process and beyond?

The chapter proceeds as follows. I begin by introducing charter schools as a form of privatization. I then situate the study in research about selection into choice schools as well as involvement expectations between families and schools. To frame the relevance of expectations for selection into charter schools, I focus almost exclusively on existing studies of charter schools. Next, I use social and cultural capital to elucidate the processes by which charter
schools recruit and retain students and their families via involvement expectations. I then detail my methods, present my findings, and discuss the implications of examining charter school choice through the lens of expectations between families and schools. I contribute to the literature regarding how charter schools can foster an environment in which personnel feel pressured to keep parents happy in order to obtain and sustain funding.

Privatizing Choice

The expansion of charter schools reflects a shift toward privatization, specifically the view of education as a privatized consumer good. Historically, public schools in the United States developed as communal goods that could promote an educated citizenry and reinforce democracy. In contrast, charter schools are based on movement for privatization. Because charter school choice applies market principles in the realm of public education, it has increasingly defined parents—and students—as consumers (DiMartino and Jessen 2018). As privatized school options, charter schools are managed independently from local school districts and often by private companies. This privatization reflects “a movement from [education] as a public good toward a consumer-service system fueled by private support” (Hamilton et al. 2018:114).

Choosing Students, Choosing Schools

Parents’ Choosing

Scholars and the public generally regard school choice as a decision for families. Gathering information on the web, attending open houses and tours, and comparing schools to one another are images that the phrase “school choice” usually conjures. They also illustrate the processes families go through in school selection. Scholars refer to these processes, and the
decisions that families ultimately make about which schools their children will attend, as the demand-side of school choice (Berends 2015; Henig 1994).

Consistent with popular perceptions of school choice, studies of charter school enrollment often consider the perspectives of families who navigate the educational terrain, rather than the school personnel who shape the messages that families receive about schools of choice. Scholars typically frame analyses of school choice in terms of how families choose schools (Ball and Vincent 1998; Bell 2007, 2009; Bulman 2004; Holme 2002; Olson Beal and Hendry 2012; Pattillo, Delale-O’Connor, and Butts 2014; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Weiher and Tedin 2002) or make residential decisions on the basis of neighborhood school assignment (Goyette 2008; Lareau and Goyette 2014). Also from the demand-side, studies examine how parents hoard educational advantages for their children more generally, whether through gaining knowledge about how to access schools or obtaining resources in school such as extra help with assignments, desirable track placements, and favorable disciplinary treatment (Calarco 2011, 2014, 2018; Lareau 2015; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lyken-Segosebe and Hinz 2015).

Due to their focus on choosing schools, these studies tend to overlook the ways that schools of choice indirectly choose students and parents who fit their ideal type of family. They also overlook how school personnel stream families toward or repel them away by fostering a school image and environment that feels comfortable for some parents to the exclusion of others. A school’s recruitment and selection processes, family member interactions with school personnel, and the messages parents receive from other families have the potential to shape parents’ choices.
**Charters' Choosing**

In contrast to studying charter school choice from the perspective of families, I examine recruitment from the supply-side by focusing on school recruitment. Through decisions of school leaders, actions of personnel, and interactions between families and schools, charter schools can also shape enrollment (DiMartino and Jessen 2018; Jabbar 2016a; Jabbar 2016b; Jennings 2010). For example, even though charter schools are tuition-free and financed by tax dollars, they can charge fees that amount to “informal tuition” (Mommandi and Welner 2018:67). This constrains families who cannot afford to pay the fees from these schools of choice.

Expectations that schools set for families, whether directly or indirectly, shape a family’s likelihood of enrollment. Charter schools without transportation pose the expectation that parents must deliver their children to school and pick them up at specified times. Parents’ work schedule inflexibility can pose transportation constraints as well. Uniform requirements can also create expectations for families, especially when they must be purchased from designated vendors. Moreover, uniforms convey a specific academic environment that might be too rigid and demanding for some families (Jennings 2010).

Involvement expectations influence a family’s fit with a school. Charter schools that require volunteerism, or even imply its importance, have the potential to shape enrollment (Mommandi and Welner 2018). Most charter schools incorporate parental involvement as part of their mission or at least feature it on their websites. More directly urging parents to get involved, some charter schools even set a requirement for parent volunteer hours per year. Cucchiara (2016:123) refers to these kinds of requirements as “identity-driven appeals in their
marketing.” Identity appeals supply ideas about which families fit a school, and they reinforce feelings of comfort, or discomfort, between families and schools.

Involvement expectations constitute one way of signaling to middle- and upper middle-class families that the school will prioritize their child’s needs if parents give their time. In fact, parental involvement is used to attract families to private schools, which require tuition and attract higher status families (Goldring and Phillips 2008). Unlike middle class families who intervene in institutions on their children’s behalf, working class parents might struggle with asserting themselves in school environments (Lareau 2011). Thus, recruitment strategies that emphasize attendance at open houses and parental involvement are unlikely to attract or retain families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Lareau 2000).

These involvement expectations have implications for mothers in particular (Parcel, Hendrix, and Taylor 2016). Women are still considered the primary caretakers of children and are expected to closely and intensively monitor their children’s whereabouts (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011; see also Scarborough 2019). Expectations about “good” mothers’ involvement in their children’s affairs extend to schools as well (Lareau 2011). Families with flexibility or traditional family arrangements that permit involvement are best equipped to make school choice a reality for children due to the lengths required to discover and enroll a child in a charter school. Parents are likely drawn to schools that allow them to exercise their resources, and schools can reward their ability to do so. Socioeconomically advantaged families with traditional gender arrangements are also valorized by other parents and members of the community for their commitment to obtain information in order to choose the right school for their children (Roda and Wells 2012:280).
Recent studies provide insight about how charter school personnel shape access in other ways. Charter school personnel can counsel out “problem students” whose attendance or behaviors do not favorably serve a school’s statistics (Jennings 2010). School personnel also project expectations of familiarity with current students and their families and try to screen out students whom they deem undesirable (Jabbar 2015). Recruiting through a snowball method seeks out families who personally know, and are likely similar to, those already affiliated with the school.

Social Capital in School

Social capital theory helps to explain how families get access to information about charter schools from those with whom they are familiar, as well as how expectations form between schools and families. Parcel and Dufur (2001:34) refer to school social capital as the “bonds between parents and schools that can facilitate educational outcomes.” School social capital can develop through parental involvement, communication between families and schools, or information sharing more generally (Parcel and Dufur 2001). Parents’ possession of valued social capital is not enough to secure advantages. Institutions such as schools facilitate the activation of valued capital by valuing students’ behavior differently by class (Calarco 2011, 2014; Lareau 2011).

Sociologists recognize that social capital does not operate neutrally across groups. Middle-class parents use personal contacts to share information about charter school application deadlines (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016; see also Fong and Faude 2018) as well as open houses (Jabbar 2015). As one charter school principal described to affluent parents in Jabbar’s (2015:650) study, “hey, we really love you as a parent and we want you to bring another parent who’s like you.”
Social capital operates at the institutional level as well (Lewis and Diamond 2015). Using data from an upper middle-class school, Lareau (1987) discovers the formation of cozy relations between parents and school personnel by virtue of the school’s institutional arrangements. Not only did parents at the school know each other, but teachers compared an open house to a cocktail party. This sounds pleasant, convenient, and advantageous for families who are familiar with school personnel. However, as Lareau (1987:293) warns, partnerships between families and schools have a down-side. Personal connections between families and schools often come at a cost, as parents might eventually expect something from school leaders with whom they develop relationships. Specifically, the relationships between affluent parents and school personnel have consequences for school personnel who may feel they must bend to parental wishes.

*Cultural Capital in School*

Derived from Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986) work, cultural capital refers to the “knowledge, habits, values, skills, and tastes” at one’s disposal. These qualities are class-based as well (Schwalbe 2014:11-12; see also Yosso 2005). Attuned to elite sensibilities, cultural capital is embodied in class-stratified language, habits, and tastes (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital helps to explain how middle-class parents “make institutions work to [their] advantage” (Lareau 2015:4). Specifically, Lareau (2015:21) argues that cultural capital includes “knowledge of the informal and formal rules of institutions, strategies for gaining individualized accommodations, and the timing and requirements for implementing any request for accommodation,” which help middle-class and elite parents acquire advantages for their children.

Schools are prime locations for parents to utilize cultural capital. In school contexts, exercising cultural capital often comes in the form of middle-class parents’ advocating on behalf
of their children or coaching them to intervene for themselves (Calarco 2014; Lareau 2011). While middle-class parents use cultural capital to meet the expectations of school personnel, middle-class students learn to demand that their expectations be met as well, such as for help with assignments (Calarco 2011, 2018). According to Calarco’s (2018) study, middle-class students also negotiate and complain about rules, or ask for exceptions, rather than accepting them like working-class students. Drawing on context-specific cultural capital allows both parents and their knowledge-wielding children to gain entrée to desired resources or advantages.

Beyond parents’ resources, institutions valorize these class-based cultural distinctions (Bourdieu 1986, 1977). In Evans’ (2020) recent study of a selective public high school, personnel value dominant cultural capital when scoring students during pre-admission interviews, such as eloquence, confidence, and ease associated with middle-class socialization (Evans 2020). In particular, evaluators preferred students who could use standard English and maintain eye contact while discussing their accomplishments. However, in recent years Lareau et al. (2016) argue, “the key role of institutions in creating standards where some practices have more value than others has generally been ignored in the empirical research on cultural and social capital,” particularly in research about selection into charter schools. This study aims to fill this gap with regard to charter school recruitment. In doing so, I advance social and cultural capital theories by showing the ways in which three charter schools activated and rewarded parents’ capital. First, personnel activated social and cultural capital by creating involvement expectations for families, albeit different levels of expectations. Next, personnel rewarded social and cultural capital by accommodating the requests of families who could meet those expectations and giving credit to families who could use social media to attract other prospective families. Overall, personnel felt compelled to treat parents as customers with the valuable capital
to write negative reviews online, spread false information about enrollment, or leave the school entirely and take with them their child’s per-pupil funding allotted by the state.

**Methods**

I collected observational data in three charter schools over the course of 14 months and 30 field visits. I spent a total of 120 hours pursuing fieldwork, half of which was time spent driving to the field sites. Totaling more than 40 school affiliates, participants included directors, enrollment managers, assistant directors, receptionists, disability specialists, a finance director, a public relations coordinator, an after-school coordinator, teachers, parents, community members, and members of the charter school boards. In addition to observing within administrative spaces of the school and during recruitment events, my fieldwork involved attendance at charter school board meetings. I also observed open houses, school tours, a festival, community relations and PTA meetings, a lottery night, and a family night.

To clarify observations and hone my understanding of recruitment at the schools, I conducted in-depth interviews with directors and enrollment managers to garner more detail about their recruitment processes and enrollment practices. These interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours. I collected and analyzed written materials as well, including school pamphlets, advertisements, social media pages, official websites, and applications for prospective students, as well as the charter applications submitted to the state’s charter school advisory board prior to their opening. In this section, I review the context of the study, research design, sampling and recruitment techniques, and my approach to data analysis through coding and memoing.

**Context for the Study**

The requirements and parameters of charter school policy vary by state. Thus, student selection processes are best understood at the local level, where they are subject to state policy
and oversight. North Carolina state law originally mandated diversity by requiring that charters eventually reflect the racial demographics of their surrounding areas. However, a 2013 law eliminated the mandate and softened the language about diversity (Bonner, Stancill, and Raynor 2017). According to current state law (North Carolina General Statutes § 115C-218.45):

> Within one year after the charter school begins operation, the charter school shall make efforts for the population of the school to reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the general population residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located or the racial and ethnic composition of the special population that the school seeks to serve residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located.

Thus, although the law says that charter school personnel “shall make efforts” to reflect the racial composition of their respective school districts or surrounding areas, it is not mandatory that a charter school’s student population matches its local demographics.

Racial and class stratification between charter schools and traditional public schools is increasingly evident in the state. In 2011, the General Assembly raised the statewide one-hundred charter school cap (Marchello 2019). Since then, student populations of North Carolina charter schools are disproportionately white compared to their respective districts (Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein 2016). Students also come from relatively better educated households (Ladd et al. 2016). Thus, because of such social selection, North Carolina is an exemplary location to examine the processes through which schools influence their student enrollments (Mickelson et al. 2018). Recent findings about North Carolina’s charter school population raise questions about student selection into charter schools in the state, especially the processes that shape which families enroll in them. As Wilson and Carlsen (2016:25) note, charter school
segregation “raises questions not just about how parents choose schools, but also how schools appeal to different families.”

**Research Design**

I employed observational, interview, and qualitative content analytic methods to study charter school recruitment and marketing. I used jottings and field-notes derived from observation in three charter schools, in coordination with their marketing materials, to examine the processes through which these charters shaped student enrollment. One of the critiques of using interviews as the sole method of collecting data is that participants’ words may not reflect their actions or might depict ideals rather than realities (Charmaz 2014:78). Interviews also lack the context in which participants act. Observation help to fill this void by providing real time insight about recruitment and retention efforts in three charter schools with varied organizational structures.

**Sample Characteristics**

After reviewing the websites and demographic information of twenty charter schools within the same state, I selected three charter schools on the basis of their varied management structures. I distinguished charter schools that are locally managed from those that are remotely managed and follow an established pattern for charters within a network; I call the former “autonomous” charters and the latter “network” charters. Other charters offer more hybrid models of management, and I call those “combined” charters. While one of the charter schools in this study developed from within the community and is autonomously managed (Garrison), another was founded by an educational management company operating a network of more than fifty charter schools (Excellence). The third charter school originated as a hands-on network charter school, like Excellence, but was converted to a hands-off network charter school with
management having less control over school activities (Ridgewood). This meant that community members were able to have more discretion in operating the third school. Another important distinction between the hybrid and network models is that the network charter school developed as a replication of a current charter school model, while the hybrid was not a replication of another charter school.

Each of the schools was developed or expanded within five years of the study. Recently expanded schools added a grade or grew their enrollments due to changes in space or funding. I selected charter schools that opened or expanded in the past five years in order to examine contexts in which schools must actively hone their image or at least promote it in order to recruit students to populate their classrooms. All of the three sampled charters were in the same state, North Carolina, and thus were subject to the same state-level legislation about school choice.

The charter schools differed in their proximity to urban areas. Two of the three schools—Garrison and Ridgewood—were in rural areas, though they differed in degree. While Garrison was a remote rural school more than thirty miles from an urban area, Ridgewood was a distant rural school because it was within twenty miles of an urban area (Brown and Schafft 2011:62). Ridgewood was still rural, but it was in a more populous area with major grocery stores and other shops nearby. The closest shop to Garrison was a convenience store about one mile away. In part due to their locations, Ridgewood had some competition with a nearby charter, nearby private school, and traditional public schools, while Garrison had limited rivals—a traditional public school for primary, middle, and high school levels and a small private school. In North Carolina, charter schools tend to open in rural areas (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang 2011), which makes these important though less convenient to study. As Logan, Minca, and Adar (2012:297) state, “nonmetropolitan schools tend to be overlooked in the segregation
literature.” Most studies of school inequality examine urban and increasingly suburban context. Meanwhile, Excellence Academy was a suburban school. Unlike the other two schools, in the immediate area of Excellence were several stores and apartment buildings. In short, it looked like a typical suburb.

Transportation availability differed between the schools. While Garrison provided free transportation for students, Excellence had a few parent-led options like carpool and a private bus, and Ridgewood relied on parents and carpool between families. Table 8 compares relevant characteristics of the three charter schools and their surrounding communities, including expectations for families.

Table 8. School Characteristics: Organizational Type, Location, Origination Date Range to Denote Years in Operation, and Involvement Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter School Name</th>
<th>Organizational Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Originally Started*</th>
<th>Involvement Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garrison Charter (K-12)</td>
<td>Autonomous/ Mom and pop</td>
<td>Remote rural</td>
<td>&gt; 10 years prior to fieldwork</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridgewood Preparatory (K-8)</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Populous rural</td>
<td>&gt; 3 years prior to fieldwork</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence Academy (K-8)</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>&lt; 3 years prior to fieldwork</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* While the schools all originated at different times, they were each in the process of expanding enrollment, for example as a result of building construction and increased space, during the fieldwork for this study. Ranges are listed for original dates in order to protect school identities.

All three of the charter schools emphasized parental involvement in some way. Garrison and Ridgewood featured information about parental involvement opportunities on their website. Meanwhile, Excellence required twenty volunteer hours per year for families with one child and thirty hours for families with two or more children.
Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

I aimed to garner understanding of the setting and build rapport with school personnel. Because it was important to be familiar with the experiences and situations being studied, I wanted the school personnel to be comfortable with my presence (Charmaz 2014). However, I also recognized the need to be conscious of how participants perceive me and to balance being too distance and too comfortable (Charmaz 2014; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006).

My research process began with a phone call to each school to explain my study and arrange a preliminary visit. When first interacting with personnel and parents at the school, I asked for verbal consent to participate in the study. The IRB approved verbal consent for observational data collection, so I read a statement informing the participants of the purpose of the study and asked for their consent to be included in it. For interviewees, I obtained their signatures on consent forms. In field-notes, which I documented from my time at the school to write field-notes after each visit, I used only pseudonyms or descriptions to replace their names. I also eliminated school identifiers. All participants were observed and questioned informally through direct contact. Table 9 lists participant characteristics, including their positions relative to the schools as well as their race, gender, and age.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>School’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>School Position</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Late-50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Financial Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Mid-40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Mid-20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Late-50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Enrollment Manager</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Late-50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Public Relations Coordinator</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Early-60s</td>
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<td>Laura</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>After-school Coordinator</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Early-70s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Board Member</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Early-50s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-40s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Early-30s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mid-30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Enrollment Manager</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Late-40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bev</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Early-40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Early-50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Early-30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>White</td>
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Table 9 (continued)

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Data Analysis

I considered data collection and analysis as iterative processes rather than separate phenomena. The interview data did not speak for themselves; analysis involved a process of deconstruction and interpretation from the moment the data were collected (Holstein and Gubrium 2002:125). Data analysis began with constant comparison between data and emerging categories, moving back and forth between data and theory (Charmaz 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I incorporated an abductive approach to data analysis, which incorporates existing studies to recognize a finding as surprising; this approach allows theory to be present in order to create empirical puzzles (Timmermans and Tavory 2012:177). Throughout the process of data analysis, I looked for surprises. I worked to defamiliarize myself with the data and revisit it while looking for variation over time and across instances and sites (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Simultaneously, I looked for discoveries within the data and searched for ways to make sense of them using existing theories.

I merged grounded theory and abductive approaches to data analysis, rejecting the view of coding as purely inductive or deductive. I used open and focused coding to make sense of the data. For open coding, I read the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, line-by-line, and created codes that conveyed action based on emerging themes. This allowed me to place data into categories and conceptualize what was happening (Charmaz 2014). Open coding helped to identify initial patterns of recruitment, after which I moved to focused coding and reassessed various codes. Coding in light of the literature, I developed more thematic codes about how personnel worked to portray the school and approached recruitment more generally (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). I worked back through the data and looked for repeated codes, building on
ideas rather than events or occurrences. I gave particular attention to implicit meanings through close examination of data (Charmaz 2014).

In this process of focused coding, I composed analytic memos to organize my thinking about what was happening in the data. During memoing, I took into account the school setting. I also built on initial memos to explore patterns identified about recruitment techniques during earlier fieldwork, comparing observational with interview data. Furthermore, I used integrative memos to link codes and assess particular themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011:193). As I pieced together the various forms of data, I avoided writing overly descriptive narratives or using predetermined theorizing to structure my analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Findings

Building Community

Across the three charter schools that I studied, personnel actively worked to build a sense of community to promote involvement with school activities and events. At Excellence Academy, parents were required to volunteer twenty hours per academic year per family and thirty hours if they had two or more children. Garrison and Ridgewood did not set requirements for involvement but emphasized the importance of tight parent networks on their websites, in recruitment materials, and during events.

Garrison’s emphasis on community was apparent from first glance at its public Facebook page. It even had a private Facebook group devoted to volunteerism. Featured on their group page was the following excerpt:

[Garrison] will be a teacher/parent directed community school. Teachers and parents will be required to be involved in the governance of the school and share in the responsibility for the educational achievements of their students. Teachers and parents will become partners in the decision making process.
The page also called on parents, grand-parents, and community members for their time and energy, urging “we need you!” At Garrison, community members, teachers, and parents were considered equals in making decisions about the school. As Garrison’s finance director Larry explained, the board was composed of parents, teachers, and community members. Other than voting for or serving on the board at Garrison, parents did not have a strong daily presence at the school. Parents were not particularly involved in school recruitment, attending occasional events and only helping set up when needed as a last resort. They did not play a part in organizing events. Garrison expected parents to spread the word about the school, but they did not require or incentivize it.

Excellence built community to recruit prospective families as well, but, in contrast to Garrison, put more direct emphasis on parental involvement. According to the director Lisa—a white woman in her forties—parents attended events in order to “try on” the school. She recalled that parents frequently told her “I want to hear if the school is a good fit.” During recruitment events, she worked to cultivate a “sense of family.” While presenting at an information session recruitment event, Lisa posited that uniforms made students “look all the same and feel like they are part of same family.” She moved on to discuss the morning meeting in which every grade was required to participate. Presenting to a large group of prospective families, she described the meeting as a chance to “build our family and build our community.”

Frequent tours at Excellence provided opportunities for personnel to build community. “Everywhere you turn, there is an [Excellence] family,” the enrollment manager Alyssa—a black woman in her twenties—told a white mom and dad, Linda and Elliot, of fraternal first grade twins during a school tour. The family had moved to the area from New England only a few days prior to the tour. Alyssa reassured them that they were not alone and that some personnel
traveled an even longer distance to attend Excellence. Alyssa exclaimed, “one teacher drives all the way from the beach!” Such a drive would require at least two hours of travel by vehicle.

Ridgewood personnel also tried to build a sense of community among parents. In a spring newsletter, Ridgewood staff announced that the lottery had opened, encouraging current students and their families to notify other friends and family about the lottery. It added, “we would love to have them be a part of our family!” Kate, the board chair at Ridgewood—a white woman in her thirties—led the school’s community relations committee each month. The committee substituted for a more traditional PTA or parent-teacher group. Though tailored to parents’ needs and intended to be run by parents, its name signaled that this group remained open to the possibility that interested community members would devote their time to the school. At the committee’s monthly meetings, a parent or two showed up to voice their concerns about the school, give ideas for events or fundraisers, or even volunteer to solicit local businesses on behalf of the school. These parent volunteers were stay-at-home or part-time employed white mothers.

Ridgewood fostered parents’ involvement because it benefited their recruitment efforts. As Nathan, the school’s director, explained:

I have some parents who really help us especially in recruitment. I mean I know this one lady who just, I mean, speaks highly [of the school]. If their kids are treated well, which they are, they’re happy. And then I have an open-door policy. They know that they can come and speak with me anytime, whereas they would never be able to speak with the superintendent over at the public school. They would have to go through these channels, and I have a direct line so that if there’s a problem, we can talk about it. You know, so, they like that aspect of it.

This quote illustrates the emphasis on parents’ unobstructed access to the director at Ridgewood. Nathan viewed the lack of communication barriers as a reason that parents were willing to
advertise the school to other parents. The quote also reflects a consumer service orientation for parents. In fact, the director viewed parents’ contributions as ancillary to school functioning because their happiness made them more willing to help with recruitment, and the success of a charter school’s recruitment determine its enrollment numbers as well as its funding.

**Expecting Involvement**

More explicitly than the other schools, Excellence personnel made extensive efforts to bridge the gap between families and schools. Driven by corporate policy, these efforts typically came from Alyssa, who worked as the enrollment manager at the school. Her job was critical to the recruitment and enrollment process. She managed all information related to enrollment, regarding both students and their families. At Excellence, unlike the other charter schools in the study, she also planned community events as well as gave tours to families and answered application-related questions by phone and email. Once families applied to Excellence, Alyssa processed their paperwork and made offers to families.

Asking what made the school attractive to parents, I learned that parental involvement was a selling point for Excellence. The assistant director, Pam—a white woman in her thirties—said that parents are always around and that was used to “sell teachers and parents on.” Pam said that the PTA met once a month. However, determining the exact time of their meetings was difficult. I could not find any information about the group on the school’s official website or social media pages, so I had to follow up with the director Lisa to even access the dates and times of their meetings, which alternated by month and even occasionally changed at the last minute.

The PTA was led by one particularly involved parent, Sarah—a white woman in her late thirties. She was a former engineer, turned stay-at-home mom, and she devoted much of her
energy to volunteering time at Excellence. During my first encounter with the PTA, I mistook Sarah for an administrator because she led the meeting with confidence and authority, using “we” to describe school actions and related events. During the meeting, she asked for volunteers to lead committees. She also requested volunteers for an upcoming field day event taking place during the school day. In a serious tone, Sarah announced to parents at the meeting “we need you to get everything done in the school.” This involvement entailed volunteering that overlapped with business hours.

Thanks in part to Sarah, Excellence parents became integral to the school’s recruitment apparatus—beyond telling their friends about the school. During several of my early visits, Alyssa emphasized a central theme of the network charter’s branding, “we need parents to function.” She even directed the message to parents during tours, telling them “we need you all.” Undeniably, the emphasis placed on parents was strong at Excellence. In Alyssa’s words, the PTA “does a lot around here.”

**Recruiting Other Parents**

Although recruitment events started much earlier, the enrollment process at each of the schools officially began with a survey to determine the number of “recommits.” Families designated as “recommits” indicated their decision to stay for the next academic year and thus saved their children’s place in the next grade level. Personnel usually distributed surveys before mid-year. Then, a lottery held during the winter at Excellence, spring at Ridgewood, and scarcely at all at Garrison determined which applications from the pool would take over the seats that non-recommits gave up. While Excellence and Ridgewood found it more instrumental to hold a lottery even if their enrollment was well below capacity, Garrison only hosted a lottery when the number of applications exceeded the number of available seats.
Families who recommitted to the school already secured their spots. However, the most active parents showed up at the lottery anyway. I encountered Sarah—the PTA leader—at lottery night. As soon as she took a seat, she pulled from her bag two large binders and began taking notes. Realizing that she did not need to be there for lottery night, I asked her why she even came to the event, as I assumed she was recommitting her child to the school. She laughed slightly, saying that “we did recommit but I am here to see the new faces and just help in any way that I can.”

Parents even delivered offers of acceptance to other families by phone at Excellence. Rather than Alyssa calling parents or using an automated message by phone or email, the school relied on parents’ voices to woo their counterparts. Excellence staff welcomed families’ participation in recruitment because current parents helped to motivate other parents to enroll their children and, once offered acceptance through the lottery, encouraged them to stay. Like elite private schools, the charter schools in this study had an interest in protecting the funding that derived from students’ enrollment, especially in profit-oriented charter schools.

**Maximizing Funding**

Both profit-oriented charter schools in the study placed emphasis on maximizing funding. At Excellence and Ridgewood, retaining students was as much of a priority as attracting them. If a student left before the first twenty days of school, the schools lost that funding from local and state tax dollars. For this reason, the first twenty days of school were the most stressful for their administrators and staff. Ultimately, the schools relied on the recommittal of current families, in addition to new families who applied through the online portal.

Excellence’s enrollment manager Alyssa, a black woman in her twenties, carried the weight of the school’s funding. Using a large white dry-erase board that lined one wall of her
office, Alyssa made daily updates to a chart containing the number of students who had applied, been accepted, enrolled, partially registered, and fully registered. These numbers, she explained, have “consequences for funding.” The school wanted every dollar of funding they could get. As Alyssa put it, “every child is worth a hunk of money.” Due to the need to raise funds, the first step toward ensuring stable financials was to determine the number of “recommits.” These were the families who indicated their decision to stay at Excellence for the next academic year. Then, a lottery held during the winter determined which applications from the pool would take over the seats that non-recommits gave up.

Due to the pressures to receive maximum funding for every classroom, in previous years, Excellence Academy intentionally over-enrolled students—more than they could accommodate per grade. As they rationalized it, some families change their minds and do not show up on the first day of school. Consistent with a market approach to educational choice, Alyssa suspected that families applied to multiple schools and then chose their “best” offer. However, in the few hectic days before the school year began, Excellence staff were unsure about how they would fit the surplus of students into the classrooms. But this was not their chief concern. More often, they told me, they worried that too many families would choose their assigned traditional public school or another school of choice at the last minute.

Ridgewood personnel were also strategic about accurately estimating the number of students for the next academic year, as enrollment figures dictated funding. Since they did not have management’s financial backing, they felt it was better to offer a low but safe estimate. Being overly optimistic could harm funding if their numbers were lower than anticipated. As Kate explained after submitting an estimate for the next year’s enrollment to their management company, “we don’t want issues with budgeting like we did last year…it’s better to low-ball; we
know from experience. We used a safer number this year.” During the previous year, their overly optimistic estimate resulted in lower funding than anticipated and accompanying debt.

Nathan confirmed that they underestimated enrollment for the next upcoming school year on purpose. Personnel knew that they would have to turn in two more estimates before the fall, which was plenty of time to see where enrollment would be closer to the first day of school. As Kate explained with regard to the estimates, “the next one is due in June. By then, we should have a more realistic estimate since it will be after the lottery.” She said the number they ultimately provided was:

important because the [funding] allotment is based on that number and, if enrollment drops, the next allotment gets cut…if you use the funds, and don’t get as much money the next time, [the school is] put in a situation we don’t want to be in with cutting staff.

They considered the current estimate safe but also enough to support their operations without firing anyone.

Keeping Customers Happy

Even at the school with the least emphasis on parental involvement, personnel felt pressured to keep families happy in order to maintain enrollments. Garrison resembled a traditional public school in many ways. It was a locally managed school offering yellow school bus transportation and a lunch program for students. Its community-building efforts also depended on joint partnerships between members of the community, teachers, and parents, rather than relying on a single group of involved mothers. Yet, Garrison’s personnel expressed ambivalence about parents’ expectations for the school. The school’s finance director Larry described the pressure to make parents happy. “I’m the first to admit that it is harder than it looks to run a school.” He said that personnel feel they must “please parents.” As he put it,
[School personnel] walk a tight line between viewing them as customers and being honest about a child’s needs—[pause] because they can leave…special needs kids are expensive. They need one teacher all day, and that’s hard to provide here. We do bread and butter education…but we don’t always know if they have an issue before they have a seat. Then we have to have difficult conversations with parents.

Despite its minimal level of involvement expectations, school personnel at Garrison still felt pressured to satisfy parents to maintain their interest in the school. They needed to maintain parental interest, so they discussed student accommodations or lack thereof with hesitation and only when the time was right—after they enrolled—because speaking frankly with parents too early in the enrollment cycle could turn them away.

Garrison’s enrollment manager also discussed the importance of attuning to parents’ needs due to their position as customers.

Like at the open house, if we have a seat—I had some walk ins, people who I told “we might have a seat,” and they showed up anyway. If we have a seat, I’ll get them in that night. You know, start the kids [on] day one. And, you know, let’s be honest, there’s a piece of funding in there. You get funding based on the first twenty days, so if the kid is not here day one, we only get [funding for] 19 out of 20 [days]. If we can register and have an opening, I’ll do it. Why not? We want to fill the seats…For the most part, you try to just make it easy for the parent. You know, they want what’s best for the kid and they want their child to have a good experience. So you do, you try. They’re our customer. I mean, you know, we are a people business and we are a service business. If they need something, you do everything you can to make it work.

The enrollment manager, Dan, explained how students obtained seats even as late as open house, which occurred a couple of weeks before the first day of school. Personnel at Garrison ultimately viewed parents as customers whose enrolled children provided funding for the school.
Parental expectations played out at Ridgewood as well. For example, a white parent member on Ridgewood’s board, Mindy, expressed disappointment after her child did not get to play in a basketball game. She complained during a board meeting, indicating that she, the parent, had invested considerable time at the school. Another example occurred during a community relations meeting. Elizabeth, a white middle-class mother in her early thirties, asked for playground equipment because her child was getting into fights on the playground. Sitting next to her child’s teacher, she insisted to the committee that her child would be less likely to punch other parent’s children if he had play toys. By shifting the blame to lacking school equipment, she was able to avoid disciplinary action for her child. She even offered to seek out donations from local businesses, and she informed those in attendance that she already contacted several of them.

After questioning whether they already had playground equipment and seeming somewhat reluctant, the community relations committee leaders acquiesced. The board chair, Kate, assured the mother that they would address the playground issue. Kate also asked Elizabeth to hold onto the names of the businesses for other fundraising purposes, encouraging her that they should be able to get access to playground equipment without tapping into valuable community resources. As she explained, she hoped to save those for other occasions, such as to purchase items for a kitchen so students could have school-cooked meals. In the following month’s newsletter, the community relations committee asked for donations of new or gently used equipment for the playground, such as soccer balls, footballs, frisbees, or jump ropes. In short, they heeded her demands. These efforts reflect mechanisms of negotiating opportunities that Calarco (2018) discusses in her study; parents work to secure advantages for children, such as by providing financial help in exchange for disciplinary action, but schools have to allow such
behavior for it to persist (Lareau and Muñoz 2012). In charter schools, personnel have an incentive to keep customers happy in order to meet enrollment requirements.

Particularly at Excellence, school personnel felt compelled to meet families’ needs in order to reach their goals for enrollment and, importantly, funding. Its director, Lisa, felt that the school was held to a higher standard in terms of meeting parents’ needs because it did not have “a student population” from which to draw and because it was in a highly competitive area for school choice. The assistant director, Pam, attributed these dynamics to the demographics of Excellence students. As she explained, “Excellence tends to attract privileged families,” specifically “more high-income households with stay-at-home moms” compared to traditional public schools. This meant that moms could show up at the school, and frequently did as precipitated by the parental involvement policy. As the director Lisa told me, parents “want the red carpet, and they expect it.” She said that families “take ownership” of the school. Lisa emphasized that this desire to take ownership had to be taken seriously because the school’s “budget is impacted by family and student happiness.” According to Lisa, Excellence personnel were focused not only on attracting new families, but also keeping the ones who were already there. Since family and student happiness directly impacted the school’s funding, school personnel felt pressured to give families what they wanted (see also Cookson and Persell 1985 regarding elite schools).

Excellence personnel felt pressured about the appearance of the school in particular. The only family taking part in a tour one cloudy day in July appeared to inspect the environment for more than safety. Looking up and down the walls, the white middle-class couple surveyed the property for cleanliness. “I apologize for the mess,” Alyssa retorted as she noticed the direction of their glances, “we are still getting the school ready for the new year.” She apologized several
times throughout the tour. After a loud, high-pitched power washer that janitors were using to clean the floors interrupted Alyssa’s speech, she looked startled. Appearing frustrated but still managing to smile, she apologized again, saying that it was “so annoying.” Once again, she assured the parents “the school does not usually look like this.”

Personnel needed families to carry and broadcast a positive image of their charter school. Any activity that hindered the recruitment of families, such as negative posts on websites, could reduce the amount of applications they received. Even worse, they might decrease the number of commitments to attend after students received offers at the school. Lisa, the director at Excellence, feared this potential response because it could decrease the school’s chances of meeting enrollment goals and thus their desired level of funding. Without the predicted funds, teachers could lose their jobs and marketing would be cut, which had been the case for the prior two years at Excellence.

These fears placed more pressure on Alyssa. In an interview, she recalled the following:

Parents will only report negative things about our school. They won’t say the good things. Like, they won’t say “oh my gosh, my child scored a five on the standardized test. Thank you such-and-such for staying after to help.” They never report the good stuff. Like, they will report “I almost got in a wreck in carpool because someone didn’t swerve”—you know! And it’s crazy. But the biggest thing they ask about is our teachers, and a lot of our teachers are returning for this school year. You can see they are here. They are settling in… Facebook is the biggest platform our parents like to use to troll on…Thankfully, I haven’t seen anything negative about me. But, um, if a teacher doesn’t respond to an email in a timely manner, they take it to Facebook as if that’s going to solve the problem. It’s just so crazy.

She also discussed Great Schools as a website that parents use to post evaluations of the school. However, Excellence personnel had no control over the feedback parents share publicly via the
Therefore, Alyssa emphasized to teachers that they should reach out to parents about any issues with their students as soon as possible to avoid negative attention—especially since it could damage other families’ perceptions of the school and likelihood of enrollment.

To deal with these concerns, management developed a strategy to promote positive social media attention. As a new policy, the school began offering credit toward volunteer hours for parents posting content that would garner attractive social media attention. They intended to improve their online image for prospective families; using current families’ positive stories about the school seemed the best way to do it.

_Taking Expectations “Too Far”_

Over time, Alyssa also indicated distaste for parents’ incessant prying around the school. Six months into my fieldwork and about a year into her job, Alyssa said she felt that parental involvement was taken “too far” at Excellence. A few months later when I mentioned that parents at Excellence were involved, she corrected me by saying that they were “too involved.” She began to make comments indicating that parents’—particularly mothers’—presence in the school exceeded what the school needed from them. During a private meeting, I asked her what she really thought about the group of parents who were involved with the PTA. She shook her head, looking around and saying she didn’t know “where to begin.” When I asked her to explain, she said that parents had more authority than she did. She indicated that she was not alone in her sentiments. The receptionists also felt left out—one of whom was a white woman in her late twenties and the other was a black woman in her early thirties. As Alyssa put it, she and the receptionists were the “last to know” about things, while administrators readily offered information to parents.
I asked her for an example of parental overreach. She told me about a parent who sought to enroll their child, whose sibling was already enrolled, but the parent could not find her oldest child’s identification number. To assist the parent, Alyssa told her to enter zeros in the application system where it asked for the sibling’s identification number. That way, Alyssa could receive the application and fix it the next day, since she knew to which child the parent was referring, and she could just place them at the top of the list. The parent then posted on Facebook that prospective families could use zeros as a reference number to get bumped to the top of the list. Alyssa was shocked that the parent spread that information just to give her friends an edge. As she explained, she called the parent to ask her to delete the Facebook post and also told her that “it did not work that way.” Alyssa was trying to maintain support of current parents and make it easier for them to enroll their children. This parent then attempted to use valuable information about how to get ahead in enrollment by sharing it with those in her network.

Instances like the one involving a student’s identification number and the prolonged intensive involvement of the PTA pushed Alyssa to question the practice of using parents for recruitment. She emphasized that she dealt with confidential information about students that should not be accessible to parents. Even though parents formerly delivered offers to other families by phone, Alyssa considered discontinuing that practice for the next enrollment cycle because she thought it was too risky to give parents access to sensitive student data after all. Whispering, she said “there are some places that parents just do not belong.” As Lareau and Muñoz (2012:210) show, parents’ collective involvement can overstep traditional boundaries between families and schools, cause conflict between parents and administrators, and become “a hindrance rather than a help.”
Family involvement expectations bred anxiety for parents who could not fit the mold. Given the emphasis on parental involvement, some prospective families were concerned about whether their presence was required for their children to be accepted to the school. For example, Alyssa, the enrollment manager at Excellence, said that parents expressed concerns if they had to work and thus could not attend an information session at the school. As Alyssa recounted, during a phone call, one parent asked in desperation “will it hurt [their child’s] chances of admission?” Wrinkling her eyebrows, Alyssa responded to the parent “no, it won’t hurt his chances.” She said that part of these concerns about chances of enrollment came from parents’ lack of knowledge about how the process works. She insisted “they are always so scared—if only they knew what was going on inside, but I can’t say ‘hey we have one hundred seats open.’”

I asked why she could not be transparent about the actual number of spots available. She responded that it would calm them, but it would also “ruin the surprise” and possibly damage the process by which they convinced parents to become invested in the school.

Discussion

This study speaks to expectations that form between personnel in three charter schools and the parents of the students who attend them. Efforts to build involvement expectations in order to recruit families were evident at each of the three charter schools that I studied. These involvement expectations typically began with efforts to build community. At Garrison, community-building efforts depended on parents, teachers, and community members sharing decision-making power, which involved a community effort rather than a single group.

Excellence and Ridgewood relied more exclusively on a single parent organization or committee to promote involvement. At Excellence, involvement expectations for parents were most pronounced, with required volunteer hours and a PTA run by white affluent women. These
mothers became directly involved in the recruitment of students such as through delivering offers by phone. Like Excellence, Ridgewood relied on primarily white high SES mothers’ involvement. At both Garrison and Ridgewood, personnel wanted parents to be involved with school governance, but not recruitment.

Charter school personnel expressed interest in maintaining parents’ commitment to the school due to the implications of their children’s enrollment for funding. Across the three charter schools with varied involvement expectations, school personnel still felt pressured to appease parents for whom they developed expectations. Despite its minimal level of involvement expectations, school personnel at Garrison still felt they had to satisfy parents to maintain their interest in the school. To do so, they delayed discussing student accommodations with parents until after they already enrolled.

Social capital played a role in charter school recruitment. Across the three schools, charter school personnel built involvement expectations as a community. At Excellence, parents were even involved with recruitment efforts. By allowing parents to deliver offers of acceptance to other families by phone at Excellence, the school relied on current parents to build relationships in order to recruit prospective families. Moreover, parents’ public evaluations of charter schools were important to personnel. Since parents’ opinions of charter schools circulate online through social media, blogs, and even major review websites, they have the potential to indicate to other families whether they should apply for their own children. Personnel even rewarded parents via volunteer credit for sharing positive stories on their social media pages in an attempt to recruit more families and distract from any negative content. Rewarding positive content allowed personnel to draw on their existing pool of happy, and socioeconomically privileged, families in order to recruit others with whom current families were connected.
Schools activated cultural capital by setting involvement expectations as well, providing parents with a sense of comfort through their involved school positions. In this sense, involvement expectations can be considered a form of cultural capital embodied by parents, which can be activated by a charter school. Being treated as valued customers, parents came to feel entitled to an important place in the schools or at least to amenities such as playground equipment. To varying degrees, the three charter schools in this study encouraged the volunteerism of socioeconomically advantaged families, particularly mothers. In the case of Excellence, parent volunteers tended to be white, stay-at-home, part-time, or flexibly employed mothers (see also Lareau et al. 2016). And the most active parents had the most to gain in terms of the position to which they became entitled. Not only were these parents known around the school and active in the recruitment of other families, but they could also make demands to benefit their children. Personnel felt pressured to fulfill their wishes in order to maintain their enrollment and the funding that followed it.

Conclusion

Charter schools value parents’ input. Parents decide if they should enroll their child and whether or not to keep them enrolled in the future, and these decisions have implications for charter schools’ funding. Parents even serve on boards and committees that make decisions about charter schools. They also evaluate charter schools through blogs and social media posts. Charter schools depend on parental support and involvement, including parents’ online reviews and willingness to commit or recommit to a school.

Charter schools depend on families’ continued support and enrollment of their children to stay in operation. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools cannot afford to have unhappy parents (Lareau and Muñoz 2012). In fact, school personnel in this study felt
compelled to view parents as customers whom they should please, or risk losing their
collection, Personnel fostered an environment in which parents could exert
influence and feel welcome because the schools needed them to obtain funding.

Viewing parents as customers is not unique to charter schools, or to K-12 education.
Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the ways that colleges “are turning into businesses
where customers—in this case, students—expect to be satisfied…have come to regard their
professors as service providers” (Selingo 2013:20). Part of these expectations of satisfaction
manifest through grades, as families come to expect something in return for their generous
support devoted to the school (Selingo 2013). Like staff treatment of guests in Sherman’s (2007)
study of luxury hotels, school personnel in this study recognized the efforts of parents as
supportive customers of their school services. The conceptualization of students’ parents as
customers has consequences for socioeconomic division; in particular, it places
socioeconomically advantaged parents in a better position to bargain on behalf of their children.

Charter schools can recreate existing inequality, but not just because of the resources that
parents bring to schools. The expectations that charter schools set for families influence who is
comfortable in the school and whether parents feel that their lives match the expectations schools
establish for them. Moreover, charter schools can foster an environment in which personnel feel
pressured to keep parents happy in order to obtain funding.

Personnel efforts to please individual parents might also come at the expense of focusing
on students’ collective well-being. In many ways, the emphasis on parents’ evaluations of
charter schools reflects a broader shift toward an individualistic view of public education
(Robertson and Riel 2019). This individualistic focus promotes the practice of keeping parents
happy, as consumers of education—a commodity (Cucchiara 2013). Notably, a focus on
pleasing parents in charter schools elevates the importance of individual families in lieu of a more collective understanding of schooling as a public good.

Future studies should consider the extent to which personnel at other schools of choice have adopted similar models of placing involvement expectations on parents and felt compelled to reward them in kind. A study using observational and interview data collection methods would shed light on how other schools of choice, such as private schools, create expectations for families. In this study, involvement expectations were most pronounced for the network charter school, which was located in an affluent suburb without free transportation options. Therefore, private schools would be a particularly fruitful area to study, as high expectations for parental involvement are likely prevalent in such status-oriented and socioeconomically privileged environments. A study of private school recruitment could also compare different types of private schools. For example, comparing those that are newly formed with older private schools might shed light on how involvement expectations differ between private schools with established reputations and those with new ones. Studies of this kind would continue to inform about how expectations play a role in the recruitment of students to schools, in addition to how the relationship between families and schools evolves with changes to K-12 schooling.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I examine the recruitment of prospective families to three charter schools with varied organizational structures. I base the previous three data chapters on a series of research questions. In chapter two, I investigate the following questions: first, how does recruitment to charter schools align with neighborhood boundaries? Second, how do charter schools’ different organizational structures influence these recruitment approaches? Third, how do recruitment decisions, such as where a charter school initially locates, reflect the market of prospective families from which they hope to attract? In chapter three, I ask: first, through which processes do charter schools construct images of their schools to recruit families? Second, how do they situate their schools in relation to others? Third, how do charter schools differentiate their marketing depending on their organizational structure? In chapter four, the final data chapter, I examine the following questions: first, how do various types of charter schools create expectations for families? Second, how do these expectations develop and evolve throughout the recruitment process? Finally, how do these expectations shape the relationships between families and charter school personnel during the enrollment process and beyond?

The schools’ organizational structures varied. One of the charter schools existed in a national network of charters run by the same for-profit company. Another was entirely autonomous, community-based, and non-profit without any management company. The third was a hybrid that began as a for-profit, network charter school but was later acquired by a smaller for-profit entity that allowed more local control of the school.

Prior research disproportionately considers how parents choose schools (Ball and Vincent 1998; Bell 2007, 2009; Bulman 2004; Frankenberg 2018; Holme 2002; Olson Beal and Hendry 2012; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000; Weiher and Tedin...
2002). My study contributes to the literature on charter school choice by analyzing school personnel decisions as well as their interactions with prospective and current families, understanding these as the supply-side of school choice. Supply-side factors complicate the basic assumption that families can simply choose a school in the same way that they would select any other consumer good (Schneider et al. 2000). Supply-side factors that I identify in this study include the location of a charter school, its marketing image, available transportation, meal affordability, and expectations for involvement. Race and class also shape access to charter schools when personnel give preferences to white and upper-class parents, or high-status parents feel more comfortable in a charter school due to their ability to fulfill its expectations.

In contrast to the predominate focus in the existing literature, my study examines the supply-side of charter school choice. The supply-side includes the processes through which charters recruit families—specifically, the messages charter school personnel create and actions they take that, intended or not, shape student enrollment. Rhetorical focus on family choice obscures the complex signaling that occurs between schools and families both before and after enrollment, an exchange that cannot be captured by one side of the school choice story. Rather than focusing solely on how families choose schools, my findings illustrate how charter school personnel make recruitment decisions in relation to neighborhoods, foster a reputation in reference to other types of schools, and build expectations for parental involvement.

Studying recruitment to charter schools illuminates selection processes. In recently developed or expanded charters, school personnel must actively recruit families with school-aged children to populate the school each year—as a means to attract a new cohort of kindergarten students, to retain current students, and even to draw additional students from district schools. But the ways in which personnel locate charter schools and draw from surrounding areas, market
charter schools, and build expectations for parents shape how families gain access to charter schools and the degree of comfort they feel once they enroll.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I summarize findings across chapters. Second, I outline my contributions to the literature. Third, I discuss how charter school ideals compare to the realities of recruitment. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future research.

Findings across Chapters

Despite their varied organizational structures, histories, and marketing techniques, the three charter schools in this study all tailored their recruitment to the pool of prospective families they wished to attract. Chapter two investigates the extent to which charter school recruitment drew on residential demographics. I find that personnel recruited from predominantly white areas of their districts, beginning with their siting decisions. Even in the community-oriented school, Garrison, personnel worked to appease local white parents by allowing a preference for residing in the neighborhood in which the charter school was located.

Chapter three examines the various recruitment strategies that personnel used to attract prospective families to the three charter schools. The forms of marketing that personnel adopted depended on how the schools were managed and organized as well as what their pool of prospective families needed. Drawing on organizational literature, I find that the network school worked to cultivate an elite image to recruit students, while the community-oriented school worked to be ordinary and serve students through necessary services. In fact, the latter looked more like a traditional public school with full-sized buses delivering children across county lines and offering free meals for breakfast and lunch. Meanwhile, the hybrid charter took on the persona of a fun, resort-like business, enticing families with exciting events and catchy merchandise.
Chapter four examines how charter school personnel recruited and retained prospective families as well, focusing more exclusively on the development and maintenance of expectations between charter school personnel and parents. Despite the schools’ organizational differences, they were markedly similar in the extent to which personnel made efforts to build expectations among prospective parents in order to recruit them. While also a source of pressure for school personnel, keeping families happy was part of how these charter schools retained them.

**Contribution to Theory**

*Protecting White Habitus in Charter Schools*

My findings suggest that charter school recruitment is not a race-neutral or neighborhood-neutral activity. For example, local parents in the predominantly white community surrounding Garrison received a preference in the school’s enrollment lottery. To explain the ways in which a charter school can secure white spaces for parents, I use and extend the concept of white habitus. Prior research on white habitus primarily analyzes people’s individual actions by virtue of their status group memberships rather than how institutions protect and reinforce white habitus.

I find that charter schools can reinforce status distinctions and reproduce inequality by securing white educational spaces. At Garrison, personnel converted their original predominantly white neighborhood school to a charter school, avoiding consolidation with moderately diverse schools in their district. This allowed the charter school to be sited in a predominantly white community, just one mile away from the original neighborhood school. Even after expanding access to families outside the community, particularly other districts that had higher proportions of black students, Garrison’s selection procedures allowed a preference for students whose families currently lived within the neighborhood boundaries. Being a
predominantly white community, this approach to recruitment allowed students from outside the community to fill necessary seats—while also pleasing local white parents who were concerned about how students from outside the district were changing Garrison’s composition and achievement record.

Personnel in the two corporate charter schools, Excellence and Ridgewood, also prioritized the needs of white parents located in close proximity to the school. At Excellence, recruitment decisions such as distributing yard advertisements to current parents and creating a gifted program worked to target local privileged families. At Ridgewood, the use of realtors to distribute school information targeted local white community members. Moreover, the recruitment of a new board member from a white neighboring community also drew on the potential of recruiting white prospective families. Finally, both Excellence and Ridgewood sited in the whitest parts of their districts.

Charter school selection also affects students who do not choose to attend charter schools. Likely left behind in traditional public schools are poor, minority, and lower ability students (Fabricant and Fine 2012; Wells et al. 2005). Charters also redirect important resources from traditional public schools as per-pupil funding follows students from their local schools to charters (Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg 2010). This recreates inequality, potentially exacerbating existing disparities between schools (Logan et al. 2012).

Managing Impressions in Charter Schools

This study demonstrates that charter schools are another site, outside of higher education, to study brand management as a vehicle to promote social selection. Charter school marketing can be considered a form of organization-level impression management. In particular, charter school personnel can use marketing techniques to create a public image of a charter school as
well as to situate a school in relation to others, whether private, traditional public, or other charter schools.

I find that the network charter school in this study, Excellence, marketed to prospective families by comparing the school to private schools, particularly through trying to seem elite and even exclusive. I find that recruitment to the hybrid school, Ridgewood, involved impression management strategies to depict the school as a fun, resort-like business. Personnel in the autonomous charter school, Garrison, compared their services to those offered in traditional public schools as they marketed free meals and transportation to attract families. Personnel at Garrison even critiqued network charters for their lacking services and reliance on advantaged families to patronize their schools.

Parents now experience educational marketing much earlier in their children’s schooling. School branding was once more confined to college commercials, brochures, and mail advertisements. However, parents must now contend with the proliferation of marketing at the K-12 educational level. As charters proliferate, these forces will only intensify.

Meeting Expectations in Charter Schools

I contribute to the literature an examination of social and cultural capital in the charter school context. I find that personnel felt pressured to keep parents happy in order to obtain funding. Parents who knew others with children enrolled were at a distinct advantage because they could carpool at Excellence and Ridgewood as well as gain information from the school more generally at Garrison. However, these findings convey that gaining advantages in the school choice market involved more than simply having access to valued social and cultural capital. It was important that charter school personnel recognized and rewarded their capital.
The charter schools in this study activated and rewarded both social and cultural capital. Across the three schools, personnel built expectations for involvement as a community. These involvement expectations were most pronounced at Excellence, where parents were involved with recruitment efforts. Personnel even rewarded parents via volunteer credit for sharing positive stories on social media. Rewarding positive content allowed personnel to draw on their existing pool of socioeconomically privileged families in order to recruit others with whom current families were already connected. Activating cultural capital, personnel encouraged the volunteerism of socioeconomically advantaged families, particularly mothers. Not only were these parents known around the school and active in the recruitment of other families, but they could also make demands to benefit their children, such as playground equipment, thus rewarding their class-stratified capital. This provided comfort and benefits to families who could meet personnel’s expectations.

Personnel across all three school types expressed concerns about keeping parents happy and pleasing parents as customers in order to obtain needed funding. Even the school with the lowest expectations for involvement, Garrison, felt torn between viewing parents as customers and parents. School personnel at Garrison had to walk a tight line between keeping customers happy and being honest with them about what they could offer their children in terms of disability services. Across the three charter schools, personnel viewed families as customers whose children’s enrollment had implications for funding.

**Charter Schools in the Educational Marketplace**

The introduction of market principles to the realm of public education has been fraught with controversy. Not everyone agrees that it enhances access or serves families equally. Ideally, market ideology places all families on equal footing to choose a school (Chubb and Moe
Support for school choice is based on an assumption of market neutrality. In an ideal open market of educational options, consumers—in this case parents—are treated alike and thus undifferentiated by social background. However, families do not bring the same resources and knowledge about education from which to draw in order to choose a school for their children, nor do schools of choice always provide options for families outside their immediate reach (DiMartino and Jessen 2018; Lareau and Goyette 2014).

Market approaches to schooling, which drive support for school choice, place emphasis on a parent’s ability to choose a suitable school for their child. At the same time, schools are not synonymous to any other consumer good. As Bulman (2004:514) puts it, “choosing a school…is not comparable to choosing a toaster.” Framed a bit differently, Schneider et al. (2000:40) argue that “market approaches work best for the repeated trading of simple, homogenous goods by many buyers and sellers…however, education is a highly complex public good with multiple attributes, and any market for schools is characterized by incomplete information, a limited number of providers, and high transaction costs.” Moreover, market approaches tend to overlook how schools influence enrollment decisions.

**Charter School Ideals and Realities**

Providing children with a quality education is a fundamental way to promote opportunity and reduce the automatic reproduction of class position between generations. Charter schools in particular offer a host of promises. For instance, students can enroll in a charter school in North Carolina as long as they reside in the state. This offers promise to disadvantaged families in particular because enrollment in charter schools does not depend on residential decisions. However, charter schools in this study sited themselves in ways that shaped their recruitment and enrollment by race and class, showing that schools play a critical role in these enrollment
decisions. They can even shape preferences through the development of public images and expectations for involvement.

It is important to separate the ideal of market neutrality with how charter schools actually recruit students. Schools can promote their image without keeping their promises (Lubienski 2005). In this study, even charter schools that purported to support racial and socioeconomic diversity as part of their missions still sited and recruited in predominantly white areas. Since each student’s enrollment promised an allotment of funding, expanding enrollment was the ultimate goal for each of the schools, especially the profit-oriented ones. Schools can also market to persuade rather than inform or empower parents with information (Stewart and Good 2016). In this study, personnel deferred the concerns of parents who sought specialist help for their children to a later date in order to maintain their interest in enrollment and hence their contribution to funding. This places school funding ahead of student well-being.

Matching ideals with the reality of charter schools is an attainable goal. Eckes and Trotter (2007) studied charter schools that crafted their mission around meeting the needs of diverse students and intentionally recruited racially and economically disadvantaged students. In their study, school leaders focused on attracting students who needed the school most, sharing an “adamant desire to provide high-quality public education to students who are most likely to be ill served by the public schools” (Eckes and Trotter 2007:74). This goal was among the first for charter schools but may be neglected today in favor of meeting enrollment and funding goals.

My study illuminates some potential barriers to access, particularly in corporate or network charter schools that lack available information about specialists, transportation, and meals. Despite the schools’ ostensive commitment to diversity, their recruitment approaches and amenities sent distinct messages about what kinds of families belonged at the school, with
consequences along the lines of race, class, and ability. Beyond simply using the word diversity in charter school application materials to the state, the development of charter school policy at all levels should promote the inclusion of disadvantaged student populations.

These issues are especially critical as charters expand in numbers and support. Between 2000 and 2016, charter schools across the U.S. more than doubled, and the percentage of public school students attending charters increased from 1% to 6% (National Center for Education Statistics 2019). Since the cap was lifted on the number of charter schools in North Carolina, the number of charter schools has doubled in the state, with more growth to come (Hinchcliffe 2019). These charter schools continue to grow across a variety of areas—rural and suburban—beyond primarily urban spaces of the past (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, and Rothstein 2005). Future studies should continue to investigate charter school recruitment in non-urban spaces.

**Directions for Future Research**

With the tremendous growth in charter schools over the past decade, it is important to continue to study how personnel target and retain families in other regions, and at what costs. Recruitment to charter schools in other regions, such as the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area of North Carolina, would be fruitful to examine using observational, interview, and content analytic methods similar to this study. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, schools rapidly re-segregated by race and SES once the public schools were declared unitary, and this re-segregation is largely attributed to neighborhood segregation (Mickelson et al. 2018). Understanding the extent to which charter school siting and recruiting relates to neighborhood boundaries in the Charlotte area, particularly its suburbs, would gleam insight about another educational market in the state, where the number of charter schools continues to increase.
Future research should also examine how personnel in other schools of choice make
decisions about recruitment, and with what consequences for student enrollment. A study using
observational and interview data collection methods would shed light on how other schools
market to compete with school alternatives, create expectations for families, and site and recruit
with regard to neighborhood demographics. For example, recruitment to traditional public
schools is one potential context for future inquiry. As marketing of traditional public schools has
become more common, future studies should examine how personnel in traditional public
schools respond to the marketing by competing schools of choice. In particular, a study
incorporating interviews with school personnel and observations of school events might ask: how
do traditional public school personnel situate their services in relation to alternatives like charter
schools? In what ways do they market themselves, and how do their recruitment strategies relate
to neighborhood boundaries?

Branding in private schools would be another fruitful area of inquiry. With the decline in
private school enrollment in recent years (Ewert 2013), how are private schools marketing to
compete with schools of choice? A study of private school marketing could also compare
different types of private schools—in particular, comparing those that are newly formed with
older and more established private schools.

The study detailed in the previous four chapters provides some expectations for future
research directions. Based on qualitative data collected in three charter schools, the findings of
this study suggest that marketing in other schools will likely depend on the local pool of families
whom originators and personnel wish to target. Traditional public schools will likely use needs-
based services to attract families, and private schools might employ more status-oriented
amenities as recruitment tools. Marketing in other schools will also depend on the ways in
which school leaders imagine and create a public image of the school, as well as the extent to
which personnel depict their schools as similar to or distinct from existing models of education—
public, private, and hybrid. However, as with the charter schools in this study, there is likely
variation within school types depending on their histories, organizational styles, and locations,
all of which have shown to influence recruitment for the charter schools in this study.
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## APPENDIX

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