ABSTRACT

SHOULDERS-ROYSTER, ERICA. Traditional Schools and Charter Schools: An Examination of the Impact of Policy Flexibility. (Under the direction of Drs. Lance D. Fusarelli and Michael E. Ward).

School principals often contend that having the ability to be the instructional leaders that they were trained to be hinges in part upon maximizing their decision making latitude. These leaders assert that policy flexibility allows schools to make necessary changes without the bureaucracy that they believe stifles reform, improvement strategies, and performance growth. These leaders often advocate for the necessary flexibility that would afford them the opportunity to lead without restrictions. There are concerns over the flexibility that charters are allowed and that traditional public schools continue to be denied.

The study examined the policy latitude that charter schools receive from the perspective of North Carolina state lawmakers and charter school leaders. The perspectives of these policymakers and principals concerning the potential extension of charter-like flexibility to traditional public schools were explored. Their opinions about the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools were solicited as well. The study determined how traditional school principals, whose low-performing schools had been given policy flexibility, planned to implement this latitude.

The study revealed that a diverse sample of legislators, each of whom served on their respective education policy committees and who represented both sides of the political aisle, uniformly agreed that policy flexibility should be offered to traditional schools. Similarly, a group of current charter school leaders who previously served as principals in traditional school settings concurred that the flexibility available to their current schools should be granted to traditional schools. The study also revealed that the principals appreciated having the flexibility to make the necessary decisions to lead their schools. The study revealed that the legislators and
charter school principals, while largely positive about the impact of flexibility in charter schools, had occasional concerns about the implementation of this discretion in charter schools.

The study included an analysis of survey responses from archival data collected by The Innovation Project through a survey of 31 traditional school principals who were in the restart collaborative. These traditional school leaders had just been granted charter-like flexibility. The analysis of survey responses revealed that these traditional school principals had specific, though somewhat constrained, plans for implementing this newfound flexibility and engaging in innovative practices.

The study concluded with a set of policy recommendations. Key among these recommendations is that the study findings suggest that policymakers should provide traditional public schools with the policy flexibility that is given to charter schools. Additional research is needed to address the study’s limitations.
Traditional Schools and Charter Schools: An Examination of the Impact of Policy Flexibility

by
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DEDICATION

To my children Jo’el, Tyson, Kaleb, Gregory and Taylor: I love you and want you to ALWAYS remember that with God all things are possible. No matter what it looks like, your race, gender or age, you can do anything you set your mind to. I did my BEST to model the importance and value of a great education. To my former, current, and future students: I hope that this inspires you to achieve your goals in life. To the youth I have had the opportunity to serve at Spring Street and Coley Springs: remain committed to God and He will give you the desires of your heart.
After graduating from Paul Laurence Dunbar Vocational High School in Chicago, Illinois, Erica Shoulders-Royster left to attend Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She was at the time the first in her family to graduate from college. Erica joined the eastern North Carolina Corps of Teach for America. She earned her Master’s in School Administration from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She enrolled as a Fellow in North Carolina State University’s first Northeast Leadership Academy cohort. As a NELA Fellow, she earned her second Masters in School Administration. Her educational background includes teaching 4th grade at the lowest performing elementary school in her district and serving as an assistant principal. As a middle school curriculum specialist and program director, she observed and worked with new teachers at every grade level. Erica currently serves as the principal of Franklin County Early College High School, a role in which she was named the 2019-20 Franklin County Schools principal of the year. She remains passionate about this work and is determined to continue the fight to ensure educational equity for all.
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For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. Psalms 30:5

Giving praises to God for the great things he has and continues to do in my life, I acknowledge that this accomplishment would not have been possible without him. To my husband, Marktontio Royster: I love you. Thanks for the many days and nights you covered me in prayer and for the encouragement you provided throughout this process.

I stand on the shoulders of my foreparents, and I do not take this opportunity for granted. To my grandmothers Mattie Lee Johnson and Lucille Elizabeth Staine: you two were giants who sacrificed for family. Thanks for laying a strong foundation. Thank you so much to my parents, Errol and Florence Staine, for setting an example and always believing I could reach my goals and teaching me a strong work ethic. You taught my siblings and me how to be self-sufficient and goal-driven. To my siblings: I love and appreciate you both for your encouragement.

Huge thanks to my Franklin County Early College High School family for their support. I am truly appreciative to lead a great group of people. I share this moment with you and pray that you stop at nothing to achieve your goals.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the policy latitude that charter schools receive from the perspective of state policymakers and from the perspective of charter school principals in northeastern North Carolina. The study also explored the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools and the potential impact of such policy latitude in traditional public schools. Aspects of charter schooling have been previously studied, including the evolution of charter schools, charter student performance, and the impact of charter schools in communities. However, there is a lack of research in North Carolina and nationally about some dimensions of charter schools. Specifically, the research does not adequately address how the flexibility that charter schools receive affects student learning, nor does it sufficiently explore whether traditional schools could benefit from the policy latitude that charters receive. When legislators crafted the original charter school legislation in 1996, House Bill 955, North Carolina they did not have the benefit of insights that have been revealed in the more than 20 years since the enactment of the statute. Gawlik (2009) asserts that “understanding and disseminating information concerning charter schools and accountability issues will contribute appreciably to the dialogue among policymakers as accountability mandates continue to be implemented and studied at the state level” (p. 7).

Public charter schools originated in the late 1980s. Minnesota was the first state to approve a charter school (NCSRC, 2018). Charter schools were originally conceived as laboratories for school innovation (NEA, 2015). By 2006, 40 additional states had enacted charter school legislation and there were a total of 3,617 charter schools operating throughout the United States. The numbers have continued to increase in the ensuing decade (Shober, Manna, &
In 2012-2013, there were over 6,000 charter schools throughout the United States serving nearly 2.3 million students in a school year, with charter school students comprising more than 4% of the total number of public school students in the United States (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013). Student enrollment at public charter schools increased between Fall 2000 and Fall 2015 from 0.4 million to 2.8 million (NCES, 2018). Charter schools continue to play an active role in education reform efforts across the United States. The growth and impact of charter schools have been extensive in northeastern North Carolina. In 2012, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction reported that 48,795 of the state’s students attended charter schools. As of September 2017, there were more than 89,000 students attending 173 charter schools in North Carolina. This number of charter schools is double the number that were in operation when the state’s cap on charter schools was lifted in 2012 (Public Schools First NC, 2017a). In North Carolina, there are specific statutory descriptors of public charter schools that differ from those of traditional public schools.

Charter schools are public schools of choice that are authorized by the State Board of Education and operated by independent, non-profit boards of directors. State and local tax dollars are the primary funding sources for charter schools, and these schools must abide by the rules, including open enrollment, no discrimination in admissions, no association with any religion or religious group, and no charge for tuition. While they operate with freedom from many of the regulations that govern district schools, charter schools are held accountable through the state assessment and accountability system. (NCDPI, 2017, p. 1).

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacted the Charter Schools Act of 1996 (North Carolina General Assembly, 1996, Sec. 5). According to this statute, introduced as House Bill 955, the initial purpose and goals behind charter schools in North Carolina were to:
• Improve student learning;
• Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are identified as at risk of academic failure or academically gifted;
• Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods;
• Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunities to be responsible for the learning program at the school site;
• Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system;
• Hold the schools established under the Article accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results; and
• Provide the schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems. (North Carolina General Assembly, 1996, part 6A)

This framework provides the context that may help explain the reason for the origin of charter schools in North Carolina and the intentions behind their existence.

**Statement of the Problem**

Public charter schools have been in operation for more than three decades. While there is significant bipartisan support for charter education, charter schools have also generated controversy. Sources of the controversy include the policy latitude available to charter schools, loss of student enrollment from traditional public schools to charter schools, decline in funding for traditional public schools because of student transfers to charters, and patterns of resegregation associated with some charter schools (Hui, 2016a; McIntyre, 2016; Paino et al., 2014).
Proponents see charter schools’ freedom from regulation as a source of educational innovation and point to the added benefit of charter schools providing a source of competition that may prompt innovation and improvement in the rest of the public education system. Charter schools are schools of choice, and parents who move their children to charters can also expect that state, federal, and in some cases local funding will follow. This is another area in which charter schools are controversial because they are paid for each student on the roster by the very district from which the student originated; that is, after a transition period in which the state provides subsidies, charter schools receive a tuition payment for each enrolled student paid by the student’s home (or “sending”) districts (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2011, p. 699).

Another area of controversy around charter schools is segregation. According to Nordstrom (2017), research is divided on how charter schools affect segregation, and some studies examining how charter schools are done in North Carolina have determined that they are exacerbating segregation. While these issues merit research, the present study focuses on policy flexibility that exists in charter schools, and the perspectives of state policymakers and traditional school principals.

Charter schools have existed in North Carolina for more than 20 years. Governor Beverly Perdue signed legislation in 2011 to remove the cap of 100 public charter schools statewide with significant and bipartisan legislative support (Dervarics & O’Brien, 2016). Since then, the number of charters in North Carolina has expanded significantly, reaching 173 charter schools serving more than 89,000 students by September 2017 (Public Schools First NC, 2017b). North Carolina public charter schools continue to grow, and tens of thousands of students remain on their wait lists (Dervarics & O’Brien, 2016). Moreover, due to charter school expansion, traditional public schools in a number of states have seen declines in student populations over the
years. Armario (2016), in a discussion of the impact of charter schools, provides some examples: “Kansas City Schools, which once educated more than 70,000 students, now enroll about 15,000. Los Angeles had almost 674,000 students enrolled in district-run schools in 2006-07 school year, compared with about 542,000 in 2014-15, a nearly 20 percent decline” (n.p.).

Some educators, including school administrators in traditional public schools, are concerned that charter schools receive flexibility and policy latitude not afforded to all public schools (Parker, 2009). However, Giersch (2014) notes that some educators urge the enactment of such flexibility for traditional public schools:

Today, both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) state their support for charter schools as opportunities for educators to enjoy the flexibility that would allow them to experiment with methods of teaching and administration that may not be possible in traditional public schools. (p. 655)

Even so, there are differences among the perspectives of educators in traditional public schools and those in charter schools regarding such latitude (Parker, 2009). The autonomy and flexibilities afforded to charters have made charter schools a topic of contention among educators and lawmakers in North Carolina. I heard from colleagues their frustration about charter schools luring capable students and their frustration with the plight of students who come back from charter schools with weaker academic and social skills than they had when they left traditional schools. I have also been in district-level meetings where the director of communications pushed traditional school principals to think about their roles differently. As district leaders, we principals were pushed to think innovatively and not consider ourselves as exclusive providers of P-12 education. Principals need to come to terms with the fact that parents have more choices, so we have to work with them differently to retain their “business.” At the
time of this study, I was in an interesting role in this regard, as I was a founding board member of a local charter school and had personally witnessed the difficulties that can occur when traditional schools lose a large population of their students to charters that have more expansive policy latitude.

Many organizations are critical of what they perceive as inequities in the policy constraints that govern traditional public schools and the more limited ones that govern public charter schools. Public Schools First NC has expressed such concerns from its inception, asserting that, unlike traditional public schools, charter schools in North Carolina:

- Are not governed by elected officials; for profit companies may manage them, and there is no requirement that board members reside in North Carolina;
- Have no curriculum requirements (however, the requirement in some states that charter school students participate in state testing probably limits such curriculum latitude);
- Can modify their academic calendar;
- Have no restrictions on class size;
- Can expand by one grade level beyond what is currently offered without approval from the State Board of Education;
- Are only required to have 50% of their teachers licensed;
- Are not required to hold teacher workdays for professional training and development;
- Are not required to provide students with transportation, and those that do provide transportation are not subject to the same safety standards as traditional public schools;
- Are not required to provide free and reduced-price lunches for students living in poverty;
• Are exempt from public bidding laws that protect how tax dollars are spent, resulting in zero transparency in budgeting since charter schools do not have to report how they spend public money. (Public Schools First NC, 2017b, n.p.)

Proponents of the charter movement assert that these schools foster high student performance, and this contention has been examined by researchers. Examining the total performance of charter schools over various subject matters brought the Center for Research and Education Outcomes (CREDO) to the conclusion that, while some traditional public schools were outperformed by a number of charter schools, the majority performed no better or even worse (O’Brien & Dervarics, 2010). CREDO’s findings contradicted the perspective of some of the original supporters of charter schools who made sweeping claims that these alternative schools would dramatically improve public education.

The aforementioned issues illustrate some of the reasons behind traditional school principals’ concerns about comparisons of policy latitude and performance between traditional public schools and charter schools. According to O’Brien and Dervarics (2010), “Charter schools need more research, oversight, and the true evaluation to fulfill their purpose of being laboratories that traditional public schools can learn from” (p. 2). All these issues are matters of concern; however, my research focused on policy flexibility and its impact. The current study sought to provide some insight to help reduce these deficits in the related body of knowledge.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study examined the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers and charter school principals at multiple school levels regarding the extension of policy charter-like flexibilities to traditional public schools. Traditional public school leaders have argued periodically that their schools should be afforded the policy flexibility available in charter schools (Hui, 2018a;
Kominiak, 2018). Since the inception of such charter schools, however, policymakers have seldom extended such flexibility to traditional public schools (McKinney, 2016). The research further explored the ways that principals of traditional public schools in North Carolina which had been granted policy flexibilities planned use this latitude. Finally, the study ascertained the perspectives of state policymakers and charter school principals at varied school levels about the impact of flexibility in charter schools and the potential impact of such policy latitude in traditional public schools.

Through an interview process, I investigated the perspectives of state policymakers about the potential for traditional schools to receive flexibilities commensurate with those extended to charter schools. This study contributes to the understanding of the impact of the policy latitude afforded to charter schools. The research discerned the perspectives of administrators at multiple school levels about policy flexibility. Additionally, this study explored policymakers’ perspectives on the flexibilities in traditional schools.

By looking at these issues from the vantage point of policymakers and principals, I sought to identify current perspectives regarding flexibilities allowed to charter schools with perspectives about similar flexibilities for traditional public schools. Findings from this study contribute to increased understanding of how traditional school principals in North Carolina who have been extended policy flexibilities intend to or have used this flexibility. This study illuminates the perspectives of traditional public school and charter school principals, as well as state policymakers, regarding the impact of the flexibility that charters have received over time.

This study included analysis of archival data collected from participants who serve as principals at multiple school levels in traditional North Carolina public schools that have been granted charter-like policy flexibility and are participants in The Innovation Project’s restart
initiative. The Innovation Project began on July 1, 2015 (The Innovation Project, n.d.). Additionally, the study included data from interviews with state policymakers through which I gleaned their perceptions about the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools and the extension of these flexibilities to traditional schools. In order to address this study’s research questions, data collected from participant interactions consisted of perspectives of state policymakers and perspectives of public charter school principals in northeastern North Carolina who had previously served as traditional school principals.

**Research Questions**

This study investigated the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers and principals at various school levels regarding policy flexibilities for traditional public schools similar to those available to charter schools. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools?
2. What are the perspectives of northeast North Carolina charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools?
3. What are the perspectives of policymakers about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?
4. What are the perspectives of charter school principals about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?
5. In what ways do principals of traditional public schools in northeast North Carolina that have been granted policy flexibility use this flexibility?
Definitions of Key Terms

The following are terms used throughout the study. The terms include the variables in the research questions. The section also includes terms that are commonly understood, but have a specific, unique meaning within the context of this study.

*Bipartisanship:* Cooperation of two political parties that typically oppose each other. We were taught to agree to disagree so as a society we prefer bipartisanship (Sabato, 2009).

*Charter-like flexibility:* For the purpose of this study, this term is defined as the opportunity to operate a school without strict regulations and bureaucratic requirements, in a fashion consistent with latitudes available within the statutes governing the operation of charter schools.

*Innovation:* New method, idea, or product. “Innovation in terms of a practice’s relative prevalence in a local district context. A charter school is innovative in its use of a practice if the traditional public schools in its local school district are not using that practice” (Preston et al., 2012).

*Public policy:* Statements/actions by the government related to what it intends to do. Public policy is enacted on behalf of the public in response to a problem that exists or is anticipated (Birkland, 2016).

*Policy flexibility, autonomy or latitude:* For this study policy flexibility, autonomy or latitude is defined as freedom of action relative to public policy constraints that ordinarily exist for public entities within a given governmental sphere; i.e., education. Charter schools in many cases are given more autonomy than traditional public schools. They do not adhere to selected state and local regulations because they are schools of choice, which means that, unlike the case for parents whose children attend traditional public schools based upon district assignment
policy, parents make the decision to enroll their children in a charter school (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006).

*Policymakers:* A group of people responsible for making policies. The policymakers intended for this study are, four North Carolina Legislators who have made an impact in the education policies in the state.

*Public charter schools:* “Charter schools are tuition-free, independent public schools exempt from most of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to traditional public schools” (Public Schools First NC, 2019, n.p.). The purpose of charter schools is to improve learning for students, expand opportunities, increase professional development opportunities for teachers and promote innovation in education (North Carolina General Statute 115C-218.14a).

*Restart program:* Program that allows low-performing schools to operate like charter schools. Traditional public schools have the ability to function without having charter status (Pellicer & Stasio, 2018).

*Traditional public school:* “A school or institution controlled and operated by publicly elected or appointed officials and deriving its primary support from public funds” (NCES, 2018).

**Significance of the Study**

While significant research about public charter schools has been conducted, there are gaps in knowledge about the perspectives of North Carolina state policymakers and principals on the impact of the flexibilities they receive. The information gathered in the study is useful to practitioners and state policymakers. The current study expanded the body of research in this area by examining the perspectives of state policymakers and those of traditional and charter school principals in northeastern North Carolina regarding the impact of the policy latitude afforded to public charter schools. This inquiry provides practitioners and North Carolina
policymakers with practical data about charter and traditional schools. Determining if the flexibilities given to charter schools have a significant impact contributes to a better understanding of whether traditional schools would benefit from having the same flexibilities.

The findings of this research are intended to be useful to practitioners and state policymakers, but it is also likely that the results provide the foundation for further inquiry by other researchers. Additional research could be considered due to the deficit of information about charter schools and the impact of the policy latitude they receive. The current study sought to contribute to the discourse around policy flexibility. It is hoped that the results of this study encourage conversation among educators, parents, and lawmakers about the flexibility given to charter schools, and that its findings better inform the discourse that exists among practitioners about the parity in policy latitude between charter and traditional schools. In addition, the results provide greater insight into concerns held by educators in traditional public schools by delving into the question of whether the flexibilities afforded to charter schools are beneficial or detrimental.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction, background, and overview of the study. The research questions are also described. The purpose of the research and the definitions of key terms are a part of this chapter. Chapter 2 begins with a history of charter schools and the theoretical framework that undergirds the study. Chapter 2 also provides a review of pertinent research and professional literature. Chapter 3 presents the research and methodology used in the study. This information includes a description of the study’s approach, research design, methods, procedures, and limitations. Chapter 4 provides
details of the study’s results. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses these results, offers conclusions about the findings, and provides the implications of the study for policy, practice, and future study.

Chapter Summary

There is a need to know more about charter schools. Sarah Sparks of Education Week addressed the lack of research on charter schools during a panel discussion, stating, “We’re just at the point now where we are starting to get regular data…but we have to go above and beyond what we do when covering educational research” (Felton, 2017, n.p.). Obtaining the viewpoints and perspectives of school principals at different school levels who currently work in charter and have traditional public school experience, as well as those from state policymakers who make the critical decisions to allow flexibility and other choices of significant impact, can create opportunities for authentic dialogue among state policymakers and educators in northeastern North Carolina. This study can encourage discourse about whether traditional schools should be provided similar latitude and given the same guidelines as neighboring charter schools. School districts in North Carolina are making such requests. Hui (2016b) reported that, “Wake County is among the school systems that have long sought permission from state legislators to operate their own charter schools or allow their schools to have the same flexibility as charters” (n.p.). Thus, it was interesting to see how the new flexibility that recently became available to a very limited number of traditional schools might impact students, staff, and school communities.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Introduction

This chapter begins with background information about charter education and a description of the current policy environment in which the study occurred. This section includes the history and intent behind charter schools. The chapter then proposes a theoretical framework, followed by a review of pertinent research and professional perspectives regarding the study purpose, research questions, and related variables.

Background and Policy Context

Currently, charter schools are a topic of considerable interest in education. McCabe and Vinzant (1999) contended that “charter schools are one of the newest, most frequent, and controversial approaches to introducing parental choice and competition in educational systems” (p. 361). Hassel (1999) went so far as to call them “a national phenomenon” (p. 2). Some experts claim that competition and innovation lead to better student outcomes and higher achievement (Bodilly & Li, 2009; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Ertas, 2013). Others argue that no such correlation exists and point to evidence that charter schools do not improve student performance beyond that which occurs in traditional public schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Bodilly & Li, 2009). This chapter looks more closely at the issues underlying arguments in the literature that presents varied perspectives of state policymakers and principals on policy flexibility in charter schools. The focal issue of this study—that is, the question of the perspectives of principals and state policymakers about extending to traditional public schools policy flexibilities available to charter schools—is also examined in detail.
Charter School History and Early Aims

Charter schools originated three decades ago. The first charter school, City Academy Charter School in St. Paul, Minnesota, was established in 1992, and “when it opened its doors… [it] was groundbreaking, the first school of its kind in the country” (Jacobs, 2015, p. 2). As Bulkley (2011) writes:

Relatively autonomous, charter schools operate under a charter – or contract – issued by a public entity (called the authorizer) such as a local school board, public university, or state board of education. The authorizer does not manage the school, but rather is responsible for oversight. The specifics of the authorizing process vary considerably from state to state and authorizer to authorizer. In theory, these contracts, usually lasting three to five years, provide school operators greater autonomy from state and district regulations and oversight than afforded a district-run public school. In exchange for this autonomy, charter schools are subject to enhanced accountability that requires them to prove they are "worthy" of contract renewal. Another distinctive feature of charter schools is that students are not assigned to them, but instead attend by choice; when more families choose a charter school than there are spaces available, children generally are selected by lottery. (p. 111)

In North Carolina, as in other states, the original intent of the charter school legislation first enacted in 1996 was to expand school choice and enhance learning opportunities. Public Schools First NC (2017a) notes that one intent of the original bill was to provide “increased choice and learning opportunities, with special emphasis on expanding learning experiences for students identified as at risk of academic failure or academically gifted” (p. 1). Improving instruction by fostering a culture for promoting creativity in teaching methods, sharing the effective methods and practices with the traditional school settings, and promoting new professional growth
advancements for educators additional aims of charter school (Public Schools First NC, 2017a, 2017b). In giving charter schools the freedom to experiment and innovate as intended, the law provided them with broad exemptions from the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to traditional public schools. The idea was that providing charter schools with policy flexibility would work to improve student outcomes and better meet the needs of the children served (Public Schools First NC, 2017a, 2017b).

Policy-Based Goals of Charter Schools

State policymakers, school administrators, and district leaders have all made an impact on charter schools. Leithwood et al. (2004) remark:

There seems little doubt that both district and school leadership provides a critical bridge between most educational-reform initiatives, and having those reforms make a genuine difference for all students. Such leadership comes from many sources, not just superintendents and principals. (p. 12)

Besides leaders in the field of education, Giersch (2014) notes that “the federal government has also played an important role in the rapid diffusion of charter school laws across the United States” (p. 656). For example, the George W. Bush administration’s reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 addressed several elements associated with charter schools, such as flexibility and parent choice, when identifying goals for improving the education of the nation’s children:

- *Increase accountability for student performance:* States, districts, and schools that improve achievement will be rewarded, while failure will be sanctioned. Parents will know how well their child is learning and that schools are held accountable for their effectiveness with annual state reading and math assessments in Grades 3 through 8.
• **Focus on what works**: Federal dollars will be spent on effective research-based programs and practices, with funds targeted to improve schools and enhance teacher quality.

• **Reduce bureaucracy and increase flexibility**: Additional flexibility will be provided to states and school districts, and flexible funding will be increased at the local level.

• **Empower parents**: Parents will have more information about the quality of their child’s school. Students in persistently low-performing schools will be given choice. (No Child Left Behind, 2002, p. 8)

No Child Left Behind addressed the value of more choice for parents and students, as well as greater flexibility for schools and local districts. This indicates that the federal government recognized a need for flexibility for schools and parental choice, both of which would be augmented through charter schools.

President Barack Obama’s administration was similarly supportive of charter schools. In 2010, North Carolina received a $400 million Race to the Top grant from the Obama Administration, promising in its application to eliminate the state cap of a maximum of 100 charter schools (Guo, 2015). This limitation was eliminated by legislation passed in 2011; the state board is responsible for approving additional charter schools. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2017), there are 173 charter schools; this represents an increase of more than 50% since 2012, when the cap was lifted.

While charter schools have expanded in number and have arguably expanded the statutory intent of expanded parental choice, there is still not a complete answer as to whether other purposes of charter schools have been achieved or whether the flexibility afforded to them has yielded what was envisioned at the origin of charter schools. This is significant because many North Carolina legislators were resistant to releasing the cap on the number of charter
schools and once it was released, a significant number of new charter schools were opened. According to Public Schools First NC (2017a), there were 173 charter schools as of September 2017, double the number of schools that existed when the cap was lifted in 2012.

Despite the fact that charter schools have been embraced by politicians and the public, there is disagreement as to whether the flexibility they receive has yielded what was envisioned at their origin. Charter schools are given flexibilities that traditional schools do not have. Zimmer et al. (2009) point out:

Critics worry that charter schools perform no better (and, too often, worse) than traditional public schools, that they may exacerbate stratification by race and ability, and they harm the students left in traditional public schools by skimming away financial resources and motivated families. (p. xi)

Supporters of charter flexibility, on the other hand, assert that flexibility is necessary to ultimately achieve the original promises of innovation and improved achievement. “Reformers must remember that too much organizational control can deny principals the very flexibility they need to do their job effectively” (Gawlik, 2008, p. 800).

**Contemporary Policy Context**

Research studies take place within a span of time. It is useful to examine the statutes, regulations, and programs that help to shape the context in which the inquiry occurs. Public policies, in this case education policies, impact the phenomena under consideration in such a study. This subsection examines the policy context in which my study occurred.

My study occurred during the first few of years of implementation of the 2015 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was dubbed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Flexibility is the focus of this study. In 2018,
the New Teacher Center (2018) created a policy brief acknowledging the ways schools could improve by capitalizing on features of ESSA. This brief addressed how traditional schools could leverage federal flexibility through Titles I, II, and IV through “evidence-based” strategies.

There is a trend of identifying low-performing schools and replacing the entire staff, contracting the school out to private management, and allowing the state to take over or reopen the school as a charter school. These are just some of the examples of how throughout the country and in North Carolina lawmakers and educators are making attempts to change schooling.

The United States 114th Congress met and addressed education in 2015. They reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Several general provisions were addressed. Two in particular are relevant to the present inquiry. They are Title IV, which addresses 21st Century Schools and the expanding charter schools, and Title V, which supports provisions to ensure that state innovation and local flexibility is permitted. Charter schools were seen at the federal level as a way to improve education in the United States, and through this form of schooling, students are given more opportunities. States are given autonomy in funding; transferability is allowed at the state and local educational agencies. Through this provision, states and school districts have the flexibility to impact schooling without the constraints to which they were accustomed. These provisions allow them to have state and local control to operate as they see the need for the population they serve.

North Carolina’s ESSA plan referenced charter schools several times and noted the total of 160 charter schools at the time the plan was signed. The state education agency further pointed out that charter schools have their own wiki page and liaison who provides assistance throughout the state (NCDPI, 2017). Overall, the state of North Carolina ESSA plan did not go
into great detail about charter schools. The plan was created to provide information on student support and the role of the charter school in providing support. “States are addressing charter schools in their ESSA plans in a variety of ways, with some not referencing charters at all and others including specific charter provisions” (Thomsen, 2017, p. 1).

The topic of charter schools has entered the mainstream popular media. A documentary entitled Waiting for Superman (Birtel et al., 2010) addressed the state of education in the United States in 2010. The movie conveyed the many ways that the filmmakers concluded traditional public education is failing. This movie depicted this message through the lenses of four youth. One of the students, Anthony, was dependent on his number being chosen in a lottery to attend a boarding charter school. The producer and director showed how Anthony and his grandmother awaited the results of the lottery that would enable him to earn a seat at a nearby charter school. The charter schools provide a “lottery” based way of selecting students to demonstrate a need of this form of education and show fairness for enrollment. Anthony realized in the fifth grade that, in order to succeed, he needed something better than what he was destined to receive at the Washington, D.C. high school to which he was assigned. The producers and director based this documentary around the success this young man may have because of the opportunities that existed for him in attending The Seed Public Charter School, which is the first urban public boarding school in the country. The irony, as suggested by the filmmakers, is that he lives in the nation’s capital, where one would think high-quality opportunities are available; instead, the school he is zoned to attend, John Philip Sousa Junior High School, is considered to be one of the worst-performing schools in the country. The depictions of both charter school and traditional public school education in this piece serve to undergird public support for the expansion of charter education.
Charter school policies vary throughout the country, but policy latitude is a common theme in statutes governing the creation and management of such schools. Practitioners and advocates assert that such flexibility is needed in traditional public schools as well (Granados, 2018). In addition to the flexibility associated with public charter school operation, legislators are increasingly and, in some instances, even grudgingly, addressing the issue of the expansion of charter-like flexibility to traditional public schools (Marchello, 2017). North Carolina can now expand flexibility to traditional public schools (Thomsen, 2017, p. 1). The state’s Restart Project allows low-performing traditional public schools to apply for charter-like discretion.

The Rowan-Salisbury School District, taking advantage of recent legislation, kicked off a system of renewal in which the entire district operated with charter-like flexibility. Charter schools have existed in North Carolina since House Bill 955 in 1996. However, this is the first time since 1996 that the same flexibility to charter schools will be granted to traditional public schools on a district-wide basis. While the debate about the extension of charter-like flexibility to traditional public schools dates back to the early days of charter schools, the actual expansion of charter-like flexibility to traditional schools in North Carolina has only just begun to emerge within the last few years. In 2015, 22 superintendents throughout the state were successful in their advocacy for such policy latitude to expand innovation in their school districts (Hitchcliffe, 2018a). Such initiatives by superintendents support the notions that charter school policies are ever-evolving and that district leaders find flexibilities appealing.

Nationally and in North Carolina, charter school enrollment is steadily increasing. Researchers from the Center for Education Reform (2017) explained: “Slow to grow at first, charter school enrollment increased rapidly at the turn of the century, though it has leveled off in recent years” (p. 31). North Carolina currently has 185 charter schools, including two online
schools serving over 100,000 children (Public Schools First NC, 2019). Although the number of charter schools in the state is increasing, there remains the argument from traditional public school supporters that state leaders need to require more accountability from charter schools regarding how money is being spent (Hui, 2018b). In many instances, however, they are also eager, as noted above, to see the same flexibilities extended to their own schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study drew from the conceptual framework articulated by Finnegan (2007) in his theory of Charter School Autonomy. Charter schools are given autonomy to function and operate. Finnegan (2007) observed that charter schools have more autonomy and flexibility than traditional public schools. According to the theory, autonomy or flexibility leads to positive results or outcomes. It is not unrealistic, he asserted, to propose the relationship. Finnegan’s (2007) theory focused on two primary components, autonomy and accountability. Charter school policies are based on the underlying assumptions about school improvement that arise from these two constructs. Flexibility in a charter context, he asserted, will generate innovation and better outcomes (Finnegan, 2007). Kahlenberg (2011) noted, “In the initial bargain, charter schools were given more flexibility to experiment than traditional public schools, but they were supposed to be held accountable for raising student achievement” (p. 1). This is what charter innovators were anticipating and is thus the rationale for the charter school experiment.

In Bulkley and Wohlstetter’s (2004) book, Lubienski provided a section on the theory of innovation and practice of charter schools. He referenced the autonomy and flexibility that leads to innovation and positive impact. The theory that flexibility and autonomy led to positive results or, in Lubienski’s explanation, led to innovation, further supported Finnegan’s hypothesis.
“Many reformers argue against a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model for education and believe in a market-style mechanisms” (Lubienski, 2003, p. 396).

Finnegan’s and Lubienski’s theories asserted that autonomy and flexibility lead to positive results or outcomes. In the early years of charter schools, federal education legislation affirmed charter education and included the following statement: “The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) includes the provision that states may use funds designed for overall school reform to promote public charter schools” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 333). This supported the notion that investment was made without stipulations or guidance on how charter schools would be marketed to the public. This endorsement was imbedded in that era’s iteration of ESEA:

Likewise, the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), includes a new federal grant program to support the design and implementation of charter schools, which was funded at 6 million dollars for fiscal year 1995. (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 333)

The funding permitted further demonstrates that flexibility existed early on for charter schools (Wohlstetter et al., 1995). These authors further confirmed that since the inception of charter schools, the belief was that if these innovative schools received autonomy, then they are destined for higher performance. This further supported the theory that the early assumptions were that flexibility leads to better outcomes.

The theory has been tested. Highlights from such research included the following studies. In a 2011 study in Boston, flexibility was given to charter schools and the student outcomes that were reported were positive (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2011). Flexibility in student attendance, a no excuse mentality with extended school hours, and some Saturday school through the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) led to positive student outcomes (Cheng et al., 2014). Another
example is the flexibility of the charter school law in New Mexico that allows a school to design a growth and evaluation plan aimed at helping teachers and students (Radoslovich et al., 2014). The flexibility allowed these educators to create a new professional development plan that included improvement objectives, action steps, and desired outcomes. They believed that the ability to measure teacher effectiveness differently and the creation of an evaluation process that inspires teachers led to positive results in student outcomes. There was an increase of 25% in teacher performance as measured by the increase in teachers’ progress towards meeting their professional development goals. These were classroom data collected for New Mexico’s licensure dossiers and National Board certification portfolios (Radoslovich et al., 2014).

Through these and other studies, participants and researchers were able to learn and draw conclusions about their perceptions of the impact flexibility has on charter schools. The studies also provided the opportunity to examine Finnegan’s assertion about a relationship between policy flexibility and performance acceleration. That said, a word of caution appeared to be in order. The information gathered in each of the studies cited was derived from a particular demographic or focused on one geographic area. The researchers and participants did not share much of the conflict or unsuccessful results. The results were provided from one perspective of data gathering. In the case of the teacher performance analysis in New Mexico, there was not much information provided on how flexibility may have hindered teachers’ or students' progress. Although this may not have been the case, one wonders if the information was skewed to fit the researcher’s perspectives.

I intended to discern from participants whether they perceive that there is a relationship between flexibility and outcomes. I hoped to determine if such policy latitude leads to improved outcomes by means of gathering and analyzing the perspectives of policymakers and charter
school principals about the impact of policy flexibility. I planned to determine from these participants how flexibility may have affected outcomes.

I also planned to determine the perspectives of policymakers and charter school principals about whether the policy flexibility available to charters should be extended to traditional public schools. Some assert that, if flexibility is good for public charter schools, then such flexibility is warranted in traditional public schools. I aimed to determine how the theory supports the inquiry by using information that is now available from a group of traditional schools in North Carolina. At the time of my study, there were 83 traditional public schools in which approval to have charter-like flexibility had been granted. This was presumably altering how some traditional schools were operating or at least planning to operate. This newfound freedom gave traditional schools participating in The Innovation Project an opportunity to operate in a charter-like fashion. This program allows traditional public schools the opportunity to receive a charter-like flexibility (The Innovation Project, n.d.). In light of this, Finnigan’s (2007) theory also undergirded the present study’s inquiry into the ways that traditional public school principals were applying this flexibility.

**Pertinent Research and Professional Perspectives**

The following sections address the literature related to the charter school operation, with a focus on policy latitude and charter school impact. These sections contrast charters and traditional schools, including operational aspects of these schools. Subsequent sections address policy flexibility, innovation, and the impact of such latitude.

**Contrasting Charter Schools and Traditional Schools**

“Although they vary considerably by state, all laws attempt to incorporate elements of flexibility and accountability” that are not likewise afforded to traditional public schools (Shober
et al., 2006, p. 567). That is, charters avoid many regulations and policy constraints faced by traditional schools, and many experts and advocates believed that this latitude is beneficial in giving parents more autonomy and choice, allowing for innovation in education, boosting competition, and improving student achievement (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Wells et al., 1998). The next section examines these oft-touted benefits of charter schools as discussed in the extant literature.

**Autonomy, Student Assignment, and Choice**

Charter schools have autonomy in being able to act with significant authority and with relatively few requirements for reporting to departments of education. “For instance, charter schools aren’t bound by the state’s school calendar law and have more flexibility to spend money from the state, and all of the teachers don’t have to be licensed” (Hui, 2018a, n.p.). Theorists had claimed that organizational efficiency may be enhanced by giving professionals increased autonomy through more decision-making power in daily activities (Luthans, 1992), and toward this end, charter schools support such an increase in professional autonomy (Huber et al., 1995). “Charter schools have historically been given more flexibility than traditional public schools because they are meant to be laboratories for innovation” (Hui, 2018b, n.p.).

Charter schools have greater freedom in how they selected students. Unlike traditional schools, charter schools are not required to admit every student who lives near the school or every student who applies. In many instances, enrollment consisted of a parent completing an application and entering their child in a lottery with hopes of admittance (School Finance 101, 2012). While charter schools are forbidden from discrimination in student enrollment, this form of autonomy allows charter schools to be selective in how they design and facilitate student admissions processes (Hassel, 1999).
Another distinctive feature of charter schools is the autonomy and choice afforded to parents and students—students are not assigned to charter schools, but instead attended by their own choice, as well as that of their parents. Parents wanted their children to attend a school that is safe and offers an excellent education, but in the United States, where families live can determine the kind of education their children receive. As Sauter (2012) notes:

Wealth appears to have an outsized effect on education at the local level. Residents that live in wealthy school districts have among the best schools in the nation based on graduation rates, test scores and independent ratings of academic success. (n.p.)

Charter schools, therefore, provided parents with the choice of another option for schooling their children. Renzulli and Evans (2005) comment on this element in remarking, “Charter schools add another option to the school choice menu, one that helps parents avoid residential mobility costs and private school fees” (p. 400). These statements highlighted the charter school policy of providing a free education with options and choices for parents.

Parents must take the time to apply for their child to attend a charter school, an autonomous admission process driven by the choice of the parents and the student. When space availability is exceeded by the number of charter school applicants, then students are typically selected via lottery process (Bulkley, 2011; Frankenberg et al., 2010). This method of student enrollment in which parents apply for their children to attend and may face the odds of a lottery when demand exceeds availability is an example of the autonomy provided to charter schools. It is also an example of the autonomy given to charter schools to design a student admissions process that works for them. This autonomy is rarely afforded traditional public schools outside of magnet schools or occasional public school choice programs. Similarly, the opportunity to
choose a public school is rarely granted to parents of students in traditional public schools (Imberman, 2011).

**Innovation in Education**

Charter school constituents value their flexibility and how it allowed them some freedom from the rules and regulations of the state education agency and the local school board. In fact, the correlation between charter schools’ autonomy and facilitating innovative education with positive outcomes has been frequently asserted. According to Peshek (2017), charters can be innovative because they break away from the one-size-fits-all model of the traditional public schools. Gawlik (2008) claims, “Local autonomy is a prime factor affecting school performance because it leads to the development of effective school practices” (p. 786). Finnegan (2007) similarly explains that, “The theory of charter schools assumes that this combination of autonomy and accountability will allow educators to implement innovative ideas and practices” (p. 504). Going even further, Abdulkadiroğlu et al. (2011) suggest that charter schools’ innovation may influence improvement throughout public education, writing, “Proponents see charter schools' freedom from regulation as a source of educational innovation, while also providing competition that may prompt innovation and improvement in the rest of the public school system” (p. 699). These researchers emphasized the strong belief that autonomy helps educators create innovative and effective practices.

**Increased Competition**

Though they operate differently, charter schools still competed with traditional schools. Researchers have noted that “the emergence of charter schools as a type of institutional reform provides an important opportunity to test the systemic effect of competition on public school students” (Booker et al., 2008, p. 124). As Booker et al. (2008) point out, “The ability of charters
to differentiate their product from that offered by traditional public schools, while charging the same zero tuition as public schools makes charters potentially strong competitors for existing public schools in the market for students” (p. 124). On the other hand, Imberman (2011) points to one negative impact of the competition between charters and traditional public schools for educational funds:

While proponents argue that charters provide innovative education to students and spur traditional public schools to improve through competitive pressures, opponents argue that charters drain the public school system of funding, leaving those who cannot enter the charters worse off. (p. 1)

**The Impact of Flexibility in Charter Schools**

In her 1989 undergraduate thesis at Princeton University, founder of Teach for America Wendy Kopp declared that “One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education” (Kopp, 2001, p. 174). Charter schools were envisioned as one mechanism through which this opportunity might be fulfilled. Rationales for the creation of charters were to serve at-risk and academically gifted students, encourage creativity, provide professional development opportunities for educators, and share best practices with traditional schools (Public Schools First NC, 2017a, 2017b). Thus, charter schools came into existence with the goals of providing choice for parents, improving performance in the educational system, and enabling innovation.

Charter schools, at the inception of the reform movement, were established based on the assumption that autonomy and flexibility would positively impact the institution of public education as a whole. It was presumed that charter schools would employ the expanded latitude in policy to innovate. An additional justification for the expanded latitude was that models of
innovation in charters would be adopted in traditional public schools, the so-called incubator effect. All of this was ultimately intended to improve student achievement. Finally, but equally important, it was clearly anticipated that charters would enhance parent choice in the selection of schools for their children.

**Student achievement in charter schools.** Some argued that factors in charter schools, including flexibility in choosing curriculum and hiring teachers, positively affect student achievement, while others disagree. Studies have shown that the competition that charter schools foster with traditional public schools has, in some cases, led to increased student achievement (Eastman et al., 2016). However, in other cases, studies have indicated that student achievement has stayed the same or even worsened (Carnoy et al., 2005). The Economic Policy Institute calls it a “noisy controversy” (Carnoy et al., 2005, p. 1) when comparing charter and traditional schools’ effectiveness. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in highlighting concerns about charter education, focused on 2004 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that indicated that charter schools had lower test scores and achievement levels for students in Grade 4 and Grade 8 (Carnoy et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2004).

Although not an advocate of charter schools per se, Lubienski (2003) asserted that the atmosphere of “choice, competition, and innovation” is necessary for improving student academic outcomes” (p. 397). Likewise, Preston et al. (2012) claimed that competition inspires more innovation in schools to eventually “lead to better student outcomes” (p. 1). The National Charter School Resource Center (2015) reviewed five major studies of student achievement, and their findings were summarized as follows:

Taken together, these five recent studies paint a picture of charter school students who perform as well as or better than the comparison group, although there are some differences
in performance by sub-group. Student performance in charter schools is, in general, higher than student performance in the comparison group for three groups that have historically lagged behind: low-income students, urban students, and students with low prior achievement levels. (p. 5)

These statements supported the notion that, with the help of the flexibilities they are granted, charter school educators can effectively improve student achievement. Indeed, charter school advocates argued that there has been a positive impact on student performance since the emergence of charter schools (Booker et al., 2008; NCSRC, 2015). These assumptions drove the charter school movement and provide a compelling reason for their existence.

However, the results of several studies point to a range of performance measured that contradict researchers’ claims of increased achievement by charter school students. For example, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) conducted a charter school study and reported, “Estimates indicate that North Carolina students who transfer into charter schools make smaller gains than they would have had they remained in traditional public schools, even when the charter schools they attend have been operating for five years” (p. 85). Palmer and Gau (2005) shared further insight, asserted that “A country that has focused closely on how charter schools are doing now needs to pay greater heed to those who authorize them” (p. 357). Researchers have cited the lack of evidence indicating that charters improved student outcomes, while some go as far as to claim the flexibilities in curriculum and teacher certification lead to worse student outcomes. Contentions like these, which have claimed that flexibilities allowed to charter schools lead to lower student outcomes, segregated student populations, and financial hardships for traditional public schools, are concerned. Thus, charter schools have been a point of contention, with mixed research on the achievement of their students and many experts questioning these schools’
effectiveness in improving student performance at all (CREDO, 2017; Nelson et al., 2004; O’Brien & Dervarics, 2010; Woodworth et al., 2015; Woodworth et al., 2017).

**Innovation.** The original intent of charter flexibility was, among other things, to prompt innovation, to serve as an incubator for reform. “For decades, charter schools have been billed as ‘laboratories of innovation,’ conjuring up images of teachers and administrators brainstorming and testing cutting-edge instruction that – if proven successful – could deliver salvation to urban education” (Vaznis, 2016, p. 1). However, this is not what appeared to be happening in charter schools. Vaznis (2016) continues to assert that “while some charters are innovative, others simply strive to build high-quality schools using existing methods, and thus do not necessarily invent new practices (p. 1).

Eastman et al. (2017) asserted that the prevailing logic in much of the education policy agenda of the Bush and Obama administrations was to change public education offerings resulting in competition increase, causing “innovative” and “flexible” public school system. The United States Department of Education indicates that the first public charter school opened in 1992 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Shanker (1988) believed his proposal for charter schools “could drive widespread reform, leading to, as he put it, thousands and thousands of schools in this country where people are building a new type of school that reaches the overwhelming majority of our students” (as cited in Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 21). Public schools were designed to serve communities (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Charter schools were created to provide choice with the intent of being innovative. Charter school advocates consistently opined that flexibility and innovation would provide ways to turn around chronically-failing schools in which the standard mode of educational provision is not working (Jha & Buckingham, 2015).
Some high-impact charter schools created a “no excuses” schools policy for students. These schools focus on reading and math, firm discipline program, extended school day and year and regular testing (Jha & Buckingham, 2015). “Nationally recognized charter school organizations, such as KIPP, have gained acclaim for academic success in predominantly poor, majority minority urban areas” (Reckhow et al., 2014, p. 225).

According to Lubienski (2003), charter school innovations include giving parents options with technology, being deliberate about messaging around safety for students, intimate and small size classes, and providing a diverse curriculum that allows options to student grouping. These are some of the many innovative practices that charter schools have implemented over the years.

Research suggests that charters have not fulfilled the original premise that flexibility would result in innovation. According to Preston et al. (2012), the strong focus of charter schools on accountability, being flexible, and having localized control has made them a viable choice for families as they decide upon the education of their children. Preston et al. (2012) asserted that “innovation is difficult to define and quantify, especially with regard to differences between charter and district-run schools, but it ultimately implies a change in established way of doing things” (as cited in Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 7). Fitzgerald (2015) also asserted that extant studies do not provide compelling evidence that charter schools are more innovative and “even former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has criticized them for looking like traditional public schools” (p. 7).

**Parental choice.** Charter schools were created, in large part, to expand parental choice; they have arguably delivered on this aim. Some have asserted this may be the only one of the many promises made in support of charter schools to which they have adhered. Advocates of charter school believed that, in this day and age of choice, parents deserve to have the
opportunity to choose where their children are taught. President George W. Bush was quoted in his presidential campaign as saying, “Let poor people choose their schools, like rich people do” (as quoted in Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013, p. 21).

The 2017 Gallup Poll on Americans’ views on schools showed some increase in overall satisfaction with the education system. The report indicated that 43% were satisfied with the quality of K-12 education in 2016 compared to 47% in 2017 (Swift, 2017). Parental and public perceptions about school choice were more favorable; according to Schultz’(2018) report, 63% support choice. Thus, the support for charter schools rose and enrollment has increased.

In recent years, parents have exercised the option to choose traditional public, charter, or private schools. This is apparent in significantly increased charter school enrollments following the lifting of many states’ caps on charter expansion. Charter schools originated in the early 1990s and now are in 42 states and the District of Columbia. Six thousand charter schools now enroll about 5% of public school children (Archbald & Hurwitz, 2017). More and more parents are choosing charter schools to educate their children. In North Carolina, charter school enrollment rose to 100,000 for the first time in the 2017-2018 school year; this is a gain of more than 8,600 students from this time last school year (Hitchcliffe, 2018b).

Although many more parents are choosing charter education, the question often remains as to whether they are receiving what they expected. “Critics argue that charter schools do not appear to produce positive, competitive effects on achievement in traditional public schools” (RAND, 2009, p. 2). The report further asserts the following:

Proponents predict that these schools will produce numerous important benefits, such as expanded educational options for students, increased innovation by educators, improved student achievement, and healthy competitive pressure for traditional public schools.
Opponents predict that they will result in serious negative effects, such as increased racial and ethnic stratification and drawing the highest-achieving students away from traditional public schools. (p. 1)

While the assertions of proponents and detractors may not be true across all charter schools, it is clear that charter schools have brought about much debate and discussion about their roles and whether or not they are improving education. The RAND report shares that research did find some positive effects of charter schools. The trend seemed to be that African American students are more likely to transfer to charters and that charter schools are not skimming the highest performing students or treating White students preferentially. This report also shared that charters do not appear to be outperforming traditional public schools in terms of academic results.

**Unanticipated/negative impacts.** Charter schools, while lauded by many, have been the recipients of significant criticism. Although some information about charter schools is limited, critics and advocates both provide information to validate their arguments. Teacher unions and other organizations that oppose charters contend that an increase in charters is simply another form of privatizing public education (Reckhow et al., 2014). Even after the many years that charters have been in existence, there remains to be a lack of knowledge, in many instances, about which organization is being held accountable for charter school operations (Palmer & Gau, 2017). Each state handles charter schools differently. Eastman et al. (2017) wrote:

> Cast as the next civil rights frontier, and wielding a discourse of choice, flexibility, and innovation, charter schools claim to triumph where public schools have failed at closing the achievement gap between minoritized students and their White, middle class counterparts. (p. 62)
However, Palmer and Gau (2017) asserted that scrutiny that focuses purely upon charter school performance and business practices is no longer sufficient; states should consistently examine the nature of organizations that are managing these schools.

The goals of charter schools and, in some instances, traditional school districts include providing choices for families that would not otherwise have an alternative to the traditional public school available to them. Charter and free schools aim to extend choice to students who currently have few options, arguably forming part of the set of solutions through which equitable access to choose becomes possible (Jha & Buckingham, 2015). One of the obvious negative impacts charter schools have on public education is thwarting the intent of the decisions in the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education litigation. These landmark Supreme Court decisions declared that racial segregation of students is unconstitutional. Critics argue that charter schools undermine the work of this and other major past court rulings. Although Brown vs. Board of Education, the Bilingual Education Act (BEA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are “separate products of struggle in historical context, each reflects the belief that all public schools must share fundamental commitments to the ethics of inclusion” (Eastman et al., 2017, p. 61).

Charter school flexibility, whether intentionally or otherwise, often allowed these schools to exclude certain populations of students. An example of this occurred when a charter school opened and declined to offer transportation or lunch to students. This causes parents of poor children to consider whether they can endure the financial burden of transportation and meals to their children (Stuckenberg, 2014). Additionally, some charters lack special education services, and this discourages parents of students with special needs from enrolling their children in
charter schools due to fear of children not receiving resources needed to support special services needed. Miron (2014) shares:

There is considerable evidence that charter schools actively discourage families from enrolling disabled children and counsel them to leave when they do manage to enroll. The largest study on this topic was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, with the report published in 2000. That study found a pattern of charter schools systematically counseling out students with disabilities rather than making accommodations and providing the required services and supports; administrators at one-fourth of the charter schools in the study reported having advised parents that the school was not a good fit for their disabled children. (p. 58)

Charter schools have been touted as a public policy asset through which innovations enabled through policy flexibility might help to make traditional schools better. Current research does not indicate that charter schools cause traditional public schools to improve through competition, but these schools do “offer expanded educational options to students and the opportunity for greater innovation by educators” (RAND, 2009, n.p.).

**Giving Traditional Schools Charter-Like Flexibility**

One of the intentions behind charter schools in North Carolina was to ensure an “excellent education” of the sort envisioned by Kopp (2001) by giving educators the freedom to teach students with limited guidelines, thereby making charters a professional development resource to assist traditional schools in raising student achievement. Toward this end, charter schools have been given considerable policy latitude.

Gawlik (2008) writes, “Charter schools encompass elements of traditional public schools, such as universal access (although some educators recognize their limited enrollment of special
education students) and public funding, and private schools, such as choice, autonomy, and flexibility” (p. 783). Nonetheless, charters were created with flexibility and creativity in mind, and as a result, “have more autonomy and flexibility than traditional public schools” (Finnegan, 2007, p. 505). While charter schools have the autonomy to operate much as they choose, with principals and teachers having increased powers to make decisions, traditional public schools are comparably limited in independence as well as flexibility. Traditional public school educators recognized this inequality of policy latitude afforded to charter schools, arguing that such flexibilities result in an absence of accountability. As Finn et al. (2001) write, “Charter schools are not truly accountable. Only when they become notorious does anything happen to them. Practically none actually gets closed down for academic malfeasance” (p. 155).

Traditional public schools could be given the same policy latitude as those provided to charter schools. Applying the same policy logic and theory of action, traditional schools would arguably glean some of the same benefits, such as flexibility with the budget, curriculum, and other latitude, that are seen in charters. Charter school-like flexibility involved discretion over multiple operational activities, including selecting the curriculum and making personnel decisions. To test the flexibility, 19 North Carolina schools deemed low-performing were approved to operate with the flexibility usually given to charter schools, including the freedom to decide how they will handle their budgeting, and results are pending (McKinney, 2016).

The decision to initiate charter schools spoke volumes about the need for change perceived by many in education and to allow charters to have flexibility speaks even louder to this intent. One argument is that “charter schools liberate educators from bureaucratic regulations and union contracts that stifle creative educational improvements” (Carnoy et al., 2005, p. 3). State policymakers have the responsibility in making important decisions for schools. In North
Carolina, there had been much reluctance on the part of state policymakers to give traditional schools charter-like flexibility (McKinney, 2016), but changes like these can have a significant impact on education. “Public choice advocates argue that, in a gritty real world of politics, democratic government serves whichever interest group is most powerful, not some abstract conception of ‘the public interests’” (Kahn, 1991, n.p.).

The current study examined the perspectives of state policymakers and principals; I interviewed charter school principals at multiple grade levels who had experience in a traditional public school setting. The study also focused on archival survey data from principals in traditional public schools in North Carolina. These principals were participants in The Innovation Project’s restart initiative. These individuals provided insights from their experience of being granted policy latitude and how they planned to employ this flexibility.

Intransigence regarding policy flexibility for traditional public schools may be softening in North Carolina. Recently, some traditional public schools have been granted charter-like flexibility. This opportunity opened the doors for these restart schools, which are being compared to charter schools, to operate with greater policy latitude. In addition, the Rowan-Salisbury School District serves as the first renewal school district.

Evidence of policymakers advocating and seeking more flexibility for traditional schools is on the rise throughout the country and in North Carolina. According to a Trusted posting, there have recently been several states and school districts seeking charter-like flexibilities (Kominak, 2018). The “restart model” in North Carolina is one example of flexibility being granted to traditional schools (Kominak, 2018). Some superintendents in North Carolina were cautious in applying to participate in this new opportunity. “Dr. Mubenga really wanted to get into the school district and understand what was going on in all the low-performing schools in Durham
before he committed all of the schools to a Restart Program” (Hui, 2018a, n.p.). The reservation may be due to the fact that in North Carolina, such flexibility is only extended to schools that are struggling (Hui, 2018a). Dunn (2019) asserts that, “Traditional public schools have a love-hate relationship with public charter schools in North Carolina” (n.p.) and provides a list of the flexibilities allowed to charters in North Carolina:

- Traditional public schools must follow the state-approved curriculum. Charter schools can choose alternate curricula.
- Traditional public schools must provide bus service to students. Charter schools don’t.
- Traditional public schools must follow state salary schedules for their teachers and staff. Charter schools can pay teachers how they’d like — paying more for performance, or negotiating for top talent.
- Traditional public schools must start classes on the Monday closest to August 26. Charter schools can start earlier or later.
- Traditional schools must employ only licensed teachers. Charter schools can have up to 50% of their teachers unlicensed, often elective teachers who are experts in the field.
- Traditional public schools are given money in multiple heavily restricted funds. Charter schools are given money as a lump sum and can spend it as they see fit. (n.p.)

This list provides a glimpse into why the love-hate relationship exists so strongly between charter and traditional public schools. As was noted previously, the state is experimented with charter flexibility and a program is currently in place for Rowan-Salisbury Schools. The entire school district is considered a “Renewal School System” and receiving the same freedom as charter schools (Dunn, 2019). The General Assembly approved and passed legislation allowing the entire school district, due to having the highest concentration of restart schools, to be granted
charter-like flexibility to each school in the district (Granados, 2018). Joshua Wagner, chair of Rowan-Salisbury’s Board of Education, asserts that this change is significant and may set the stage for other districts that may have an interest in taking this approach (Blackwell, 2019). The district personnel have met and continued to strategize and put together a renewal plan. As a renewal school district, the Rowan-Salisbury district is well on the way to establishing individual school identities and program foci. The range of programmatic emphases includes language immersion and full art programs for schools (Blackwell, 2019).

In Florida, policymaker Roberto Martinez is quoted saying, “traditional districts should get the same consideration” for flexibility as is available to charter schools (Solochek, 2017, n.p.). Martinez expressed his beliefs in choice and additionally, how his advocacy for policy discretion works both ways. He served on the state Constitution Revision Commission and is Florida’s former State Board of Education chair. Martinez concluded his argument by expressing that traditional public schools should have options and be able to compete and innovate. Similar to the policy debates in North Carolina and Florida, two House bills were introduced in Michigan to allow flexibility for school districts. “House Bills 6314 and 6315, sponsored by Rep. Tim Kelly, R-Saginaw Township, would create the legal framework for a ‘public innovation district’” (DeGrow, 2018).

Flexibilities create a new opportunities and challenges for traditional public schools, and it is too soon to know whether limited instances of such discretion are producing consistent improvements (Dunn (2019). What is clear, however, is that momentum for the extension of charter-like flexibilities to traditional public schools is growing, as is the interest of policymakers and practitioners alike in whether such flexibility bore fruit.
Chapter Summary

Charter schools are given policy latitude and flexibilities that traditional schools lack. Compared to traditional public schools, charter schools operate with minimal restrictions on factors such as student enrollment, class size, curriculum, provision of lunch and transportation, and teacher recruitment and hiring. “Traditional public schools have long clamored for the same flexibility as charter schools, but state leaders have only been willing to offer it to struggling schools” (Hui, 2018a, n.p.). The current study explored the implications of this policy latitude given to charters by obtaining the perspectives of northeastern North Carolina public charter school principals and the perspectives of state policymakers on flexibilities. Moreover, this research sought to determine the impact of policy latitude on charter schools and whether the flexibility provided to charters should be extended to traditional schools. Archival data were analyzed from a survey of traditional school principals whose schools had expanded policy latitude as a result of participation in the TIP restart initiative.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction

Chapter 3 addresses this study’s research design and methodology. The following sections explain the research design and outline the research questions. Following these chapter elements, I provide a description of the study’s participants. The instrumentation for the study and the procedures that were implemented during the study are also detailed. The chapter concludes with a description of the data analysis processes and the delimitations of the study.

Since charter school legislation passed in 1996 in North Carolina, the increase of student enrollment in charter schools has grown significantly. “Despite significant growth in the state’s population and periodic efforts by charter proponents to increase the number of charter schools, the cap remained at one hundred until 2011” (Ladd et al., 2017, p. 537). At the time of this study in 2018-19, there were 185 charter schools, including two online or virtual charters serving over 100,000 children (Public Schools First NC, 2019).

This case study explored the policy flexibility in public charter schools and opinions about the extension of such flexibility to traditional public schools. I examined the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers via interviews with legislators. I also gleaned the perspectives of charter school principals at various grade levels regarding policy flexibilities for traditional public schools similar to those available to charter schools. This research further explored the ways that principals of schools in North Carolina schools that have been granted policy flexibility planned to use their afforded latitude. Finally, the study ascertained the perspectives of legislators and charter school principals about the impact of flexibility in charter schools.

I concluded that case study methodology was the most suitable research protocol. The study included an analysis of archived survey responses collected from principals whose schools
were participants in The Innovation Project’s restart initiative. I also conducted interviews with participants who once served as administrators in traditional school settings and who now serve as principals in northeastern North Carolina charter schools. The perspectives of state policymakers were also gathered. The study revealed what policymakers believe about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools. Insights about policy flexibility were also gathered from four charter school principals who had previous experience serving as principals in a traditional school setting. “One major feature of well-collected qualitative data is that they focus on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings, so that we have a strong handle on what ‘real life’ is like” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11).

In 2015, The Innovation Project initiated a Restart Program for low-performing traditional schools, designed to allow these schools to receive charter-like flexibility. The Innovation Project serves as a means to provide resources to schools in the Restart Program, and the organization came into existence in July 2015. Explaining the project, leader Ann McColl said, “We identify the obstacles and then say, ‘How do you make that obstacle a part of your path to something better?’” (Granados & Hinchcliffe, 2018). According to the organization’s website, its mission is “to bring together forward-thinking North Carolina school district superintendents to find and implement innovation and transformative practices in public education so that students and their communities can thrive” (The Innovation Project, n.d., n.p.).

There is a growing interest in the policy latitude that program participants received at the inception of the restart initiative. The first schools to operate under the restart model began the program in the fall of 2016. While the schools that gained approval to use the program increased to 103 in March of 2018, there is no way to know yet whether what they are doing actually helps their struggling students (Granados & Hinchcliffe, 2018). As a researcher, I intended to
determine the perspectives of legislators and northeastern North Carolina charter school principals regarding the impacts of policy flexibility. I interviewed four principals who served in a traditional school setting prior to becoming a charter school principal. Charter schools are exempt from many state mandates (Fusarelli, 2002). These principals served at multiple school levels. “Although politically controversial and highly contested in most states, charter schools appear to have emerged as lawmakers’ vehicle of choice for experimenting with public education reform in the United States” (Holyoke et al., 2009, p. 40). “Advocates argue that freeing schools from red tape will give school administrators and teachers the flexibility to devise effective education programs for students” (Fusarelli, 2002, p. 20). Through this case study, I sought to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of state policymakers and northeastern North Carolina charter school principals regarding the policy latitude that charter schools received. I talked to four legislators who have experience in the development, enactment, and oversight of policies for traditional and charter public schools. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing information about charter schools’ policy flexibility and the impact it has had on the schools. Furthermore, this study specifically examined attitudes about the extension of such latitude to traditional public schools and the potential impact of such policy latitude.

**Research Design**

There are many nuances to charter schools. I focused on a multi-site case inquiry that addressed the flexibility that charter schools have and which traditional schools typically lack. A qualitative research design was chosen for this study. Creswell and Miller (2000) observed that “qualitative inquirers bring to their studies a different lens toward validity than that brought to
traditional, quantitative studies” (p. 125). This study drew upon Finnegan’s (2007) theory that flexibility leads to positive outcomes.

I employed a case study approach and limited information to the perspectives of state policymakers and principals in northeast North Carolina. The information collected through telephone interviews with principals and policymakers provided the perspectives of these participants, and I incorporated archival survey data collected from The Innovation Project. Brinkmann (2014) asserts that “the interview has become one of the most widespread knowledge-producing practices across the human and social sciences in general and also in critical psychology more specifically” (p. 1). The use of interview notes, demographics of participants, and archival survey data assisted in triangulation of the data, thus providing stronger evidence in analyzing the data. Triangulation is similar to the modus operandi approach used by detectives, mechanics, and primary care physicians (Miles et al., 2014).

The case study approach allowed me to focus on the in-depth study of the case. A case study allows the research to focus on an issue through one or more cases in a setting or context (Miles et al., 2014). I realized that, in my attempt to collect data, I needed to be strategic in how I structured my questions to ensure that I accessed multiple sources and was mindful of the time. According to Thomas (2011), researchers who conduct case studies know two important things about a case study:

1. The researcher drills down further;
2. The researcher creates a three-dimensional picture. (p. 4)

Data were collected and carefully analyzed to ensure fidelity of the reporting. For this qualitative case study, I examined the impact of the policy latitude that charter schools receive from the perspective of state policymakers and charter school principals in northeastern North Carolina.
To study this, I interviewed each participant for an hour to determine how they viewed the flexibilities given to charter schools and the extension of such flexibilities to traditional public schools. Each principal was purposefully selected and had experience in both traditional public school and charter school administration.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that were explored in this study are outlined below. They are organized in a matrix that also provides information on the participants from whom data were obtained for each question and the data gathering tool used for each question. This study worked to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools?
2. What are the perspectives of northeast North Carolina charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools?
3. What are the perspectives of policymakers about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?
4. What are the perspectives of charter school principals about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?
5. In what ways do principals of traditional public schools in northeast North Carolina that have been granted policy flexibility use this flexibility?
### Table 3.1

**Research Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Data Gathering Tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools?</td>
<td>Policymakers (state legislators)</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are the perspectives of northeast North Carolina charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools?</td>
<td>Public charter school principals in northeast North Carolina</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are the perspectives of policymakers about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?</td>
<td>Policymakers (state legislators)</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are the perspectives of charter school principals about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?</td>
<td>Public charter school principals in northeast North Carolina</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In what ways do principals of traditional public schools in northeast North Carolina that have been granted policy flexibility use this flexibility?</td>
<td>Principals participating in The Innovation Project</td>
<td>Archival Data from North Carolina Innovation Project Survey Results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Study Approach

The study approach and technique that I used including transcribing and coding interview responses; I employed the Atlas.ti coding software (student edition). An audio recorder was used, and I asked questions and took notes to assist in collecting the data during the interviews. An interview protocol was developed for asking questions and recording answers. I incorporated analysis of the archival data collected from principals in The Innovation Project’s restart.
initiative. The results from the survey and interviews collectively provided the data needed to draw conclusions necessary to answer the research questions.

**Study Participants**

**Participant Descriptions**

I conducted the study after receiving approval from the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and from selected charter school board chairs. The interviews with charter school principals focused on charter schools in northeast North Carolina; the interviews with state-level policymakers focused upon four legislators with significant policymaking experience related to education and charter education. Although information from principals and policymakers was collected, their respective identities remain confidential. I conducted a purposive sampling process; the sample included four public charter school principals at multiple levels who had leadership experience in a traditional school setting. I retrieved information from archived responses provided by principal participants in The Innovation Project’s restart initiative.

I reached out to the individuals responsible for The Innovation Project survey to express my interest in their archival data and obtain access to the data. I retrieved the data collected by The Innovation Project (TIP) leaders from principals who are participants in the restart initiative. TIP had a total of 83 restart schools in 27 school districts across North Carolina (The Innovation Project, n.d.). The schools being served in this project were low-performing and needed innovative ways to provide a “restart.”

**Participant Recruitment**

Following approval of the study by the North Carolina State University IRB, I sent a letter to the board chair of each of the prospective charter schools to secure permission for the
study (Appendix A). “In qualitative research, however, the sample size is not generally predetermined. The number of participants depends upon the number required to inform fully all important elements of the phenomenon being studied” (Sargeant, 2012, p. 1).

Following the granting of permission by the charter board chair, I contacted the charter school principal. An email with an invitation to participate in the study was sent (Appendix B) and, when necessary, followed-up by a phone call to each principal to express the purpose for the study and invite their participation. The message provided an opportunity to respond to any concerns or questions. Each charter school principal participant was informed about their role in the study and advised that participation is voluntary. Charter school principal participants were also informed that confidentiality was maintained and that I would secure all information gathered throughout the study. Each principal was asked to sign an informed consent statement acknowledging their role in the study, the purpose of the study, and that they understood how the information attained was to be used (Appendix C). Each participant’s identity was confidential, and pseudonyms were used in the place of real names to ensure anonymity.

While securing the consent of charter principal participants, I worked simultaneously to accrue policymaker participants to interview. According to the Public School Forum (2018), as legislators attempt to make decisions based on evidence, they face the challenge of studying a myriad of complicated educational issues. I contacted four legislators who had experience with educational policy. I anticipated selecting two Democrats and two Republicans who had significant experience with the development, enactment, and oversight of charter school legislation. I intended to interview policymakers who had been influential and in favor of charter schools, and who, while active in educational policy affecting charter schools, had not been very supportive of charter schools. Finally, I intended to include policymakers who had been
supportive of traditional schools receiving charter-like flexibilities as well as those who had opposed such flexibility. While I was successful in securing the participation of legislators who met most of the above-mentioned criteria, I could not ascertain their perspectives about the extension of flexibility to traditional public schools in advance.

I contacted each of these legislators by email (Appendix D) or phone call. Once each participating legislator had been identified and consented to participate, I scheduled a face-to-face or over-the-phone interview. Each legislator signed a consent statement indicating they understood their role in the study, the purpose of the study, and how the information attained was to be used (Appendix C). “Qualitative research, including qualitative interviewing, requires a great deal of investigative analysis as researchers work to explore how participants conceive the world” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 23).

**Instrumentation and Validity Measures**

**Study Instruments**

Using Creswell (2014) as a guide, I developed the interview instruments for my qualitative case study. The two instruments were used in interviews with legislators (Appendix E) and principals (Appendix F). Each instrument consisted of overarching theme questions, with more specific sub-theme questions added to elicit additional information about these constructs. There were two primary data sources: interviews and archived survey responses from The Innovation Project.

Structured interview protocols were the instruments through which I gathered data from the legislator and charter principal participants in this study. I asked questions that addressed the research question constructs. I audio-recorded the responses to ensure accurate data collection. Time and breaks were allotted as needed by the participants. At the conclusion of each interview,
I thanked the participant. The results of the interview responses and archival data from The Innovation Project survey were collected, reviewed, and analyzed.

Two research questions were developed that required data from policymakers; these were Research Questions 1 and 3. To obtain data to answer these two questions, I interviewed four state legislators using an original instrument that I developed (Appendix E). Data collected to answer Research Questions 1 and 3 were drawn from interviews with policymakers. The interview questions allowed me to obtain policymakers’ perspectives on policy flexibility in traditional and charter schools. Their responses provided insights into decisions that had been made which affect decision making in public charter and traditional public schools throughout the state of North Carolina. Although the study focused in part on northeastern North Carolina, the results are useful to other areas in the state.

Research Questions 2 and 4 required data that arise from the points of view of public charter school principals. To make their perspectives on policy flexibility in charter schools and traditional public schools more useful, I interviewed charter principals who also had traditional school administrative experience. Data collected to answer Research Questions 2 and 4 were drawn from interviews with public charter school principals. The interview questions allowed me to obtain principals’ perspectives on policy flexibility in traditional and charter schools. Their responses provided insights into decisions that have been made which affect decision making in public charter and traditional public schools throughout the state of North Carolina. Although the study’s focus was on northeastern North Carolina, the results gave information that could be useful to other areas in the state.

To validate these instruments, I engaged a panel of experts within the field. The panel consisted of four members: a university researcher with expertise in topics related to public
charter schools; a former member of the North Carolina charter schools advisory committee; a former state superintendent of schools who, along with the state board of education, presided over the first seven years of the implementation of the state’s charter school legislation; and a state education agency administrator for charter school support and monitoring. I created a feedback form to solicit specific comments from these individuals on the utility and understandability of the interview elements. Panel members reviewed the instruments using the protocol outlined in Appendix G. Based on panel member recommendations, I edited the instruments to create final versions.

In addition to the interview instruments that I created for the study, I also used the survey instrument that was sent to the principals in The Innovation Project’s restart initiative (Appendix H). The survey was created by TIP leaders Gerry Hancock and Ann McColl. This instrument, used in The Innovation Project, is entitled Restart Flexibility Survey, and it was used in my study with permission. A copy of the email documenting this is attached as Appendix I. The Innovation Project created this instrument to seek feedback from principals in participating schools regarding their exercise of policy flexibility. I adapted the instrument by selecting the items relevant to addressing Research Question 5 in my study; these items included Items 1, 2, and 3 of the TIP instrument.

Data Collection

This case study’s data collection procedures began with the approval of the study by the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University. I followed the procedures outlined by IRB and requested the archival data from The Innovation Project. The Innovation Project consists of 83 traditional school principals who have been granted charter-like flexibility to run their schools. The Innovation Project facilitators Gerry Hancock and Ann McColl
administered the survey to all TIP restart initiative principals as they were beginning their experience with expanded policy flexibility. The survey was designed such that it could be completed in 10-15 minutes. The collected data were shared with me in a spreadsheet format. The archival survey results from The Innovation Project collectively provided me with data about the intended exercise of flexibility from the perspective of traditional public school principals.

To gather the necessary qualitative data needed, I was intentional about participant selection and purposeful about the sampling to ensure useful data. I implemented the validity strategies by using multiple approaches (Creswell, 2013) to enhance my ability to assess the accuracy of the findings and reassure the readers of that accuracy.

As previously described, I conducted structured interviews with four state legislators who represented diversity in terms of political party, racial identity, gender, support for charter schools, and the chambers to which they were elected. They were similar, however, in the fact that they had significant experience in dealing with charter school legislation. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Each legislator signed an informed consent document (Appendix C) before the interview began. I audio-recorded each interview. The identity of each participant was kept confidential and a pseudonym was used. The protocol for these interviews is found in Appendix E. This study involved a phone interview with each legislator. The date and time were based on the availability and preference of the participant.

The charter principal participants were selected based on their experience, current role, and geographic locale. I contacted potential participants who were currently serving as public charter school principals and who had also served in traditional public schools as
principals/assistant principals. I interviewed participants who were serving in northeastern North Carolina. The background knowledge that these principals shared in both traditional and charter school settings supported my study and provided me with their perspectives on charter flexibility.

Each charter principal signed an informed consent document (Appendix C) before the interview began. I audio-recorded each interview. The identity of each principal was confidential and a pseudonym replaced the name of each principal participant. The protocol for these interviews is found in Appendix F. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

This study involved face-to-face interviews and, if that was not doable, a phone interview. The date, time, and location were all based on the availability and preference of each principal participant. I took appropriate measures to ensure confidentiality and kept data records secure. Hard-copy notes and documents related to the research were maintained in a locked filing cabinet at my home. Electronic files were safeguarded on my personal computer, which was password-protected. I maintained in the same password-protected computer a file that contained a participant master list in which the actual names of participants were matched to their pseudonyms. No one else had access to this master list.

These data sources yielded rich information needed to answer the four research questions. The data results from The Innovation Project and the interviews from the policymakers and principals provided valuable information about policy flexibility and its impact in traditional and charter schools.

**Data Analysis**

The research design was a multi-site case study that employed qualitative methodologies. The data from the interviews with policymakers and principals were analyzed using qualitative
methods. The interview recordings were transcribed. I reviewed the notes and interview recordings. The analytical procedures used to process the data retrieved from the interviews with policymakers and principals consisted of transcription and thematic coding of the content. The coding mechanism was used to determine the common themes. Coding is a method that allows the researcher to identify trends from the data collected during interviews. “The coding of data, for example (data condensation), leads to new ideas on what should go into a matrix (data display)” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 14). “Validity cannot be assumed, and presentation of research findings must invite the opportunity for critical reflection by consumers” (Whittemore et al., 2001, p. 537). I used the coding software Atlas.ti to be strategic and systematic in organizing the data collected.

The archival data retrieved from The Innovation Project were the constructed responses of participating principals to the TIP survey (Appendix F). The analysis of the survey responses provided data to aid me in answering Research Question 5, which reads: In what ways do principals of traditional public schools in northeast North Carolina that have been granted policy flexibility use this flexibility? The use of The Innovation Project data allowed me to determine how flexibility in traditional public schools was being used by these principals. I reviewed the data and determined the common themes. Immediately after determining these themes, I clustered or grouped information that had similar patterns or characteristics.

I also analyzed the interview transcripts for common themes and patterns. As with the responses to the policymaker and charter principal interviews, the TIP principals’ responses were analyzed through a thematic coding process. The coding software Atlas.ti was used to organize the data systematically, thus allowing me to see the trends and differences in the research data collected. The program helped track all notes, annotations, and codes needed. The tracking is a
unique tool that provided support while I researched and determined how to interpret the data. I subjected the data to a process of triangulation to ensure the validity of the data. “Triangulation is similar to the modus operandi approach used by detectives, mechanics and primary care physicians” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 299). The three sources included in the triangulation were data from the charter principal interviews, data from the policymaker interviews, and survey data from the TIP principal responses.

Subjectivity Statement

I have served in education for the past 20 years and have seen constant change throughout these years. The most significant of these changes, in my opinion, has been the advent and expansion of public charter schools. This research was a passion, because I wanted to determine what it is about charter schools that causes so much division of perspective in conversations about this topic among various educators. I have worked with passionate and driven educators in the traditional school setting who became upset or frustrated at the mention of charter schools.

The ongoing trend that I have witnessed with charter schools and the impact it has had and continues to have on traditional public schools is profound. I have witnessed school district numbers dwindle and schools closing due to the rise of charter schools in certain areas. I have seen charter schools enjoy flexibility with policies and practices over which I had little discretion as a traditional school teacher and administrator. Nevertheless, when it came time to review student outcomes, I found that traditional and charter schools performed similarly. It also became clear that such comparisons were difficult when the rules for achieving these results were not the same for these different types of schools.
My experiences in traditional and charter school settings are the foundation of my biases about my topic. I have mostly served in traditional school settings for employment. I have served in various capacities, including classroom teacher, middle school curriculum coach, exceptional children compliance specialist, assistant principal, and now, principal. I have witnessed good and bad in the settings I have served. I have been vocal in each setting, advocating for children to ensure that things were equitable for all. I have had many moments when I felt defeated and silenced for various reasons. I also felt that some rules, procedures, and policies were in place that were not revisited or questioned because things had always been done a certain way in these settings. However, my experience in charter schools came as a result of my relationship with two strong-willed teachers for whom I served as program director when they were teachers in the traditional school setting. Both teachers fulfilled their two-year Teach for America commitment and remained an additional year. However, when the third year ended, they opted to leave the traditional school setting to teach in a high-performing charter school setting to learn how charter schools function. They returned to the area where they initially taught to start their own charter school. They asked me to either be on their charter board or teach at their charter school; I opted to serve on their board. This experience allowed to see charter schools from the beginning of the process and throughout. I served on a charter school board and, later, as board chair for two years. Additionally, four of my five children are currently enrolled and thriving at the charter school in which I once served as a board member.

I have a passion and empathy for underserved communities. I am a product of a father from Belize, Central America, and the highest grade level he obtained was junior college. He moved to Chicago for better opportunities and served as a union worker at Porter Equipment Company for over 40 years. My mother was a homemaker and provided childcare for children all
of my life. I believe that is where my passion for children actually derived. My mother never went to college, but she pushed to ensure that each of her three children did. Because my parents and forefathers laid the path for me to do so. I admit to having personal biases for the underprivileged and those who lack the opportunities for an equitable education.

I know that all children can learn and deserve the same resources as others. I chose to join Teach for America because I believed in the mission and wanted to give back before pursuing a law degree. I realized my passion and purpose and chose to remain in education. I have been fortunate to serve in various school districts and capacities. I remain convinced that if resources were evenly distributed, students in under-resourced areas will have a better opportunity.

My research is important, and my views may be skewed because I desire to see equality for all. I serve in northeastern North Carolina in a school district that borders one of the wealthiest districts in the state. As an African American female educator, I am challenged in my career aspirations because of my race and sex. I am the first in my family to obtain a doctoral degree. I find it necessary to provide a legacy for my own children, students, and extended family members.

An additional bias is that I do not believe things are done equitably between charter and traditional public schools. I believe that dollars should not be granted to any charter school that does not provide transportation and meals to students. Charter schools that eliminate these programs intentionally eliminate a population of students from having an opportunity to attend because they cannot afford to provide their own transportation or meals.

I sought to eliminate any potential biases by triangulating data from The Innovation Project survey and the interviews with policymakers and principals. Using all these data helped me prevent any unnecessary biases I may have had concerning traditional or charter schools
based on my perceptions and previous experiences. I stuck to the interview script and avoided facial expressions or variations in my voice level. I remained professional and took notes and adhered to the guidelines established and agreed upon with each participant.

I approached this study with the desire to learn and make change. I hope that the information gathered and results shared will help improve education in northeast North Carolina in such a way that people are drawn to make any necessary changes. I also seek to make things equitable for all. It is difficult to compare schools if different resources are in place for the schools. I live, serve in, and have my own children educated in northeast North Carolina. As a result, I am committed to be consistent and fair throughout this study so that the data are not skewed and findings are not questioned.

“The fourth of the five misunderstandings about case-study research is that the method maintains a bias toward verification, understood as a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions, so that the study therefore becomes of doubtful scientific value” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 234). I remained faithful to the principles of unbiased inquiry throughout the research process. I learned and conveyed my learnings throughout the process. Thomas (2011) says that with a case study, there is still the assumption that one must collect good evidence and lots of it.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Limitations were anticipated in advance of the implementation of this study. Findings from qualitative research are typically not generalizable to contexts other than those in which the studies occur. Such limitations and misunderstandings in case study research are summed up as follows:

- General knowledge is more valuable than context-specific knowledge.
• One can’t generalize from a single case so a single case doesn’t add to scientific development.

• The case study is most useful in the first phase of a research process; used for generating hypotheses.

• The case study confirms the researcher’s preconceived notions.

• It is difficult to summarize case studies into general propositions and theories. (Reis, n.d., n.p.)

The policymaker and charter principal participants in this study were limited in number. I believe, however, that the impact on generalizability was more than compensated for by the richness of data that accrued from the in-depth structured interviews that occurred with these individuals.

A limitation of the study relative to the analysis of data from the survey of principals in The Innovation Project was time. The Innovation Project had been in existence for a limited number of months when the TIP survey was administered to principals in the restart initiative. It was implemented in September 2017. As a result, an extensive archive of data did not exist.

Assumptions

I made the following assumptions when conducting this research:

1. Each participant was honest with her/his responses.

2. Participants did not fear retribution for their participation in the study or for their responses.

3. The inclusion criteria for the samples were appropriate and ensured that the participants had experiences which enabled them to provide relevant data for the purposes of the study.
Chapter Summary

Policy latitude is a controversial issue for traditional public schools and traditional charter schools. Policymakers have extended the policy latitude afforded to charter schools to traditional public schools, but on a limited basis. The Innovation Project operated on the premise that schools know what effective policy and practice for their students is and that they should be granted flexibility to make changes (Granados & Hinchcliffe, 2018).

The perspectives of policymakers and principals regarding the extension of policy flexibility to traditional public schools were gathered. The archival data results from The Innovation Project and the interviews with policymakers and northeast North Carolina principals who serve at multiple grade levels provided insight into the use and impact of policy latitude.

This chapter also described my background and the potential for researcher bias that might arise from my experiences. I noted the strategies that I intended to employ in order to skewing the data out of my own subjectivity. These strategies were faithfully implemented during the data gathering, analysis, and reporting processes.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Chapter Introduction

The purposes of this study were threefold. First, I examined the perspectives of North Carolina legislators and charter school principals about extending policy flexibility to traditional public schools. Second, I asked these same legislators and charter school principals to share their perspectives regarding the impact of policy flexibility in public charter schools. These legislators all had experience in education policymaking, and the principals had firsthand experience and perspectives of leadership in both traditional schools and charter schools. Third, I analyzed historical data from a North Carolina The Innovation Project (TIP) survey to determine how the principals of restart schools used the flexibility of policy they had received.

In order to fulfill these purposes and answer the related research questions, I interviewed four incumbent lawmakers in the state. I also interviewed four practicing public charter school administrators who had once served as traditional school principals. I reviewed and analyzed the 2017 archival survey responses of principals from 31 of the 83 original restart schools in the TIP districts. These are North Carolina principals who had been granted charter-like flexibility because of their participation in the Restart Program, and they constituted 37% of the restart principals.

This chapter provides results for the research questions that were developed to fulfill the research purposes. All the interview response data were collected by way of audio-recordings, with each interviewee granting permission to be recorded. The interviews allowed me to gain insights about their perspectives and knowledge to aid my study. The charter principal and legislator participants were each assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Prior to asking questions that addressed the research questions, I asked a set of opening questions to gain
demographic information about each participant. The questions included details about race, gender, and length of time in their respective roles. The remainder of the interview questions were used to gather data for the qualitative elements of the protocol addressed in Research Questions 1, 2, 3 and 4. The interview questions and the research questions for which they provided data are organized in matrices at the beginning of the pertinent subsections that follow.

**Analysis of Participants’ Demographic Data**

Each participant in this study signed the consent form that signified her/his willingness to be interviewed. Before beginning each interview, I asked participants for permission to audio-record the conversation, and each consented to this as well. Each participant was informed that the interview would not exceed one hour.

From the list of seven legislators I identified as potential participants, I reached out to six. Of this group, four consented to an interview. Two of the participants were Democrats and two were Republicans. They had 33 years of combined service in the North Carolina legislature, which is formally known as the North Carolina General Assembly. Two legislators were Senators and two served in the House of Representatives. Two were males and two were females. The legislators were more diverse as a group than the charter principal participants; two were Black and two were White. Each served on the education committees of their respective chambers.

Of the seven principals who met the purposive sampling criteria and were contacted for an interview, only four agreed to participate in the study. While the original candidate pool of prospective principals was diverse, the four who agreed to be interviewed were all White. I interviewed three men and one woman. Their combined experience in education totaled 64 years. Three of the principal participants had more than three years of experience as an assistant
principal. Two served as assistant principals in northeastern North Carolina, and the third served as an assistant principal in a high school; the fourth participant had previously served for several years as principal of a traditional public high school.

Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data to Answer Research Questions

This section addresses the results for Research Questions 1 to 4, each of which was explored through qualitative data collected in participants’ interview responses. I start with results from the participant background questions included in the interview. I then address the results for Research Questions 1 and 2, which examined participants’ perspectives about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools. Research Question 1 explored this issue from the legislators’ viewpoint, and Research Question 2 did so from the principals’ viewpoint.

Research Questions 3 and 4 are likewise a pair of queries that explore the same topic—in this case, perspectives regarding the impact of flexibility in public charter schools. As with Research Questions 1 and 2, the examination of this construct was addressed first with legislators and then with principals. Following the reporting of results for Research Questions 1 and 2, and then Research Questions 3 and 4, I compare the responses of legislators and principals for the two constructs.

Background of Participants

Legislators. I interviewed four legislators in order to obtain data needed for Research Questions 1 and 3. For the interview process, I developed a structured interview protocol (Appendix E). I drafted an email message that was sent to each legislator participant (Appendix D). The interviews were conducted at a time convenient for the participant. Prior to the commencement of each of the interviews, the legislator submitted a signed copy of the consent
document (Appendix C), which indicated her/his willingness to participate in the study and an interview. Each legislator who participated in the interview was assigned a pseudonym, which made it easier to ensure confidentiality as I analyzed and reported the data. Data were collected from the four legislators’ audio-recorded interviews. Once each interview was completed, recordings were transcribed. I read the transcripts several times and determined common themes or patterns. I also utilized Atlas.ti software so that codes were captured. These processes allowed the identification of emergent themes and topics.

The interview protocol for legislators began with background items. Organized in Table 4.1 below are these interview questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background of participants</th>
<th>Opening Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please tell me your role.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How long have you been serving in the legislature?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tell me about your work experience. Do you have any charter, traditional, or private school experience?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is your race? Gender?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These interview questions asked for information about each legislator’s role, how long they had been in their positions, and their work experience, race, and gender. Two of the legislators I interviewed served in the North Carolina Senate and two served in the North Carolina House. Two of the legislators were Republicans and two were Democrats. The participants averaged eight years and three months of service; the longest serving member had
been in office for 10 years, and the least senior member had been in the General Assembly for three years. The legislator participants included two Black members and two White members.

As was noted earlier, all these legislators served on the education committees of their respective chambers. Indeed, this was a criterion in their selection as prospective participants. Their experience in education ranged from volunteering in schools and serving on the school boards in their respective districts to having actual teaching experience. Each legislator had experience serving in public education. One had experience serving in a charter school as a volunteer; another had volunteered in both traditional public schools and public charter schools. Two legislators had served on local public school boards of education; one of these members also worked with charter schools in the district. One legislator shared that she had served as a teacher in traditional public schools but did not have experience working in or with charter schools.

**Principals.** There were seven principals who met the study’s purposive sampling criteria; four agreed to participate to an interview. I sent a letter to the board chair of each selected charter school and secured permission for my study (Appendix A). I drafted an email message that I sent to each prospective principal participant (Appendix B). The four principals each signed an informed consent statement (Appendix C) granting permission prior to the start of each interview. By signing the statement, they acknowledged their understanding of the purpose of the study, the data collection process, and their rights as a study participant. The purpose of the interview was to obtain data needed for Research Questions 2, 4 and 5. Similar to the data-gathering process with legislators, I developed a structured interview protocol (Appendix F). Each principal participant was assigned a pseudonym. The pseudonym ensured that each principal participant’s identity was confidential as I collected, analyzed, and reported the data.
from the audio-recorded interviews. Immediately after each interview was completed, recordings were transcribed. I read each transcript multiple times and conducted thematic coding of the interview content. I determined the common patterns and themes from each interview. I also utilized Atlas.ti software so that codes were captured to systematically organize the data collected.

The interview protocol for principals began with background information similar to what was collected from legislators. Table 4.2 below shows the interview questions.

Table 4.2

Matrix of Demographic Items from the Principal Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background of participants</td>
<td>1. Please tell me your role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. What made you decide to pursue a career in education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How long have you been serving in this school as the principal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. What is your race? Gender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. In what traditional schools did you serve as principal? For how long?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These interview questions inquired into the principals’ roles, why they chose education, how long they have been serving in their current position, their race, their gender, and their work experience in a traditional school setting. When the purposive sampling list was created, two of the principal participants had past experience as assistant principals in traditional public schools. The other two principal participants had served as principals in traditional public schools several years prior to the time of the study. Traditional public school administrative experience was a
criterion for participation in the study, as it provided these charter school principals with context for their speculations about the provision of expanded flexibility to traditional schools.

At the time of their recruitment to participate in the study, the principal participants were serving as principals in charter schools. Leading in a charter school was also a necessary criterion, as this lent perspective about actually leading in an environment where policy latitude is the norm. By the time of the interview, participants were serving in different leadership roles. Two of the participants were serving as superintendents of their respective charter schools. The superintendent role in this context equated to that of the lead principal at a traditional school; in these cases, the charter school superintendent is the lead principal for the elementary, middle, and high schools in a K-12 charter school. A third participant started out as principal of a charter school serving grades K-8. By the time of the interview, he had assumed the role of executive director. The last participant served as the founding principal of a charter high school and was the director of college counseling at the time of the study interview. The combined educational experience among these charter school administrators totaled 64 years. The participant with the most experience had served for 35 years in education. The original pool of principal participant candidates was ethnically diverse, but the principal participants who agreed to participate included three White males and one White female.

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was a qualitative inquiry and read as follows: What are the perspectives of North Carolina legislators about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools? I collected data to answer this research question from the interviews with the four legislators who were described in the previous subsection.
Table 4.3 presents the items from the interview protocol for legislators who were used to gather responses needed to answer Research Question 1.

Table 4.3
Matrix of Research Question 1 and Legislator Participant Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1 – What are the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools?</td>
<td>1. Share your perspectives about the policy flexibility available to charter schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Describe your level of support for public charter schools in North Carolina.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Share specific charter school policy issues that you favored or contested. Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Do you favor allowing charter-like flexibility in some traditional public schools or districts? If so, why? If not, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Describe your level of support for public traditional public schools in North Carolina.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Share specific traditional school policy issues that you favored or contested. Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. How do you define flexibility in schools?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. What level of flexibility do you support for traditional public schools? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. What kind of flexibility do you think would be of greater value to traditional school(s)? Curricular? Instructional? Human resources? Financial? Other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. What do you perceive is the posture of the state legislators generally regarding the types of flexibility traditional schools should have? Describe the bases upon which legislators tend to differ (e.g., partisan/political, geographic region of the state, rural/suburban/urban, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A transcription of the recordings was completed after each interview. Interview data were analyzed. Common themes, trends and patterns were identified from the responses of all participants. Transcripts were read and Atlas.ti was used so that codes and quotes were captured.
While the questions in Table 4.3 were asked in sequence during the interviews, the responses of the four legislators often transcended the particular question on the table and addressed previous questions or anticipated other questions. In some instances, the participants provided information not addressed in the interview protocol. As a result, I elected to organize the findings from these interviews by thematic sub-subsections rather than in the sequence of the interview items listed in Table 4.3.

Each of these legislators professed that they believed in and supported traditional public schools and were largely supportive of charter schools. However, it is important to note that one legislator’s enthusiasm for public charter schools had waned. She acknowledged being supportive of charter school legislation when it was first introduced in the state, because she thought at that time that charter schools could be “blueprints for helping students who had difficulty learning.” Subsequent sections will explain her diminished enthusiasm for the charter school movement.

**Policy Flexibility**

Each participant had a different definition of policy flexibility. One legislator described an example of flexibility as follows: “Well, as a classroom teacher, I used flexibility in my classroom, because I believe that you have to teach each kid, and you have to be flexible enough to allow their learning style to flourish.” Several ideas were brought up about the kinds of policy flexibility that were available to charter schools. Class size and the assumption that charter school class sizes were typically smaller than those in traditional public schools were mentioned by one of the legislators. Another legislator defined flexibility as “local control.” He believed that flexibility is “the opportunity for a school, a principal, a teacher to maneuver in such a way
as to provide the best outcomes for each and every student.” Another legislator couched her response in terms of authority for wielding flexibility; she believed it is:

…the principal’s ability to determine what the school ought to be like based on who the children are. The children in some school system will come from predominantly low income areas and will come in and have a lot of needs.

In other words, she believed that the flexibility is based on the needs of the school children, which are determined by the leader. Yet another legislator defined flexibility in schools as “knowing some exceptions.” He further added, “We need the flexibility to be able to take the framework that we got, and again, be effective in the child learning.” I ascertained from his comments that having the flexibility gives you the opportunity to learn what is best for your particular situation and to ultimately have a positive impact in a child’s learning.

When legislators were asked about their perspectives about the policy flexibility available to charter schools, they shared varied opinions. One legislator shared that calendar and human resource decisions are some areas of flexibility available to charter schools. Similarly, the next legislator mentioned personnel flexibility as an area of discretion that exists within charter schools.

As was noted previously, one legislator shared that when charters were introduced, she was supportive of their flexibility because these schools could serve as a “blueprint” for helping students who had difficulty learning. The theme of the blueprint was something that this legislator mentioned throughout her interview. Another participant shared that “charter schools have tremendous flexibility in both calendar and curriculum, much more so than do the traditional public schools.”
One legislator mentioned an area of flexibility that no one else addressed, which is the use of facilities. Charter schools may rent, buy, or construct facilities, and while they must adhere to health and safety regulations, they have considerably greater latitude over the nature of school facilities than their traditional school counterparts. She conveyed that charter schools could use part of traditional public school facilities. This legislator also noted that many charter schools have additional funding they get from private entities.

Support For/Against Charter School Policies

Participants had much to say about charter school policy issues that they favored or contested. Two dealt with the concept of funding. One was vehemently opposed to the idea that a charter school can be “for profit.” In her opinion, when that occurs, helping kids “reach their full potential” becomes secondary. The other mentioned that he “I had no problem with any government entity, municipalities, funding a charter school. Anytime they want to give any of our schools money, I’ll take it.”

Two legislator participants dealt with North Carolina’s cap on the number of charter schools. One participant, who was a Democrat, vividly recalled opposing the bill that proposed elimination of the cap. She opposed such a measure because “taking off the cap means that we are open to every entity deciding it wants to set up a charter.” She further contended that the criteria for opening a charter are not fair and are set by the state’s public charter schools advisory board. The other participant who addressed the cap was a Republican who supported “lifting the cap on charter schools.” He explained:

We have a big state. We are a rapidly growing state. We have our economic and social challenges, as does every state, but as a state that’s growing among the fastest in the
country, these challenges are a bit exacerbated insofar as access to schools that provide for the needs of individual students.

One legislator, a Democrat, shared that initially she did not fully understand the latitude available to charter schools. She noted, however, that what she did understand was that they were not being held accountable for some things. She elaborated that traditional schools were responsible for reporting things such as test results, while charter schools did not have to follow the same standards. “Traditional and charter public schools should follow a standard, because you can’t compare oranges and apples, but you can compare oranges to oranges,” she said.

The discussion of the policy issues that the legislators favored or contested was animated. The fact that each legislator appeared passionate about the discussion of such issues was very helpful to me as I gathered data for the study.

**Extension of Policy Flexibility to Traditional Public Schools**

All the legislators, when asked, professed that they were in favor of allowing at least some charter-like flexibility in traditional public schools or districts. The legislator with the most experience asserted that there should be “uniform” flexibility. She continued by sharing that “I think if we state a purpose for the flexibility that we should adhere to that standard until it can be proven that we need to change it.” Another veteran legislator opined that all teachers need the same kind of flexibility afforded to those who teach in charter schools. Two of the legislators used the term “absolutely” to emphasize their level of support for extending flexibility to traditional schools. One agreed that charter-like flexibility should exist in traditional schools and was disappointed that things have not moved more aggressively in this area. Another legislator observed that it is “worth a try” to allow traditional schools charter-like flexibility. He further added, “I think y’all ought to try to. If it works, we ought to be able to try things that work.”
Another legislator asserted that extensive flexibility for traditional public schools is what he will support. He discussed initially testing, presumably in a pilot model, such flexibility in traditional schools to ensure that the flexibility measures they opt to use are applied in a responsible fashion.

The issue of a quid pro quo relative to flexibility came up during the interviews. Some of the legislators discussed conditions that should exist if flexibility is extended to traditional public schools. One individual believed that with the new flexibility should come accountability. Three of the four legislators noted that their decisions about the matter would largely rest upon their confidence in school leaders in the buildings and teachers in the classroom. One added that the extension of flexibility would depend on “who is running that school.” Perhaps ironically, given his profession of support for the extension of flexibility to traditional public schools, he believes that many decisions should be made by those in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

The theme in many of these comments follows the legislators’ assertions that they trust the “experts.” These legislators believed that school district leaders, principals, and teachers have the knowledge and background to determine effective methods for helping their students. Said one, “The leadership and the decision making is in that one building. It’s not in a central office or in a group of seven or eight folks that come and meet every month.” In other words, this legislator appeared to believe that the condition for flexibility rests upon whether the principal is actually the primary administrator for her/his building or simply one who carries out the instructions of a district-level administrator. Similarly, this is what another legislator shared when he discussed the level of flexibility that he would support for traditional school public schools:
Well, I support [flexibility] as long as the school leadership has a principal that actually works with the team and has the skill level and the experience that is necessary to move schools forward. I would support a great amount of flexibility of the principal with the teachers.

While this legislator appeared to default to the principal as the key individual to exercise flexibility, another said that she believes in and supports “school leadership teams.”

One legislator reflected on the notion that charters have tremendous flexibility in both calendar and curriculum. Another observed that traditional public schools had not availed themselves of latitude that was already available to them. “There’s a lot of flexibility in our existing public schools have that charter schools have that they don’t even use.” One legislator noted that the state is moving toward granting flexibility. He shared information about the Rowan Salisbury School System. This is the first local education agency in the state to be granted policy flexibility on a district-wide basis.

**Typology of Policy Flexibility**

The legislators varied in their opinions about the kinds of flexibility they thought would be of greater value to traditional schools. One admitted that “of course the financial is going to depend on [the General Assembly] to allocate adequate money and right now they don’t have it.” In other words, as a legislator, she knew that allowing financial flexibility would stem from the work of decisionmakers in the state. She provided the example of how the state contemplated allotting $150 per teacher for the purchase of materials and supplies. She added that giving money in this fashion “made no sense,” and added, “We ought to allocate the money to the system.” She perceived that this measure constituted micromanagement of budgetary decisions.
about fund allocations, rather than affording the district to determine the most appropriate use of such funds.

Another legislator thought class size flexibility would allow “kids who need the extra help the opportunity to receive [it].” She believed that traditional school students who were underperforming would benefit from the extra help and time afforded by smaller class sizes. One legislator posited that calendar, funding, and hiring flexibility would be important. He went on to share, “If you’ve got a desperate need for a physics teacher and you need to pay somebody a little bit more to get them, well you’ve got the flexibility to do that.”

Another legislator spoke of flexibility in the area of recruitment, salaries, and credentialing. He believed schools should be able to adjust salaries or provide an incentive to “attract the best person for your schools.” Yet another legislator admitted that he was uncertain about what type of flexibility would be of greater value to traditional schools.

Although, the legislators were largely supportive of flexibility for traditional public schools, they did not elaborate the specific types of flexibility beyond the limited examples in the preceding paragraphs. One legislator avowed support for “all levels of flexibility.” He further explained, “I think a school system has to decide.”

Posture of Other Legislators Toward Flexibility

I asked the legislators who participated in this study to comment in general on the perspectives of legislators regarding the types of flexibility that should be available to traditional public schools. Although the legislators worded their responses differently, their thoughts about the perspectives of other legislators regarding such flexibility were largely aligned. Two legislators reflected on the presumption of their own educational expertise that was held by some of their colleagues. One veteran legislator mentioned that new legislators in North Carolina
collectively lack an educational background, but uniformly believed they know what schools need. Another novice legislator went on to share that, when he assumed office, “everyone” believed they knew something about education. He elaborated further to say that this belief arises from the fact that “everyone went to school.” Another participant referred to the unwillingness to see other points of view that typified some of her colleagues. She perceived how this stubbornness led to poor legislation:

Oh, this team of legislators as more have come in—and I don't think very many have educational backgrounds—they come in with an attitude that they know what schools need. They know what will make education better. They know what will help kids to perform and they know the least about it.

The essential message that this legislator was delivering is that the attitudes of legislators, in general, are impeding educational progress. “Their attitudes are terrible and they’ve made poor decisions.” She went on to say that when it comes to heeding the experts, legislators “will stick in the mud” rather than amend their own opinions. Another legislator vehemently asserted that legislators are not teachers. Similar to the previously mentioned legislator, she maintained that legislators collectively can only talk about their experiences and typically make decisions based on isolated incidents.

One of the legislators observed that a tendency to control is evident among some legislators who talk about flexibility, but then micromanage so many dimensions of school operation through detailed education legislation. This legislator was concerned there is too much “partisanship.” This legislator stated that both political parties talk out of “both sides of their mouth.” He further explained that either party might readily adopt the posture of “we love choice on one hand, but they do not want to give anybody choice on the other hand.” Another legislator,
who is a Democrat, said that although Republican leaders have been discussing granting the equitable policy flexibility to all public schools, they have not been willing to follow through.

Overall, these four legislator participants seemed to avoid answering this particular interview question. These policymakers provided limited commentary about the posture of other legislators toward the actual types of flexibility that traditional public schools should have. It is not clear why they might have been reluctant during this portion of the interview, particularly in light of the fact they were not reluctant in other parts of the interview. While the reasons for this hesitancy were not entirely clear, they may have arisen from the fact that these four legislators were themselves sometimes not very specific about the types of policy flexibility that they thought should be afforded to traditional public schools. Therefore, it was perhaps difficult for them to speculate about the attitudes towards policy flexibility in others. These four legislators surmised that their colleagues perhaps were not sufficiently aware of what was going on in traditional public schools.

**Synopsis of Conclusions for Research Question 1**

The results for Research Question 1 revealed that all the legislator participants avowed support for traditional public schools. However, these same legislators remained divisive on topics within education. They agreed that traditional public schools should receive some flexibility like that which is available to public charter schools. Overall, these legislators agreed that they often lack the knowledge and background to make decisions about what should happen in education in the state of North Carolina. They often indicated that they based their decisions on their experience or their own schooling. Although they explained they are not educators and, in many instances, expressed the belief that educational policy decisions should be left to the educators, they vacillated because of a perceived need for controls in the system.
Legislators’ responses tended to be more general in content than specific. They did not provide particularly granular descriptions of policy issues or facets of school operation to which flexibility might be applied. This may be a product of limited experiences in schools, or a function of the particular types of experiences these individuals had in schools. When asked about specific policy issues they favored or contested, they appeared to need more prompting. Finally, the legislator participants indicated that there is excessive partisanship among legislators regarding decisions on education policy in North Carolina.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was a qualitative inquiry and reads as follows: What are the perspectives of northeast North Carolina charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools? I collected data to answer this research question from the interviews with the four principals who participated in the study.

Table 4.4 presents the items that were used to gather responses needed to answer Research Question 2 from the interview protocol for principals.
Table 4.4

Matrix of Research Question 2 and Principal Participant Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| RQ2 – What are the perspectives of charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools? | 1. Share your perspectives about the policy flexibility available to charter schools.  
2. Are there some things that you thought you had the flexibility to do that it turns out you don’t have the flexibility to do?  
3. Describe your level of support for public charter schools in North Carolina.  
4. Share specific charter school policy issues that you favored or contested. Why?  
5. Do you favor allowing charter-like flexibility in some traditional public schools or districts? If so, why? If not, why not?  
6. Describe your level of support for traditional public schools in North Carolina.  
7. How do you define flexibility in schools?  
8. What level of flexibility do you support for traditional public schools? Why?  
9. What kind of flexibility do you think would be of greater value to traditional school(s)? Curricular? Instructional? Human resources? Financial? Other?  
10. What do you perceive is the posture of public charter school principals generally regarding the types of flexibility that traditional schools should have? |

Similar to legislator interviews, a transcription of the recordings was completed after each principal interview. Interview data were analyzed. Common themes, trends, and patterns were identified from the responses of all participants. Transcripts were read and re-read utilizing Atlas.ti to capture codes.

The questions in Table 4.4 were addressed in sequence, and the responses of the four principals were coded in order to aid in discerning the themes and topics regarding their perspectives on policy flexibility. In some instances, the participants provided information not
addressed in the interview protocol. As a result, I elected to organize the findings from these interviews into thematic sub-subsections, rather than in the sequence of the interview items that are listed in Table 4.4.

**Support for “Good” Schools**

The charter school principals overwhelmingly asserted that they believe in and are advocates for “good” schools. The participants affirmed the value of a strong education for all students. A participant said, “We should want every school to be successful, because that’s our future.” The stated desire of these principals was that every student receive a great education. They believed that, in order for this to occur, there must be good schools, whether charter or traditional.

When asked about their support for charter schools or traditional schools, one participant stated, “I guess my support would be situational. I say that in the sense of, I support good schools. And I am not a loyalist to either charter or traditional public schools. I’m a supporter of good public schools.” These educators similarly shared the point of view that they wanted to see all schools serve kids well. Although, the interviews were done independently of one another, the principals were of one mind regarding the issue of “good” schools.

**Ease of Decisions and Affecting Change**

The principal participants believed that serving as an administrator in a charter school instead of a traditional school provided them with the capability to make changes quicker. One of the principals shared “my biggest hurdles, I guess, to executing my vision were whether or not I had the human capital, or time, or the energy.” This principal went on to say, “I always felt as a charter school principal that I had the ability to do what I wanted to do when it came to executing my school’s mission and vision.” Another principal went further and shared, “I think the biggest
thing, the advantage that we have with flexibility is you can affect change quicker.” These principals believed that the latitude and discretion afforded them the opportunity to more effectively get things done for their students.

One of the principal participants served in the state of Wisconsin before moving to North Carolina and shared the following observation:

The flexibility that I experienced as an administrator in a charter school is very consistent with what I had experienced in the traditional public setting in my previous state, and quite honestly, it’s best practice. It gives schools the ability to be responsive to the needs of their students.

This same principal affirmed that she believes that the reason majority of principals leave traditional schools for charter schools is to have more flexibility to run their schools in the manner that they choose.

Three of the four principals used the term bureaucracy in describing the limitations of the role of the principal in a traditional public school setting. One principal shared, “So I think overall, there’s just way too many levels of bureaucracy that are dictating the way that things have to be done.” These principal participants conveyed the limitations that they experienced when they served as principals in a traditional school setting. The requirements of having to get decisions approved by their superintendents became a barrier that they perceived prohibited them from doing their jobs effectively. They were frequently concerned and worried about what would or would not be allowed. In his comparison of administration in charter schools to that in traditional schools, one of the principals acknowledged, “It’s all under one site, under one roof, so that really cuts out that bureaucratic step.” These principals admitted they do not have a lot of “upper” management to whom they have to report or from whom they need to receive approval
Exercise of Flexibility in Charter Schools

The flexibilities that charter schools receive affect multiple dimensions of school operation. This latitude includes how the schools’ administrators spend money, hire and fire staff, organize the school calendar, and select the curriculum that they opt to use.

Budgetary flexibility was uniformly appreciated among the principals. Three of the four principals discussed the latitude they have to be in charge of their own budgets. These three principals noted that the flexibility as a building leader to choose how to spend funds is available in charter schools. They said they take time to reflect on the question of “where are our greatest needs?” before making budgeting decisions. A principal participant reflected on the flexibilities to which he has access in this way:

In charter schools, we receive our money from the state in one lump sum; it’s not divided out into specific budget codes. So, we get this money in one lump sum and then it’s up to us to determine internally where that money goes and what it’s best used for.

This principal added his appreciation for having the ability to decide how to spend school funds for things he deems as priority for his school. Another principal noted that traditional schools cannot cross “streams of money,” whereas charter schools have the flexibility to move money. He shared that “I think the flexibility comes from being able to apply what’s right for kids.”

Three out of four principals discussed their deep affinity for the flexibility they have in determining how money is spent. One participant referred to the flexibility in charter school spending as the “Ghostbuster effect,” which he noted deals with the ability to move money much more expeditiously. For example, if extra funds are needed for curriculum, then the principal can
shift funds from furniture to curriculum. One of the principals shared that he spent most of his funds on teacher salary so he could stay competitive and maintain a strong staff.

One principal further added that, as a school leader, he made more money in the charter school in one year than he ever did in the traditional school district where he served as principal. This observation was intriguing because of the lack of flexibility traditional schools have in this area. Another principal suggested that the budgetary latitude charter school leaders have is not without its potential pitfalls, acknowledging that mismanagement of budget is one of the quickest ways a charter school could be closed. He added that, while fiscal mistakes in a traditional public school may have consequences for the principal, the state and district do not close a school due to improper budget management. In fact, he continued to point out, they find funding from the district and shift money around to bail a school out. Still, this concern aside, he stated, “the budgetary freedom is extremely important.”

Human resources management is a less complex process in public charter schools than in traditional public schools, according to three of the charter school principals I interviewed. In traditional schools, if teachers have tenure, it is difficult to get rid of them if they are not effective teachers. One of the participants stated, “I’ve turned down a lot of teachers with credentials, a lot of teachers with teaching experience, a lot of teachers with Master’s degrees and instead hired a college student fresh out of college with no teaching experience.” This principal shared this out of confidence in his ability to hire the caliber of educator he preferred. Another leader acknowledge that he has the authority to recommend hiring a teacher; however, the charter board actually has the jurisdiction to approve the hire. Nevertheless, he appreciated being the individual who is primarily responsible for the fact that the teacher is hired—and the fact that he was empowered to determine the salary offered.
Another principal participant conveyed the value of having the “right people on the bus.” This principal expressed concern about how tenure in traditional public schools protects teachers who have “unspoken status.” By this, the principal meant that veteran teachers or teachers with history are difficult to sanction because of their status. Only one of the four principals mentioned how he appreciated and benefited from having flexibility with the state evaluation system. His school applied for a waiver and submitted an evaluation instrument that the state approved. The instrument his school used is “far more intuitive and far more effective at helping teachers identify strengths and areas of growth.” This same principal also brought up professional development and the flexibility that he and his colleagues are afforded in the training of staff.

The calendar and the start date of school has been a frequently contentious topic in the state of North Carolina, where traditional public schools are statutorily prohibited from beginning a school year prior to Labor Day. Two of the four charter school principal participants agreed that having the flexibility to determine start/stop dates and adjust the calendar is appreciated. The flexibility to start in early August or consider year-round alternative scheduling is something that has been afforded to charter schools. Extending the school day is something one of the principal participants lumped in with the calendar discussion of calendar flexibility, and he believes that the extra time made available through the exercise of this flexibility has afforded students who were behind the opportunity to catch up academically.

This principal turned to the topic of instruction and related constraints on content. “No, we can’t teach whatever we want. We have to teach the standard course of study.” He added, however, that there is more flexibility for his school than is available in traditional schools which must adhere to what the LEA requires relative to curriculum and instruction. One principal reflected on his time in traditional public schools and how the central office was heavily
involved in the decision making when school curriculum was chosen. Another elaborated to note that, although charter schools are not required to teach the standard course of study, he did not understand why anyone would not teach the standard course considering that students are tested on the standards. Half of the principal participants discussed the benefit of having the flexibility to select the curriculum or allow creativity in the classroom. One said that teachers are not expected to teach the same “cookie cutter way.” They have autonomy to choose the material and method and prefer this flexibility in educating students.

While the participants uniformly appreciated the opportunity to serve in a charter setting and the attendant right to exercise flexibility in such schools, one participant shared that one needs to have traditional school experience in order to be a good charter school principal. He believed that serving as an administrator in a traditional school, in particular, provided him with hands-on training which proved foundational to his success in his current school.

**Charter-Like Flexibility in Traditional Public Schools**

All the principal participants asserted the belief that charter-like flexibility should exist in traditional public schools. One principal participant observed:

I think charter schools have been afforded what I would consider the common sense rule, and I think that quite frankly, the traditional public schools should be afforded the same rights, to be able to have that same flexibility, which I think you’re starting to see now in North Carolina to some extent.

These participants did not offer any reasons traditional public schools should not be granted charter-like flexibility. One of the participants ventured that a potential benefit of extending traditional schools charter-like flexibility would be increased recruiting capacity. “I’d be far more eager to go back to a traditional district if I had that kind of flexibility that I enjoyed at the
charter school.” This comment indicated the importance of the opportunity to exercise such flexibility to this principal.

Another participant, who also expressed support for extending the flexibilities that charter receive to traditional schools, did so with the expectation that accountability for such latitude would be added. This participant added that, if accountability were included, then schools would have better motivation to exercise the flexibility prudently. Another principal provided historical context by discussing the reasons that charter schools were first authorized in North Carolina. Among the rationales for charters was the assertion that such schools would serve as “incubators of innovation.” It was further believed that collaboration among charter and traditional public schools would then serve as a means for dissemination and adoption of promising reforms. But, this participant observed, charter schools are not held accountable for innovation, and collaboration is not happening. If it were happening to the level and degree anticipated, then traditional schools would be benefitting from the expansion of knowledge and innovation and the exercise of flexibility in charter schools.

Overall, it was clear that these principals appreciated having the flexibility in their respective charter schools; one went so far as to say that, essentially, “we can do anything we want.” These principals also strongly believed that it should be the same for traditional public schools, and they agreed flexibility would benefit traditional public schools. Executing and utilizing flexibility is something these principals believe has made a difference in their leadership since their time in a traditional school setting.

**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3, which was qualitative in nature like the other research questions, reads as follows: What are the perspectives of policymakers about the impact of flexibility in
public charter schools? The qualitative data were collected from the interviews with the four legislators who participated in this study. I asked these participants to respond to five questions regarding the impact of flexibility in public charter schools.

Table 4.5 presents the items from the interview protocol for policymakers used to gather responses needed to answer Research Question 3.

Table 4.5

Matrix of Research Question 3 and Legislator Participants Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ3 – What are the perspectives of policymakers about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?</td>
<td>1. Do you believe there are ways that flexibility positively impacts public charter schools? If so, which flexibilities and how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Do you believe that flexibility negatively impacts public charter schools? If so, which flexibilities and how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Describe changes in school performance, particularly student achievement in North Carolina, that you believe are linked to policy flexibility.</td>
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Once I completed each interview, the audio recording was immediately transcribed in an effort to prepare for the process of identifying common themes or patterns. I read and re-read transcripts utilizing Atlas.ti to capture codes. I identified themes and created a code family from the captured codes. Following this process, I was able to determine emergent themes and topics. I analyzed these themes and topics to determine repeated perspectives of the legislators about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools. These data are critical because they enabled me to capture how these legislators perceived the manner in which flexibilities impacted charter schools.
The impact of flexibility in charter schools. When I interviewed the legislators about their perspectives on the impact of flexibility in charter schools, I received varied responses. Each had a bias or beliefs about such impact. One legislator admitted, “I can’t say really,” which was probably the most direct of all the answers.

Multiple legislators addressed their responses to the impact of policy latitude related to personnel issues. Three legislators mentioned the impact of policy latitude in the area of staff licensure. One said that such latitude better positioned charter schools to “attract the best person for your schools.” Another legislator elaborated to say that flexibility related to licensure provided opportunities for high-needs schools which really helps such communities. He continued by adding that charter schools could hire 50% of their staff without a license, which has “great implications for our high-needs school districts who can’t find teachers, licensed teachers.” The third legislator who spoke of human resource latitude highlighted the impact of a charter administrator being able to offer more money to compete with other schools in recruiting and retaining quality staff. He asserted that having flexibility to pay someone more money is something that benefits charter schools.

Another legislator shared that the flexibility of student behavior in charters is smaller class size. The next legislator focused on curriculum and the flexibility that charter selects the kind of curriculum that works best for their population of students.

**Policy Flexibility and Student Achievement**

Legislators were asked to describe the changes in performance, particularly in student achievement, that were linked to policy flexibility. The responses addressed class size, implementation of year-round school calendars, and cooperative innovative high school projects.
or early college high schools. Three of four of the legislator participants were able to respond; one simply felt that he did not know enough to have a useful opinion.

The legislator who focused on class size recognized that large classroom sizes in the traditional public schools do not provide students extra help to students who may need it. On the other hand, in the smaller class settings typical of charter schools, students who may need significant additional assistance can receive it. She added that this may be the reason that “kids in charter schools do well.”

The next legislator connected school calendar flexibility, additional instructional hours or longer school day, and the relative ease of implementing a year-round calendar with improved student performance. The interconnectedness of traditional public schools with other district schools sometimes makes year-round calendaring more difficult. The dynamics within the larger communities served by traditional schools complicate this issue further. This legislator participant believed this impacts students achievement because students start early or have additional instructional hours with a year-round calendar. This helps to bridge learning gaps, in this legislator’s opinion, because at-risk students are given an opportunity to learn even when they are on break. One legislator suggested that the “implementation of a year-round calendar for schools” helps improve student outcomes. The extra learning benefits those students who are at risk and need the extra time.

Although early college high schools are not charter schools, one legislator noted that, when the members of General Assembly enacted statutory support for this cooperative innovative high school project, they were providing opportunities to innovate in traditional public schools. He further asserted that such innovation had positively impacted students. These schools, he said, have had “outstanding impact, positive impact, both for the student and for the
family.” He pointed out that early college high schools have saved parents money, because their students are afforded the opportunity to earn college credits before entering higher education. In addition to saving parents money, early college high schools have had positive impact on student performance at the high school level. Early college high schools provide high school students with the opportunity to attain an associate’s degree or college transferable credit. The legislator believed that these programs “have resulted in improved outcomes for students.”

The legislators reflected, albeit in limited detail, about links between charter schools’ policy flexibility and other student outcomes. One legislator shared that traditional public schools are unfairly disadvantaged by the state’s alphabetical grades for school accountability designations. She maintained that this system sets up traditional schools to fail; charter schools, in her opinion, are not graded in the same way.

Another legislator said she had not “seen the link between flexibility and student achievement.” She argued that the students in charters will do well because they are “chosen by whatever means.” In her opinion, the system favors charter school students because they have flexibility to create smaller class sizes, plus the mere fact of a student being selected to be in a charter school gives her/him enhanced opportunities. On the other hand, the students in traditional public schools “have large classroom sizes,” which puts them in a precarious situation because typically the “kids who need the extra help” and time lack “the opportunity to receive them.” If flexibility were given to traditional schools like charter schools, she continued, it could help those who need it the most.

One of the legislators mentioned an outcome of charter education that he referred to as “changes of environment.” He explained that charters could change the environment for the student and make a positive impact in their performance because they are better meeting the
needs of their students. Having flexibility allows for a set of kids to reach challenging goals that could not have been achieved without the flexibility.

**Positive Impact of Flexibility**

It is worth noting here that, while much of the analysis of interview responses presented thus far clearly indicates a great deal of affirmation for policy flexibility, the legislators offered fairly limited commentary when asked about the positive impact of such flexibility. When legislator participants were asked whether they believed flexibility positively or negatively impacts public charter schools, those who felt strongly elaborated extensively on their responses. Those who did not have an opinion limited their answers. Examples of positive dimensions of flexibility that were shared included latitude with calendar, hiring, and curriculum and instruction.

Flexibility with hiring has provided charter principals with the broader discretion in running their schools, according to one of the legislators. The hiring flexibility is critical because “not every teacher works in every school,” and this individual explained that a teacher who does well in one school may not be as successful in another school.

Another legislator suggested that flexibility with curriculum and instruction has benefited charter schools, contending such flexibility should be available to both public charter schools and traditional public schools. He believed a school leadership team should have the flexibility to determine course offerings “in addition to the standard course of study,” and felt this would involve “extracurricular activities” for children to help further their learning.

**Negative Impact of Flexibility**

As far as negative impact of policy flexibility was concerned, one legislator simply asserted that flexibility does not negatively impact charter schools. The only time that this
legislator believed flexibility is negative is when its availability in charters is compared to the absence of flexibility in traditional public schools. Unfortunately, he did not elaborate further about why he believed such to be the case. Another shared that flexibility negatively impacts charter schools when someone fails to do their job, adding that this is something that builds over time and, in most cases, flexibility is the problem. Similarly, another legislator thought that when flexibility is abused, it has a negative impact because it hurts the reputation of the school in which it occurs and tarnishes the reputation of other charter schools. Students and staff at that particular school are further negatively impacted because the school may have to close.

Another legislator talked about the lack of knowledge some charter school administrators have regarding fiscal management because they are not finance people. Unlike circumstances in traditional schools, charter school administrators and fiscal officers do not have central office oversight or the safeguard of districtwide budgetary resources to assist them if they get into a financial bind. This legislator therefore felt that, with their limited experience, charter school administrators should not be responsible for leading a charter organization or large school budgets.

The flexibility to have non-certified individuals provide instruction in the classroom was cited by one legislator as having a negative impact on charter schools. These non-certified teachers lack behavior management skills; thus, the classroom is not managed well, which can cause students not to learn. Another shared that people’s failure to do their jobs has a negative impact. He seemed to believe this can happen more readily in a charter school where there is diminished oversight. The charter school could be in trouble, and no one would be aware until it is almost too late. He further shared that such a situation typically “doesn’t happen overnight.”
When problems like this go undetected, they can have a detrimental effect on students, staff, and an entire school community.

Overall, the legislators were not prone to associate policy flexibility with negative outcomes. The limited responses that I received about the negative effects of flexibility suggested that if someone abused the discretion afforded to them, they should lose it. Legislators did not really see major downsides to policy flexibility. This is consistent with, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, legislators indicating that they were largely supportive of policy flexibility, both in charter and traditional public schools.

**Lack of Focus**

During the latter part of the interview, the legislators got off topic as they responded to the set of questions that addressed the impact of policy of flexibility in charter schools. The data collection became challenging here, because they discussed other things that legislators could improve upon rather than responding to the questions. I found it difficult to redirect the conversation, because each participant appeared passionate about what they were sharing. In addition, in light of the qualitative protocol that I was following, I did not want to block responses that, while unrelated to the interview questions, might prove to be useful. One discussed discipline in schools and shared his belief in “old-fashioned discipline.” Another legislator editorialized about colleagues who overstep the legislator’s role, stating, “We’ve got to stop micromanaging our schools.” He went on to elaborate that the reason he believed this occurred was legislators’ fear of the public that they are allowing failure of the educational system.
Research Question 4

Research Question 4 was stated as follows: What are the perspectives of principals about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools? The qualitative data were collected from the interviews with the four charter school principals who participated in this study. Principals responded to a series of interview questions regarding the impact of flexibility in public charter schools that were similar to those to which the legislators responded.

Table 4.6 presents the items from the interview protocol for principals that were used to gather responses needed to answer Research Question 4.

Table 4.6

Matrix of Research Question 4 and Principal Participant Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ4 – What are the perspectives of principals about the impact of flexibility in</td>
<td>1. Do you believe that there are ways that flexibility positively impacts public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public charter schools?</td>
<td>charter schools? If so, which flexibilities and how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Do you believe that flexibility negatively impacts public charter schools? If</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>so, which flexibilities and how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Describe changes in school performance in North Carolina, particularly student</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>achievement, that you believe are linked to policy flexibility.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Are there some things that you thought you could do that it turns out you cannot?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Similar to the process with the legislator interviews, a transcription of the recordings was completed after each principal interview. The interview data were analyzed. Following the interviews with the four principals, I identified common themes, trends, and patterns from the responses of all participants. Transcripts were read and re-read utilizing Atlas.ti to capture codes.
The questions in Table 4.6 were addressed in sequence, and the responses of the four principals were coded in order to aid me in discerning the themes and topics regarding their perspectives on the impact of policy flexibility. In some instances, the participants provided information not addressed in the interview protocol. Similar to previous results, I elected to organize the findings from these interviews into thematic sub-subsections, rather than in the sequence of the interview items listed in Table 4.6.

**Positive Impact of Flexibility**

These participants spoke with passion and a tone of excitement when discussing this topic. The ability to lengthen the school day, adjust the school calendar, implement some creative tutoring, or simply provide support services for students are some of the things one principal mentioned as having positively impacted the school. He appreciated having flexibility with curriculum, going so far as to says that he had “full control over curriculum.”

One principal participant believed that the budget is the greatest example of the positive impact of flexibility. He appreciated having the opportunity to review what the greatest needs are in the school, as well as how he and the staff are trying to accomplish tasks and ensure that the budget aligns to the school’s mission. He went on to state, “We prioritize our spending based on what we feel we need.” He also noted that, even among charters, “we all do it differently.” This further demonstrated that the exercise of flexibility varies between charter schools and there is not a certain order in which things must be completed.

Another principal reflected on his first charter school experience. The capacity to numbly adjust plans was, in itself, a very positive impact. He recalled sitting at the table with his legal pad, reflecting upon and discussing with staff members the question, “What do we want our school to look like?” He noted that, if they chose to or needed to make adjustments to the
original plan as the school year progressed, they did so with ease. He stated, “Okay, well, we need to change this, we need to change that, and we were about to mold and redo what we can along the way. So that flexibility was great!” Collectively, he shared, he and the staff were able to make those things that were written on paper “come alive” and make real-time adjustments as needed.

One of the principals appeared to contradict some things other principals said earlier. He stated, “The bottom line is we have to do everything that a traditional public school has to do. We’re held accountable to the same standards in almost everything.” He added that people generally do not fully understand charter schools. “It is a little bit of a misconception,” he said, “Things that we’re not held accountable to, it’s typically because of the intrinsic difference between a charter school and a traditional.” He also noted that charter schools have to serve Exceptional Children (EC) in the manner in which they are served in traditional schools. This principal compared his time in traditional public schools to his time in charter schools, noting that the EC department at his charter school is larger than the EC department he supervised when he served as principal of a traditional school. This principal was speaking from the standpoint of over 30 years of traditional school experience.

**Negative Impact of Flexibility**

When asked to reflect on the negative dimensions of policy flexibility, the principals shared several thoughts. One of the four mentioned the negative impact of nepotism in charter schools. He elaborated on the practices he believed constituted nepotism, stating, “Friends. So, it comes out to the honesty and integrity and that’s where that flexibility is hard.” This same principal also spoke negatively about the motivations of some charter school organizations, stating that individuals working in charter schools who are not in charter education “for the right
reasons, they do things that benefit themselves more than it does kids or the schools.” An example was provided. Six of the 14 charter school applications for one school year were from the same organization. “My personal opinion is they’re in it for the dollar, and that’s where that flexibility is hard. And the only bad part is if they’d get to a certain point before they’re caught, the money’s gone. Kids have to suffer.” Another principal pointed out that a charter school can put money towards things that are not going to best enhance student performance, thereby negatively impacting schools. Unfortunately, however, he did not elaborate or share specific examples.

Two principals did not offer perspectives that flexibility negatively impacted charter schools. One of the two mentioned that charter schools in some instances opted out of federal programs, thus limiting their funding. Yet this charter principal believed that the choice was worthwhile because the decision provided more flexibility since schools that make this choice are not confined to the restrictions attached to the money. He stated, “If you don’t take Title I money, then you don’t have to adhere to all the standards that Title I throws at you.” Another mentioned that charters that are less mature have leaders who may not understand “how to balance all of those things; as a result, the performance suffers.”

Overall, the principals were varied in their responses to the interview prompt regarding the negative impact of policy flexibility. I noticed them struggling initially with a response. From this, I gathered that flexibility and negative impact did not seem to be a natural association for the principals when this question was asked. One principal stated, “I can’t say anything that handicaps due to flexibility.”
Policy Flexibility and Student Achievement

Similar to legislators, principals were asked to describe the changes in performance, particularly student achievement, that were linked to policy flexibility. The responses addressed human resources, calendar flexibility, teaching flexibility, and budget. All four principals shared strong opinions on the subject, and two out of the four elaborated quite a bit on the topic.

Three of the four principals shared something about the hiring of teachers that they believed correlated student achievement with policy flexibility. Two of the three asserted that their ability to hire teachers and adjust teachers’ salaries made a big impact. One shared his view on hiring teachers who did not possess the licensure credentials ordinarily required in a traditional public school district:

I think that probably defies conventional wisdom because you’d think that hiring non-licensed teachers is just going to lead to lower academic outcomes. But I would argue the opposite, at least in our case….I’ve turned down a lot of teachers with credentials, a lot of teachers with teaching experience, a lot of teachers with master’s degrees. And instead hired a college student fresh out of college with no teaching experience….And the purpose behind all that is we believe that if a person has the right mindset, we can actually get them to grow and outperform teachers who have fixed mindsets…and the flexibility that we have with hiring licensed and unlicensed teachers has been proven in our data over the last several years.

Throughout this portion of the interview, he went on to share that his leadership team seeks and recruits teachers and staff members with the “right mindset,” which he believed has contributed to student success over the years. The next principal strongly felt his ability “to put money where we feel it is best used—teacher salaries” is one way that he knows policy flexibility has helped
student achievement. He compared Wake County, which has a lot of local money, to Franklin County, which does not have a lot of local money. The ability of his charter school to “offer a competitive salary to Wake County Public Schools” helps the school greatly. He said that he knows that he can “pull in high quality teachers” because of the “competitive salary.” This principal linked the ability to provide competitive salaries to his capacity to acquire higher quality teachers and principals. In turn, he linked this flexibility to outcomes; if a school pays people more money, the school will get better student achievement results.

The next leader approached the topic of hiring teachers as a benefit to student achievement differently by adding that the flexibility allowed him to not renew teachers whose data results demonstrated that their instruction lacked rigor and relevance. He further noted that “flexibility allowed us to affect change.” He recalled serving in traditional schools and having to work with the “wait-ya teachers.” He described these teachers as those who would wait the new school administrator out because the principal would usually be gone before the teachers were removed. The relative ease of non-renewing a teacher is a flexibility this principal seemed to be empowered by and appreciate.

Calendar flexibility, while generally appreciated among these principals, is something that only one of the principals believed contributed to student achievement. He strongly believed that the flexibility in the school day and year afforded his students with more time. The “extra time has really allowed us to target students who need it, to give extra tutoring services and help students achieve, and actually just grow a lot.” He contributes the school’s high growth to the investment made with the extra time. The school year begins earlier than is the case in most schools and the school day is extended. He argued that “it’s hard to catch a student up in that race if they’re already two or three laps behind.” In other words, if students are several grade
levels behind, the calendar flexibility allowed the school to make adjustments necessary to get students caught up.

The benefit of having the ability to make decisions when it came to teaching and curriculum was shared by two of the principals. One addressed the flexibility in teaching. Teachers avoid “cookie cutter” approaches to instruction at her school, as she does not require her teachers to teach the exact the same content or by the same methods. They do not use a pacing guide and are allowed freedom to do what they discern is best for their students. The other principal talked about writing his own curriculum. He shared that the “teachers write their own curriculum based on the state standards,” and the school used technology resources instead of textbooks:

I’m not being told how to teach; I’m not being told what to teach beyond the state standards.

My lessons aren’t scripted, so I don’t have to be on page 302 on day 150 of the school year.

The teachers love the flexibility of being able to teach the standards but teach them how they love to teach, whatever that may be.

This kind of latitude, in the opinion of these principals, makes for a happier school environment in which teachers and principals take advantage of the flexibility in doing their jobs.

The flexibility charter schools have with the budget was woven throughout the other topics mentioned. This was especially so in the area of hiring teachers and securing materials purchased for classrooms. Principals shared that they appreciated the policy flexibility to make budgetary decisions for their respective schools.

**Limits on Flexibility**

During the interviews with the four charter school principals, each of whom had experience as an administrator in a traditional public school, I asked the question, “Are there
some things that you thought you could do that it turns out you cannot?” For the greater part, they shared that they could not think of restrictions or flexibilities they do not have as charter school leaders. They agreed that they feel the flexibility to secure or enact everything they need to do to run their schools. That said, a couple of examples of unanticipated constraints were mentioned.

One charter school principal provided an example of legislation that allows students who perform well on their End of Grade (EOG) tests to take the next level or an advanced class in the same content. This is the sort of thing that he would have presumed charter schools could enact out of their policy flexibility. Instead, he learned that, initially, this did not apply to charter schools. At the time of the study, he was not at complete liberty to enact the practice; this principal is going to have to work to ensure that his students have the opportunity to take advanced classes.

One of the principals shared that, in her decade of charter school experience, she ran into constraints with her plans for a “blended learning experience” for students. She referred to this as students having the opportunity to take classes virtually and in person. She discerned that the state’s Department of Public Instruction (DPI) would have a difficult time with this idea because of the scrutiny that its virtual charter schools were receiving. She and her colleagues learned, to their disappointment, that while they thought that they “could have more flexibility in the way we deliver instruction to our kids, to try more personalized learning…we really cannot.” The combination of virtual and face-to-face learning was, therefore, not something that was being offered to students at the time of the interview because it would not be approved by the DPI. It should be noted that this interview occurred in the months that preceded the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though these principals uniformly presumed to have extensive
latitude, one noted that he still likes to clear things in advance. He noted how meticulous he has been in contacting the Office of Charter Schools to be sure of what he was approved to do.

In closing, Research Question 4 was an examination of how principal participants in the study shared their perspectives of the impact of policy flexibility in public charter schools. Overall, the analysis of their responses to the five interview questions allowed me to determine patterns and themes from their perspectives about what those flexibilities are and the positive and negative impact that policy latitude has had on charter schools. Their perceptions regarding the impact flexibility was based on their experiences and knowledge and included comparisons based on their prior experience in traditional public schools.

**Research Question 5**

Research Question 5 was a qualitative research question. Data were derived from the survey responses of principals in The Innovation Project (TIP) restart initiative. The survey is provided in Appendix I. The items were a series of open-ended queries. From the 83 original restart schools in the TIP districts, 31 respondents responded to and completed the survey distributed by TIP, which is a response rate of 37%.

The restart model gives school leaders the flexibility to be creative and implement charter-like flexibility. The participants were North Carolina principals who had been granted charter-like flexibility because of their participation in the Restart Program. My purpose for using the survey data was to gather information for my fifth research question, which reads as follows: In what ways do principals of traditional public schools in northeast North Carolina that have been granted policy flexibility use this flexibility? The data were in the form of written responses to open-ended items 1, 2, and 3 from the survey. TIP’s leaders provided consent for my review of these responses (Appendix I).
I analyzed participants’ responses through a thematic coding process. I captured quotes and created a code family from the TIP survey responses. From this process, I identified emergent themes and topics in the survey data. I analyzed these themes and topics in an effort to determine the ways traditional public school principals in restart schools were innovating and the ways they had begun to use or were planning to use charter-like flexibility.

TIP is a participant in the restart initiative. In 2015, legislators voted to allow traditional public schools that have been categorized as low-performing by the state to have charter-like flexibility in order to improve their processes and performance. TIP was organized in 2015 and, at the time of its initial survey, had 18 school districts throughout the state participating in its restart initiative. At that time, there were 83 schools that had adopted a restart model. The survey was administered by TIP as a preliminary survey of principals in the restart collaborative. Principals described how they were innovating in several categories and how they might use policy flexibility. The content that follows is organized according to the three items in the survey that were pertinent to my study.

For Survey Item 1, principals were asked to respond to the following prompt: As a restart school, you have additional flexibility in several important areas. In a few sentences, please briefly describe any innovative practices your school is putting into place in each of the following categories. The first category, which was enumerated as Item 1.a, was staffing (licensure, evaluation, staff roles, pay, duties). The most frequently mentioned innovations that these participants articulated in the staffing category addressed certification and hiring some type of coach. Multiple respondents mentioned allowing teachers to teach outside of their certification area. One shared in the survey that his Exceptional Children (EC) teacher had difficulty passing the Praxis assessment, which is a certification test mandated by the state. Unfortunately, this
particular principal’s EC teacher took the exam several times and could not pass it. However, because of this newfound flexibility, the teacher’s position was spared.

Other principals referenced using the flexibility to have teachers provide instruction outside of their licensure area. “We have used staffing flexibility to have teachers teach out of certification area as needed. We have not created any new position categories, but hope to do that in the future.” An example shared by a principal in this section was hiring a part-time art teacher. Another of the staffing positions that stood out was a “community outreach/receptionist position who is integral part of our Hispanic community involvement.” The respondents also described the innovation of providing coaches; specifically, they mentioned classroom culture coaches and behavior coaches. Both types of coaches would work with teachers. However, the behavior coach would also work with students and their families. The behavior coach would help schools jumpstart the Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) program.

One principal shared the results of having the flexibility to increase pay for members of the staff. The respondent said, “Paying staff a stipend for extended day tutoring with highly qualified teachers…Staff came in over the summer for four days for intense professional development and, in turn, were able to trade out teacher workdays during the school year to take off.” The opportunity to have these types of flexibilities allowed these principals to explore and implement staffing innovations not previously available to them.

The second prompt under Survey Item 1, Item 1.b, invited restart principals to describe innovative practices related to the use of space and time (calendar, scheduling, innovative learning spaces). The most frequently mentioned time-use strategy was a non-traditional calendar. With these calendar innovations, principals mentioned strategies involving the use of days in the summer. Four principals discussed training staff over the summer, and they saw this
as a way to promote professional development. Only one of the four mentioned providing a
summer work stipend. Each of the four mentioned either swapping workdays for the Fall or
providing some kind of planning days throughout the year to compensate for the work completed
during the summer. Time use innovations also included those related to hours of instruction for
students. One principal wrote about extending the day “for 60 students – 2 days a week for
intensive academic remediation.” This principal also made reference to providing dinner for
students before they went home following each session. Another mentioned offering a “jumpstart
to the school year 3 weeks in advance;” this would be offered to students who were not
proficient on state tests.

The last element in Item 1.b addressed innovative learning spaces. Two respondents
shared they were considering a sensory integration behavior coach, teacher, and related lab for
students. Three principals were hoping to partner with the community college to offer magnet
themes connected to careers with a collaborative effort to teach technical classes, classes for
college students, and a program for student success. Two of the principals were looking into
putting something in place for students in Grades 3-5; one principal described an intervention
room and another shared an idea of a “pushing in” program for class involvement for English as
a Second Language (ESL) students during a reading block for students. One wanted to
personlize advisory time with students and create a “development period to start every
morning…a flex block period to allow students period for in-school tutoring, clubs, and
enrichment course.”

Survey Item 1.c prompted principals to describe the innovative practices their schools are
putting into place in the area of curriculum (education programs, materials, tests). The most
frequently cited innovations were curricular in nature. Examples included an art integration
initiative, an English Learner curriculum for students in Grades K-5, and the implementation of a tutoring program. One principal mentioned using tutors to assist and provide small groups for math instruction. Other curricular innovations included restorative justice content, blended learning with an engineering focus, and International Baccalaureate (IB) implementation. An elementary principal addressed the use of mCLASS interim assessments to set student goals. Another principal discussed researching STEM and STEAM as models for the delivery of instruction. Three principals said they either did not have any innovations planned at the time of the survey or were in the planning stage.

In Item 1.d, principals responded to a prompt about the next category of innovations, which was school culture and discipline. Respondents provided varied responses. The most common innovation, which was addressed by five principals, was implementation of restorative justice practices. Only one elaborated, however, and this respondent cited the “use of restorative practices as a whole school model to decrease off-task behaviors and develop character traits to yield success from students and teachers.” Another respondent mentioned MTSS. Only one principal mentioned PBIS. This was a bit surprising, because PBIS was used throughout the state at the time of the survey. One leader shared that the practice of wearing uniforms had already been implemented at the school. This principal was looking to include yoga and mindfulness as innovations. Two respondents discussed sensory classrooms and two suggested the possibility of hiring additional staff, such as a school counselor and a school therapist.

In Survey Item 1.e, principals responded to the last category of innovative practices: community engagement (staff and community buy-in). This section elicited more detailed responses. The most frequent strategy mentioned was some type of forum for community and families. The explanation from one principal was that this would provide an opportunity to share
what was happening in the school and invite the community members’ participation. Another respondent mentioned having families to complete surveys. Two principals acknowledged they were still planning community engagement activities. One wrote of putting something in place to connect with bilingual families. Another shared the need to create parent academies that offer monthly afterschool classes on helping students and include providing a meal for these families.

In Survey Item 2, principals responded to the question: Are there other innovative practices your school is putting into place as a restart? The principals did not have much to contribute in response to this question. The most common response was “not at this time.” Some principals who appeared to be further along in either their thought processes or actions related to innovation shared that they were looking at implementing daily morning meetings. Sensory integration was addressed by two principals, and another discussed afterschool enrichment sessions for students that would be accomplished by extending the school day 1 to 2 days a week. Authentic assessment was mentioned by another principal.

In Survey Item 3, principals answered the question: How will you use financial flexibility to enable the innovations you discussed above? The principals were varied in their responses. All four of the principals were interested in adding more staff positions. One elaborated that hiring more teachers would allow the school to close gaps in student performance. One of the principals indicated an intent to use non-certified staff members in positions, while another shared, “not having to follow class size restrictions has made an additional position available that we will turn to cash to use to support our efforts.” Several principals were still in the planning process when they completed this survey. One of them stated, “We will utilize these flexibilities as we gain clarity.”
Overall, these principals indicated that they were doing or planned to do different things to meet the needs at their schools. Many did not respond with definitive answers at the time they completed this survey. Some principals made attempts to look at options rarely implemented, or even considered, in traditional schools, while other responses described practices that were similar to things already being done in traditional public school settings.

Legislators’ and Principals’ Perceptions of The Innovation Project’s restart Initiative

I asked two questions to legislators and principals about The Innovation Project’s restart initiative during the previously-reported interviews that I conducted with them. These questions were worded as follows:

- What kind of flexibility do you anticipate having for the school(s) in The Innovation Project?
- What tangible outcomes do you anticipate will be related to the flexibility received by schools in The Innovation Project?

The responses from these interview questions were analyzed, transcribed, and coded. I used these data to discern themes in the legislators’ perspectives regarding the restart initiative.

Two of the four legislators initially appeared to not recall what the work of The Innovation Project entailed. I was asked to remind them what the collaborative was about. Three of the four legislators did not speak favorably about The Innovation Project. It is important to note that, as the discussion continued, it became clear these legislators were critical of the school restart model, which the legislature had enacted, and not The Innovation Project as an entity.

One of the legislators simply referred to The Innovation Project as a “disaster,” but unfortunately did not elaborate on the reasons. The next legislator said that she was not a fan of The Innovation Project, asserting, “I haven’t seen any record or data that tells me that this is the
way to help students achieve.” She went on to discuss the importance of getting buy-in from the community. The third legislator shared she was not supportive of the way The Innovation Project is set up in its current design. She said, “I do know that we have to make some changes if the kids are going to perform who are not performing.” In other words, since the restart model was not acceptable to her, she felt some other intervention must be employed to help all students succeed and perform well academically.

The final legislator shared his thoughts on The Innovation Project by simply stating that if charter-like flexibility were uniformly available, “we would have a happier workforce, and happier students, so customer satisfaction.” He elaborated to add that such flexibility should also lead to better outcomes for kids. Families and students would be pleased because teachers and administrators would be afforded the opportunity to innovate in ways they have never been able to do without the flexibility. The flexibility they are able to implement through restart would lead to better student academic results.

Two of the four principals appeared to be sufficiently knowledgeable of the initiative to discuss the restart schools. One conveyed that he was serving at-risk students and had chosen to extend the school day and year. This principal appreciated the notion that participants in restart have the mechanism and flexibility with their budget to add positions, such as counselors or social workers. The other principal stated, “I’m not a proponent for the restart schools and The Innovation Project.” He went on and appeared to change his mind by noting that these schools are given charter flexibility and can do things differently. He did not convey why he was not a proponent. The other two principals were not familiar with the restart collaborative and did not feel comfortable sharing an opinion. One shared his belief that restart schools should change their curriculum and do something different with personnel, such as “hiring and recruitment,”
which would be the top things he believed they should change if those schools had this newfound flexibility.

**Chapter Summary**

The findings from this qualitative research study provided insights into how legislators, charter school principals with traditional school experience, and traditional public school principals in the Restart Program perceive the utility and impact of policy flexibility. The study focused on five research questions. Data were collected through the interview responses of North Carolina charter school principals and legislators, as well as from the archival data collected by TIP through the survey completed by 31 traditional school principals in the restart collaborative. I used the interview protocol to determine how principals and legislators perceived the availability, utility, and impact of policy flexibility. I utilized the archival results gathered from the TIP survey to assess how principals in restart schools described innovations and plans for use of their newfound policy latitude.

Overall, results from the interviews and survey indicated that principals appreciated having the flexibility to make decisions to do what they perceived as best for the students. A very consistent response from legislators was their belief that traditional public schools should also be granted charter-like flexibility; however, they disagreed with the Restart Program model that was, at the time of the study, the only current way some traditional school principals could receive charter-like flexibility. I do not believe their concerns related to the idea of traditional public schools having charter-like flexibility, but rather to how the restart model is implemented. The survey results also disclosed that the traditional public school principals were in the initial phase of the restart and were trying to develop a plan utilizing the flexibility they had been granted.
Chapter 4 covered the findings from the research that I conducted in order to discern policymaker and practitioner perceptions of policy flexibility and its impact. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of these findings. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for policy and practice, along with suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the study results described in Chapter 4. It begins with a summary of the major study findings. Reflections on the implications of the study follow. I also include practical and theoretical implications of these findings for policy and practice. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was divided in three parts. Initially, I examined the perspectives of North Carolina legislators and charter school principals who previously served as traditional school principals about extending policy flexibility to traditional public schools. Next, I interviewed legislators and charter school principals to understand their perspectives regarding the impact of policy flexibility in public charter schools. Lastly, I reviewed and analyzed historical data from the North Carolina The Innovation Project survey to determine how the principals of restart schools initially planned to use the policy flexibility they received.

Summary of Findings

The findings of the study are addressed by the examination of data related to five qualitative research questions and a review of archival survey data from principal participants in The Innovation Project (TIP) restart initiative. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools?
2. What are the perspectives of northeast North Carolina charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools?
3. What are the perspectives of policymakers about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?

4. What are the perspectives of charter school principals about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?

5. In what ways do principals of traditional public schools in northeast North Carolina that have been granted policy flexibility use this flexibility?

I asked about and reported principal and legislator participant demographics. The participants were four North Carolina legislators who had experience in dealing with charter school legislation and were serving on the education committees of their respective chambers. The legislators were evenly split by race; 50% of the legislators were males and 50% were females. The racial identities of the legislator participants were also evenly split; 50% were White and 50% identified as Black. All the participants had served as a principal in a traditional school setting before serving as a principal in a charter school. My principal participant group was not as diverse as the legislative group; 100% of principal participants were White, 75% were men, and 25% were female. The last group of participants consisted of 31 North Carolina principals whose schools were given charter-like flexibility as a result of participation in the Restart Program. These 31 restart principals had responded to a survey and represented 37% of the principal participants in the TIP restart initiative. The demographics and backgrounds of the TIP survey principal participants were not collected.

I analyzed interview results by determining common themes, patterns, and trends. I transcribed and coded the information. Research Question 1 addressed North Carolina policymakers’ perspectives about extending to traditional schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools. A series of interview questions was used to gather the data
needed for this research question. Legislators were able to share how they define policy flexibility and their perspectives about charter-like flexibility, how it is used, and whether it would be valuable to extend such latitude to traditional public schools. A qualitative analysis revealed that the four legislator participants supported traditional public schools and largely agreed policy flexibility should be granted to traditional public schools. These legislators also agreed they sometimes lacked the knowledge and background to make optimal decisions about education in North Carolina; much of the basis for their decisions was their own experiences. As a result, throughout the interviews with legislators, their responses were often more general than specific. They also acknowledged that partisanship among legislators impacts decisions on education policy in North Carolina.

Research Question 2 was similar to Research Question 1, but obtained the perspectives of charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools. As with the legislators, the charter school principal participants’ interview protocol was used to gather data for this research question. A qualitative analysis demonstrated that these charter school principals who once served in a traditional school setting appreciated having flexibility in the charter school setting, and they agreed that principals in traditional school settings should have the same flexibility. The principals were adamantly in favor of “good” schools serving students so they could obtain a great education. The principals were consistent in their belief that they were able to make many changes in charter schools which they were not able to make in traditional school settings.

Research Question 3 examined the perspectives of policymakers about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools. The four legislators in this study provided insights into the impact of policy flexibility on student achievement. Three cited examples of charter school
practices that they believed impacted student achievement in schools, including smaller class sizes and flexibility with instructional days and hours. The consensus among these legislators was that policy flexibility has a positive impact on student achievement. One legislator said she had not concluded there was a link between the policy flexibility available to charter schools and the achievement of their students.

While limited in their commentary about other impacts of flexibility in charter schools, legislators mentioned flexibility with staff credentials, curriculum, and instructional practice as examples of positive dimensions of such policy latitude. It should also be noted that flexibility with staff credentialing was cited as a negative impact of flexibility by one legislator. Other negative impacts of policy flexibility in charters, from the vantage point of the legislators, included heightened opportunities for fiscal mismanagement and somewhat non-specific concerns about the abuse of such authority.

Research Question 4 also addressed the impact of flexibility in public charter schools, but from the perspective of the principal participants. The principals were varied in their responses about the positive and negative impact of policy flexibility. Some of the positive impacts included discretion over the school calendar, academic curriculum, and creative implementation of tutoring for students. They appreciated having expansive flexibility to prioritize their spending. Policy latitude with human resources issues, such as faculty credentials, flexible salaries, and the removal of problem performers, were areas of flexibility that these leaders believed positively affected student achievement.

While generally having the opportunity to choose what is best for their schools was a positive impact discussed by the principals, one of the leaders shared that charter leaders often have to follow and adhere to expectations similar to those of traditional school leaders. This
contradicted the perspectives of the other principals who focused more on their access to the flexibility to do what they need to do in their schools. They uniformly found such latitude to be positive and could not think of flexibility restrictions that limited what they were able to do. These principals felt they had all the flexibility needed to run their respective schools. Their perspectives about the positive and negative impacts of policy flexibility were shaped not only by their present experience in charter schools, but also by comparisons to what they had done previously as administrators in traditional public schools.

Research Question 5 examined the qualitative data results from the survey responses of principals who participated in The Innovation Project restart initiative. These responses provided insights from school principals in traditional public schools about newly-instated charter-like flexibility and how they opted to utilize that flexibility. Of the 83 principals in the restart initiative, 31 responded, which is a 37% response rate. The principals varied in their plans to implement this newfound flexibility.

I examined responses to the three items in the survey that pertained to my study. The first survey item asked participants to share the innovative practices they were going to implement at their school. Flexibility related to the certification of teachers was one of the innovations most frequently mentioned, as was flexibility in paying staff. Some principals wanted to take advantage of compensating staff for additional duties and working in extended day programs. Several principals mentioned scheduling and use of time as a means of innovation. Some described the use of a non-traditional calendar. Others noted they were considering extending the school day or offering a jumpstart session for students. Flex-block was also described as a potential time use innovation, and principals additionally explored innovations with curriculum. The survey also addressed how principals planned to innovate in the area of staff and community
buy-in. Innovations included expanded mechanisms for parent input along the lines of community forums and surveys. Respondents described plans for parent academies and monthly after-school classes with a closing meal for families who attend.

In response to the third survey item, which inquired about the ways principals would use financial flexibility to enable the innovations mentioned above, principals were varied in their responses. The most frequent theme conveyed the idea of adding additional staff or using non-certified staff in different positions. Otherwise, their plans for use of budgetary discretion did not seem very well-formulated. As so many of the survey participants were still in the planning phase at the time of the survey, it is likely that they were still trying to brainstorm and determine how they were going to implement and utilize this newfound flexibility.

During their interviews, I asked legislators and charter school principals what they thought about The Innovation Project’s restart initiative. Three out of four legislators did not see The Innovation Project as being a success. One even used the term “disaster” to describe it. The last legislator saw the flexibility as an opportunity for better outcomes for students. Only two of the charter school principals were knowledgeable about the restart initiative. One spoke favorably of the extension of policy flexibility to the restart schools, while the other was not favorably disposed toward the restart concept. It is important to note that interview participants who spoke negatively about this initiative appeared to be critical of the restart school reform model and not The Innovation Project as an entity.

Discussion of Findings

The full impact of charter school policy flexibility in North Carolina has not been examined. Charter schools have been a point of contention in North Carolina; they were initially authorized by House Bill 955 in 1996. One of the principal participants in my study provided
historical context by discussing the reasons charter schools were first authorized in North Carolina. Among the rationales for charters was the assertion that such schools would serve as “incubators of innovation.” It was further believed that collaboration among charter and traditional public schools would serve as a means for disseminating and adopting promising reforms. But, this participant observed, charter schools are not held accountable for innovation and collaboration is not happening.

The withholding of charter-like flexibility from traditional public schools is one of the issues in contention. If the original intent of dissemination of useful practices was happening to the level and degree anticipated, then traditional schools would be benefitting from the expansion of knowledge and innovation and the exercise of flexibility in charter schools. However, it was not until 2015, nearly two decades after the original charter school bill was enacted in North Carolina, that some traditional public schools in North Carolina became eligible to obtain charter-like flexibility. From the results of my study, I conclude that key policymakers and charter school leaders, in general, believe that traditional public schools should be granted charter-like flexibility. Analysis of the data to answer the five research questions produced interesting and instructive findings. The following subsections outline these findings, discuss their meaning, and examine their consistency with extant literature.

**Extension of Flexibility to Traditional Public Schools**

While legislators defined flexibility differently, they all agreed traditional public schools should receive policy latitude. Legislators in other states, including Florida and Michigan, have voiced similar perspectives (DeGrow, 2018; Solocek, 2017). The initial response of the North Carolina legislators in this study was an enthusiastic endorsement for policy flexibility but, as they continued in the discussion, a few of the legislators added some caveats. For example, one
said that flexibility should first be piloted before being universally extended to traditional public schools. Others wanted conditions placed on the flexibility that might be extended to traditional public schools. There was a common theme among these legislators to trust the experts (district leaders, principals, and teachers), but several still wanted the flexibility to be conditional. Additionally, it should be noted that while these legislators supported extending flexibility to traditional public schools, they were only four members of the General Assembly. When asked about the perspective of other legislators, one observed that a tendency to control and micromanage is evident among legislators. Another, who is a Democrat, shared that Republicans speak of expanding jurisdiction to traditional schools, but do not deliver.

Whatever the partisan perspectives, the fact that it took nearly two decades for legislators to extend policy flexibility to a relatively small number of traditional schools with the restart initiative is a strong indication of how much North Carolina legislators actually want traditional public schools to have charter-like flexibility. That said, it is not uncommon for state legislatures to cling to budgetary caution and insist on oversight (McKinney, 2016). Even so, McKinney’s (2016) article said that to “test” charter-like flexibility, legislators allowed 19 low-performing North Carolina public schools the budgetary discretion afforded to charter schools. At present, summary conclusions about this public policy experiment are pending. Dunn (2019) provided information about an entire North Carolina school district, Rowen-Salisbury, which received charter-like flexibilities. However, five years into the modest extension of such policy latitude, the results of the provision of budgetary and other flexibilities in public schools have not been conclusively examined. Thus, conclusions about whether policy discretion in traditional public schools should be expanded do not appear to have any traction in the North Carolina General Assembly.
The finding of this study indicating that these four legislators support providing charter-like flexibility to traditional public schools contradicts the conclusions of McKinney (2016), who observed that North Carolina policymakers have been reluctant to give traditional schools such latitude. Despite the support of these legislators for expanding the jurisdiction of traditional public schools, consistent with McKinney’s observations, the majority of North Carolina legislators appear to remain largely reluctant to giving charter-like flexibilities to traditional public schools.

Like the legislator participants, the principals who participated in this study expressed enthusiasm for the extension of policy flexibility to traditional public schools. Each of these four principals had served previously as building administrators in traditional public schools, and they all felt strongly and favorably about the flexibility they have enjoyed as charter school principals. They reflected on their experience in traditional school settings and noted circumstances in which they did not feel freedom of action because the central office was engrossed in whatever they were doing and dictated much of the work they did at the school level. Unlike their experience in traditional schools, the flexibility they had in charter schools made them feel they were in control of what happened in their buildings. The principals articulated why charters were created, and one pointed out that charters are not being held accountable for conveying the knowledge about and benefits of such practices to traditional schools. These principals had a great appreciation for the flexibility they have at the charter schools.

As charter school principals, they appreciated having autonomy and believed that the flexibility they were afforded contributed greatly to their ability to get things done for their students. One charter principal went so far as to suggest that traditional school principals often leave public schools to have more flexibility to run their schools as they prefer. Bureaucracy is
one of the reasons most often cited when traditional public school leaders describe the restrictions of their role as principal (Pendola, 2019). Farkas et al. (2003) found that "More than pressure from the standards movement, or unhappiness over salaries, or worry over the rapid turnover of personnel, school leaders say the bane of their existence is the pervasiveness of politics and bureaucracy" (p. 32). In a study of charter and public school principals, Vickers (2014) shared:

Charter public school principals are perceived to have more influence in the areas of establishing curriculum and providing professional development. This perceived power in the area of curriculum and professional development is likely to be the result of the high level of autonomy that charter public principals often possess at the building level. (p.103)

One of the principals in this study said, “I’d be far more eager to go back to a traditional district if I had that kind of flexibility that I enjoyed at the charter school.” This comment indicated how vital the opportunity to exercise such flexibility is to this principal. After this response, I began to wonder just how many traditional public school educators who are now in charter school settings would return if they were granted the same flexibilities school leaders are provided in charter schools. One of the charter school leaders noted not having to report to upper management for school decisions, unlike his previous experiences in traditional school settings, which this principal said enabled him to get things done more efficiently. He attributed this to being able to make all the decisions under one roof, as opposed to having to get things approved from central office as traditional school leaders are required to do.

The principals in this study noted that they particularly enjoyed the budget flexibility. The leeway to spend and shift school funds, however, is a latitude that comes with potential pitfalls, including mismanagement of funds that could lead to a charter school closing. The
opportunity to be competitive and pay teachers more in an effort to compete with area districts is a strategic human resource strategy. They noted appreciation for being able to hire staff members of their preference, whether licensed or not, and reported that they offer competitive salaries to secure personnel they believe are the “best fit” for their schools.

This study’s findings regarding charter school principals’ support for the extension of flexibility to traditional public schools are not replicated in any of the literature that I reviewed. Therefore, even if not a unique finding, this finding about the extension of policy latitude to traditional public schools appears to be one that is rare in the literature. Conversely, the perspectives of this study’s participants regarding the reduced/limited bureaucracy with which they contend as charter school principals are consistent with previous literature indicating that flexibility would reduce bureaucracy. The principals’ viewpoints are aligned with Finnegan’s (2007) conclusion that charter schools benefit from more autonomy and latitude and Lubienski’s (2003) assertion that autonomy and latitude lead to innovation and positive impact.

It appears that past research does not offer many examples of charter principals championing more flexibility for traditional schools. Loss of a competitive advantage might be one explanation. Such competition is one of the reasons indirectly suggested by one of the principals I interviewed. He made a statement indicating that, if he had enjoyed similar flexibilities in the traditional public school where he previously worked, he probably would not have left to go to a charter school. Notably, there was also a bit of condescension among the charter school principals in this study. While they were positive about the extension of flexibility to traditional public schools, they occasionally hinted that offering flexibility to traditional school leaders might give them something they could not handle. They appeared to believe that traditional schools would benefit from having flexibility, but also indicated that such flexibility
should be accompanied by accountability or some type of stipulations. One principal who expressed support for extending charter-like flexibilities to traditional schools did so with the expectation that accountability for such latitude would be added. This participant added that, if accountability were included, then schools would have better motivation to exercise the flexibility prudently. The irony of this comment is that this individual spoke of additional accountability for traditional schools when already they must adhere to more rigid policy constraints and more exacting accountability requirements.

**Impact of Policy Flexibility**

Both groups of participants were largely positive about the impact of flexibility in charter schools. Legislators were more descriptive of the impact of flexibility on the processes of schooling than on outcomes. One legislator flatly asserted there was not a link between flexibility and student outcomes. Legislators highlighted the flexibility that charter principals employed. The flexibility gave principals the capacity to do things differently. While the legislators did not go into great detail about the impact of policy flexibility outcomes, they did note its influence on process.

Similar to the legislators, principals were vague about the direct impact that charter schools have made in the overall outcomes of public education, one of the original justifications for charter education, or on results in their individual schools. Legislators and principals offered opinions about the kinds of flexibilities that would provide value for traditional public schools, although they did acknowledge that the impact on achievement would likely be indirect. Latitude with personnel issues, according to both groups, was one of the most impactful components of charter school flexibility. According to multiple legislators and principals, the ability to hire staff, with or without licensing certification, is profoundly impactful. Innovations with calendar,
scheduling, and smaller class size were additional ways they have used flexibility of process to help children achieve better. They strongly believed that smaller class sizes provide for more personalized instruction, and they equated access to smaller classes with academic success. Principals appreciated the opportunity to alter their calendar, especially offering a year-round calendar model to bridge learning gaps. These observations about the impact of flexibility on the processes of schooling are consistent with Lubienski’s (2003) conclusions that flexibility and the resulting innovation improve student outcomes. Additionally, many experts and advocates believe this latitude is beneficial in giving parents more autonomy and choice, allowing for innovation in education, greater competition, and improved student achievement (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Wells et al., 1998). This aligns with the views of this study’s participants about the impact of flexibility on process and achievement.

There were some negative reflections in this study on the impact of policy flexibility. The state legislators were concerned about the exercise of fiscal discretion in some charter schools and seemed more hesitant about the extension of such budget flexibility to traditional public schools. The principal participants also expressed concern about this area of latitude, but to a lesser degree. One legislator captured the perceptions of his counterparts succinctly; the discussion centered around the need for caution as it relates to budgetary discretion. The hesitancy to extend fiscal flexibility to traditional schools was fostered, in part, by the experience of some charter school administrators. The legislator mentioned that the limited experience and fiscal management practices of some charter administrators has caused concerns in the past. Another legislator spoke of the lack of oversight for some charter school budgets. That is, traditional public school leaders have central office directors of finance who provide oversight and monitor spending, but such regulatory guardrails are less prevalent in charter schools.
Unlike traditional schools, charter schools are given funds with significantly fewer stipulations. The theory of action has largely been that innovative charter schools will produce higher performance, in part because of fiscal autonomy. My findings regarding policymakers’ concerns about the prospect of fiscal issues in charter schools, and in traditional public schools if they are given greater flexibility, are consistent with the extant body of literature. According to Schwenkenberg and Vanderhoff (2014), “financial mismanagement is an often cited reason for [charter] school closure” (p. 4). The charter principals in my study enjoyed the latitude they have with their budgets, but several also acknowledged that one of the quickest ways to be shut down is to mismanage funds. This aligns with Ladd and Singleton (2018), who noted that charters may close for various reasons, one of which is financial mismanagement. The conclusions of these authors underscore how critically important it is for charters to manage their funds appropriately in order to remain open.

While the potential of fiscal impropriety did come up among the charter school principals in my study, it should be emphasized that the idea of attaching negative associations to the construct of policy flexibility did not come naturally to them. They saw little downside to such latitude, and even seemed to struggle to provide a response to the interview prompt regarding the negative impact of policy flexibility. From this, I gathered that flexibility and negative impact did not seem to be a logical association for the principals. One principal stated, “I can’t say anything that handicaps due to flexibility.”

**Uncertainty in the Face of Newfound Flexibility**

The results from The Innovation Project (TIP) survey of principals in the restart initiative were limited; many did not fully complete the items. It should also be noted that the participation rate (37%) for the survey was a bit low at the time the data were collected by TIP; only 31 of the
83 principals who were eligible to respond completed the instrument. The survey results were collected at the onset of these traditional public school principals being given charter-like flexibilities, when they were arguably still adjusting and determining what their respective schools needed. Their proposals for innovation were not remarkably different from descriptions of the use of flexibility shared by the charter school principals who were interviewed for this study. These 31 principals clearly had ideas and plans, but were, for the most part, not yet at the stage for implementation. Some of the most frequently mentioned plans for innovation and use of flexibility included innovations related to licensure, evaluation, staff roles/duties, calendar, scheduling, and innovative learning spaces.

While offering a more equitable situation for these schools, the thought of expanded flexibility being an option in traditional school settings was likely novel enough that it may have moderated the degree to which these principals planned to do things differently in their schools. Their plans for innovation largely mirrored practices related to the use of flexibility described by the charter school principals in this study. The charter school principal participants who were interviewed expressed their excitement for having the flexibility to do what is necessary for their students without having to get permission. But the innovations that these charter principals described were comparable to innovations that past research has identified as common practice in charters.

When they responded to the survey, the TIP principals were still in a planning period of determining how to proceed with such latitude. As a result, the principals could have been a bit unsure about what to do with the newfound flexibility. It is also likely they were thinking incrementally rather than in terms of radical innovation. In some instances, their plans for innovation and exercise of policy latitude did not appear to be profoundly different from what is
already being done in many traditional public schools. Perhaps the reserved nature of these school leaders’ plans was natural since they had not had significant policy flexibility before. They had not yet had much time to think expansively about employing this flexibility. Whatever the case, it is useful to have reflections from newly-empowered principals about how they might use policy flexibility.

Unanticipated and Novel Findings

Unanticipated Findings

A couple of the findings in this study were unanticipated. The first was the absence of broad-based, substantive commentary on a particularly controversial dimension of charter school impact—the oft-cited charge that charters exacerbate resegregation. None of the legislators or principals, except for one, brought up the matter. In fairness, it should be noted that there was not an overt question in the interview protocol that invited a response to this particular dimension of charter school impact. However, with the exception of a specific prompt about academic impact, such was also the case for other types of impacts of charter schools. In a recent study, Ladd and Turaeva examined 2015-16 data for approximately 11,000 families, each of whose children moved from a traditional public school to a public charter school in that year. They found that the transfer of white students, but not of minority students, increased segregation.

…using a conditional logit model to estimate revealed preferences, we find that the value parents place on the racial composition of individual charter schools differs by the race and income of the switchers. As a result, even after we control for other valued aspects of charter schools—such as distance from the previous traditional public school and the charter school’s mission, academic performance and services offered—the differential
preferences of the switchers reinforce racial isolation within charter schools. (Ladd & Taraeva, 2020, p. ii).

It could be that my study participants either did not see the matter of resegregation as an issue, or that they chose to avoid it as a topic. If the latter was the case, did they fail to address resegregation because it is uncomfortable to discuss? Woodard (2019) stated, “I’m growing increasingly uncomfortable with the continued dialogue related to the notion that “charter schools cause segregation, an unintended consequence of the school choice movement” (p. 1). She went on to write, “Charter schools are about choice. Referring to the unexpected impact of school choice as ‘resegregation’ is polarizing and distracts from the main issue, student achievement” (p. 2). In this study, the principal who mentioned segregation brought it up to oppose those charter schools that have “created a sense of de facto segregation in their schools” through the specific crafting of their policies. He pointed specifically to schools that do not offer transportation or child nutrition programs for their students. Once these things are removed from a school program, he said, the school is likely to “perpetuate a racial divide among students and communities.” Despite the fact that a specific prompt or interview question was not directly asked, it is still interesting that the topic only came up once in the eight interviews I conducted.

A second unanticipated finding was the perspective of the legislators concerning the level of expertise they and their colleagues bring to education policy matters. While this study does not assert that the legislator participants were a representative sample, they were a diverse group in terms of political orientation, race, gender, and experience. They included two Democrats and two Republicans, two Blacks, two Whites, two females, two males, one novice legislator, and three veterans. In several instances, this group was critical of their own insights and those of
others; they shared surprising critiques of legislators about their colleagues’ and their own lack of knowledge related to education policy matters.

A couple of the participants thought that legislators are often making decisions based on their own schooling experiences. Matters of policy that legislators believed their colleagues sometimes failed to consider with sufficient expertise included issues related to charter school flexibility and the extension of flexibility to traditional public schools. The participants offered their opinions about their colleagues’ voicing of support for the extension of flexibility to traditional public schools, but typically with a desire to implement stipulations on those flexibilities. One legislator was “disappointed” that more has not been done to allow charter-like flexibility in traditional schools. Another shared that “legislators need to leave the policy development for educating our kids to those who are the experts.” There was one participant who was critical of the fact that legislators make important decisions which impact educators throughout the state, yet they are not educators and often make less than informed decisions. One veteran legislator offered the insight that novice legislators have often come in with attitudes about making policy that are actually “impeding educational progress.”

**Novel Findings**

This study expanded the body of knowledge from past research in a couple of significant ways. As was noted earlier, the literature did not provide many cases of in-depth interviews of legislators on the topic of extending charter-like flexibility to traditional public schools. This appears to be a novel dimension of my study’s findings, perhaps as a result of the diverse, cross-sectional group of legislator participants included in the study.

Another novel finding of this study is the consensus of the charter school principals in support of flexibility in traditional public schools. The body of literature that I examined did not
uncover similar findings in other research studies. This is an interesting and unexpected finding, since it would potentially undercut one of charter schools’ competitive advantages—theyir flexibility. One of the principals captured this irony by saying “I’d be far more eager to go back to a traditional district if I had that kind of flexibility that I enjoyed at the charter school.” Such an attitude, if it were to become pervasive, would impact who serves in charter schools since there would not be the exclusive incentive of flexibility, which is one of the factors that draws principals to charter schools.

**Limitations of the Study**

The findings of this study are limited to the perceptions of four charter school principals who were once traditional school principals, four North Carolina legislators, and 31 principals who participated in the TIP survey. The study results are limited to the state of North Carolina. The policy context for charter and traditional public schools in North Carolina is nuanced, and the findings of the study may not be generalizable to other locations.

The sample of policymakers was limited to four legislators. The legislative group was diverse, but the four participants represented 170 legislators and their perspectives, in some instances, may not have been representative of the full body of policymakers. If the sample size had been larger, the findings could have been more expansive and included additional perspectives.

The principal group was not as diverse as I had hoped. The cohort of charter school principals that met the criteria I established for interview participants, including prior administrative leadership in traditional public schools, was relatively small. Of that number, only four consented to participate in the interview process. Thus, the reflections of charter school principals may be less generalizable.
Limitations also resulted from the methods that I chose in order to collect the data in this study. As with other types of research protocols, there are limitations associated with interviews. While I obtained rich data from these discussions, the small number of participants and the absence of quantitative data limit the generalizability of the findings.

**Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice**

Twenty-nine years ago in the state of Minnesota, the first charter school was created. According to Cohodes (2018), “forty-three states and Washington, DC, now have laws that permit the operation of charter schools, and around 7,000 charter schools now serve more than 5 percent of students in the United States” (p. 1). Charter schools have been an increasingly influential segment of the educational community and were created to have an impact in public schooling in America. However, there is debate about whether these “incubators for learning” have provided traditional public schools with the knowledge of innovation and information about implantation of policy flexibility gleaned over the years. Proponents of charter schools assert that they remain “unequivocally a catalyst for opportunity, offering students diverse and integrated classrooms that prepare them for success in college and beyond” (Dillingham, 2019, p. 4). Policy flexibility was the focus of this study, both in terms of the impact it has had in charter schools and whether it should be extended to traditional public schools.

This study’s findings suggest that giving traditional schools charter-like flexibilities is something about which legislators and principals alike were uniformly positive. Given these perspectives, my first policy recommendation is to give charter-like flexibility to traditional public schools. I further recommend that this latitude be provided without stipulations beyond those that constrain charter schools. This policy flexibility should not be withheld from schools that are performing well. Ironically, moderately performing and high-performing schools in
North Carolina were not included in the statutory provision that extended policy flexibility to participants in The Innovation Project’s Restart Program. Currently, only struggling schools receive such policy latitude in North Carolina. This limitation should be removed in order to allow all public schools the opportunity to have charter-like flexibility.

The analysis of responses of the principals who participated in The Innovation Project (TIP) survey is instructive. The TIP principals were ready to utilize flexibility. While somewhat constrained in the level of flexibility they proposed to employ and the degree of innovation they anticipated, it was clear that they were ready to use their new policy latitude, at least in part. I do recommend that policymakers rethink what the process should be and what the closure consequence, one of the sanctions for failing charter schools, could be for consistently low-performing traditional public schools.

The findings of this study showed that educators need to be more effective in informing legislators about their interest in flexibility. Legislators either failed to share or chose not to mention the extent to which they have been lobbied regarding the extension of policy flexibility to traditional public schools. This could help bridge the gap between what legislators know and what is actually happening in schools relative to this issue. Consequently, if policymakers are aware of the needs and perspectives of traditional public school leaders when policies are made, they are more informed and can make better decisions. Expanded communications among educators and lawmakers will help legislators be better advocates when making critical decisions that affect all children in the state. Such communication can help to reduce the amount of guessing out in their work and provide lawmakers with concrete examples and information about what is needed by way of policy flexibility in schools. The recommendation for expanded advocacy is also a result of legislators being critical about their knowledge and the amount of
information their colleagues had about charters and other education matters. They were, in a number of instances, humble about their own base of knowledge, but expressly critical about what other members of the legislator knew and the degree to which they are informed.

The reflections of both legislators and charter school principals about the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools proved to be less about the impact of flexibility on actual outcomes, such as student achievement, and more about the impact upon processes of organization, management, teaching, and learning. Policymakers might consider purposeful metrics through which charters are held accountable for the innovation that was promised and upon which the charter movement was founded.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Allowing all schools the same opportunity to experience policy flexibility in order to enhance their chances for success, at least in the opinion of this study’s participants, is the appropriate direction for the state of North Carolina. These practitioners and lawmakers were in agreement that flexibility should be granted to traditional public schools. However, the execution of this thought and belief seems to be a monumental task. Additional inquiry could address barriers to the expansion of policy flexibility and factors related to the successful implementation of such latitude. The results of this study support policy flexibility being granted to all public schools, both traditional and charter.

Future research should include expanding the pool of participants, establishing a more diverse principal pool, and conducting a follow-up with survey participants. Moreover, the findings of this study were limited to the ideas and perspectives of four principals and four legislators; if the sample size had been larger, more data could have been collected from a broader and more diverse group of participants in these two populations. Thus, future researchers
should expand the participant group to acquire additional data and expand the generalizability of the findings.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is now collecting data about the implementation of policy flexibility in restart schools. Researchers should engage with DPI officials to access these data, as they offer a rich opportunity for researchers to broaden the body of knowledge about the use and impact of flexibility in struggling schools.

To address the limitation related to the survey used by the researcher from TIP and the constraints on respondents in rating how they would implement flexibility, the instrument, if employed by future researchers, should be created by the researcher in collaboration with TIP prior to release of the survey. This should increase the response rate, and the results will be more representative and useful if more principals complete the survey. Although Creswell’s three steps to increase response rates address hard-copy surveys, the information could be applied to digital formats as well:

1. Mail out the original questionnaire.

2. Follow it 2 weeks later with a second questionnaire to the individuals who have not responded (called nonrespondents).

3. After another 2 weeks, send a postcard to the nonrespondents, reminding them to complete the questionnaire. (Creswell, 2012, p. 391)

This inquiry limited the major constructs addressed in the interviews with legislators and principals to their perspectives about policy flexibility and its impact. Subsequent research should explore the issue of impact in greater depth. A follow-up with those traditional public schools that have received policy flexibility and an examination of the impact on their process and performance data could be included. To address the lack of discussion around the issue of
resegregation, the research questions could be more direct and include items specifically
designed to gain information about this phenomenon.

To address the geographic limitations of the study, a future researcher might expand the
geographical area and not limit their inquiry to the state of North Carolina, from where this
study’s legislators, principals, and charter school leaders provided their perspectives. If this is
done, variances in the charter school legislation would need to be considered. Determining
similarities and differences in findings relative to study constructs throughout the country could
add to the body of knowledge and provide additional insights regarding the extension of
flexibility to traditional public schools nationwide. It would be instructive to learn what leaders
conclude about these issues in other states, and might be particularly interesting to determine the
perspectives of legislators, principals, and charter school leaders in Minnesota, where charter
schools originated.

**Chapter Summary**

School principals often contend that having the ability to be the instructional leaders they
were trained to be hinges in part upon maximizing their decision making latitude. These leaders
assert that policy flexibility allows schools to make necessary changes without the bureaucracy
they believe stifles reform, improvement strategies, and performance growth. These leaders often
advocate for the necessary flexibility that would afford them the opportunity to lead without
restrictions. There are concerns over the flexibility that charters are allowed and which
traditional public schools continue to be denied.

This study examined the policy latitude that charter schools receive from the perspective
of North Carolina state lawmakers and charter school leaders. The perspectives of these
policymakers and principals concerning the potential extension of charter-like flexibility to
traditional public schools were explored. Their opinions about the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools were also solicited. This study determined how traditional school principals, whose low-performing schools had been given policy flexibility, planned to implement this latitude.

The study revealed that a diverse sample of legislators who represented both sides of the political aisle, each of whom served on their respective education policy committees, uniformly agreed that policy flexibility should be offered to traditional schools. Similarly, a group of current charter school leaders who previously served as principals in traditional school settings concurred that the flexibility available to their current schools should be granted to traditional schools. The study also revealed that the principals appreciated having the flexibility to make the necessary decisions to lead their schools. The study revealed that the legislators and charter school principals, while largely positive about the impact of flexibility in charter schools, had occasional concerns about the implementation of this discretion in charter schools.

This study analyzed survey responses from archival data collected by The Innovation Project through a survey of 31 traditional school principals who participated in the restart initiative. These traditional school leaders had just been granted charter-like flexibility. The analysis of survey responses revealed that these principals had specific, though somewhat constrained, plans for implementing this newfound flexibility and engaging in innovative practices.

Based on its findings, the study concluded with a set of policy recommendations. Key among these is the recommendation that policymakers should provide traditional public schools with the policy flexibility given to charter schools. Additional research is needed to address the study’s limitations.
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Appendix A: Charter School Board Chair Permission Letter

Date

Dear Board Chair:

My name is Erica Shoulders-Royster, and I am a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University in the field of education. I am writing to obtain permission to interview your charter school principal. The research that I am conducting is about the policy flexibility charter schools receive and that some traditional schools have recently been granted due to their participation in The Innovation Project. The interviews will be used to gain insights about such flexibility, and about the impact of the flexibility on schools.

I am extremely interested in interviewing the principal and seeking your consent to sit down with this individual to gain his/her perspectives. I am interested in this school because I am focusing on schools in the northeast and I want to talk to principals who have experience serving in traditional as well as charter schools.

With your permission, I will conduct an interview with your principal using a structured protocol with questions that would allow them to provide insights on the flexibility and the impact it is having on the school. The interview will not last longer than one hour. I will work with the principal to select a date, time, and location based on his/her schedule. All interview responses will remain strictly confidential. The identities of each participant, school and district will remain anonymous.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or estaine@ncsu.edu. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University. My dissertation co-chairs are Drs. Lance Fusarelli and Mike Ward. Each can be reached at ldfusare@ncsu.edu and meward@ncsu.edu.

Please complete and sign the attached form with your name, date and return it to me if you agree to my request. Feel free to use the enclosed self-addressed stamp envelope or you can scan and email the form to me at estaine@ncsu.edu.

I appreciate in advance your consideration. Upon completion of my study, I will be honored to provide you with a copy at your request. If you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Erica Shoulders-Royster
Appendix B: Email Message to Principal Participants

Dear Principal ____________,

I hope this email finds you well! I am writing to ask for your participation in a study designed to determine the impact of policy flexibility on charter and traditional schools. The research that I am conducting is about the policy flexibility charter schools receive and that some traditional schools have recently been granted due to their participation in the The Innovation Project. The interviews will be used to gain insights about such flexibility, and about the impact of the flexibility on schools.

I would like to interview you at your school for an hour. I am interested in your school because I am focusing on schools in the northeast and I want to talk to principals who have experience serving in traditional as well as charter schools.

Before we begin the interview, I will go over the attached participant consent form, which further explains the study and your rights as a study participant. I will ask if you’re willing to participate and willing to sign the consent form. If you are, I will use an interview protocol as my guide to ensure that I cover the essential elements of the topic. I will record our conversation and take notes to ensure that I do not miss any information provided. Your identity and the identity of the school will remain confidential. I received approval from your charter school board chair and I am hoping to get your participation.

If you have questions that you would like to address before agreeing to participate, please let me know and I will schedule a time to discuss the study with you by phone in the next few days. If you do not have further questions, please identify some dates that I can visit to conduct the interview. I can be reached via email at xxxxxxx@ncsu.edu. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best wishes,

Erica Shoulders-Royster
Appendix C: Participant Consent Document

North Carolina State University
Informed Consent Form for Participants

Title: Traditional Schools and Charter Schools: An Examination of the Impact of Policy Flexibilities

Principle Researcher: Erica Shoulders-Royster

Faculty Sponsors: Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli & Dr. Michael E. Ward

You are being asked to participate in a research study to examine the impact of policy flexibilities in traditional and charter schools. This study will identify the policy flexibility charter schools receive and that some traditional schools have recently been granted due to their participation in The Innovation Project. The study will provide insights about such flexibility, and about the impact of the flexibility on schools.

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose to not participate, or to stop your participation at any time without penalty. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being a participant in this study. In the opening paragraph above are specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, you have the right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you for your records. If you have questions or concerns at any time about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to respond to a set of interview questions about the policy flexibilities you believe have an impact in charter schools. The time set aside for the interview is 60 minutes. You can opt to not answer any of the questions that you do not want to answer, and/or you can stop answering at any time.

There are minimal risks associated with this study given the safeguards and measures used to protect your identity. I will not disclose any information that would allow any identification of you or any other participant. A pseudonym will be used to ensure that your identity is protected. There is no direct benefit to you; however, your participation in this study will help to add to the body of research about traditional and charter schools. Your participation is confidential. Published results from this study will not include any information that can be used to identify participants.

If you believe that you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NCSU IRB office at irb-director@ncsu.edu or at (919-515-4514).

Consent to Participate
I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix D: Email Message to Policymaker Participants

Dear ____________,

I hope this email finds you well! I am writing to ask for your participation in a study designed to determine the impact of policy flexibility on charter and traditional schools. The research that I am conducting is about the policy flexibility charter schools receive and that some traditional schools have recently been granted due to their participation in The Innovation Project. The interviews will be used to gain insights about such flexibility, and about the impact of the flexibility on schools.

I would like to interview you at your office or by phone for an hour. I am interested in talking to you because of your experience with charter schools.

Before we begin the interview, I will go over the attached participant consent form, which further explains the study and your rights as a study participant. I will ask if you’re willing to participate and willing to sign the consent form. I will use an interview protocol as my guide to ensure that I cover the essential elements of the topic. I will record our conversation and take notes to ensure that I do not miss any information provided. Your identity will remain confidential.

If you have questions that you would like to address before agreeing to participate, please let me know and I will schedule a time to discuss the study with you by phone in the next few days. If you do not have further questions, please identify some dates that I can visit to conduct the interview. I can be reached via email at xxxxxxx@ncsu.edu. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best wishes,

Erica Shoulders-Royster
Appendix E: Interview Protocol – Policymaker

Erica Shoulders-Royster, Ed.S.

North Carolina State University

Traditional Schools and Charter Schools: An Examination of the Impact of Policy Flexibility

Introduction

Say: “I greatly appreciate you taking time out of your schedule to talk to me today. I value your service to our great state. I respect your time and promise to stick within the allotted time.”

Say: “My name is Erica Shoulders-Royster and I am a doctoral student attending N.C. State University. I am conducting a study on the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools and the impact that charter-like flexibility is having on schools participating in The Innovation Project. My goal is to study and learn through the perspective of state policymakers, charter school principals and survey results from The Innovation Project regarding the actual impact of flexibilities charter schools receive.

I currently serve as a School Principal of an Early College High School and have served in traditional public schools all of my career; however, my children attend a charter school and I often observe some of the differences in what their school does versus what educators in traditional schools do. I am very passionate and interested in learning from policy leaders like you about my topic.”

Say: Before we begin, I’d like to review a few disclosures with you:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your decision to participate in this study or not participate. By signing the consent form, you have indicated your willingness to participate. Please note you are free to stop participating in this study at any time.
- The session will be recorded digitally in order for me to have a complete record of our discussion. The discussion will be kept confidential; any information obtained from you that can identify you will only be disclosed with your permission. During the interview and in the reporting of this conversation, a pseudonym will be used in place of your name.
- Everything will be kept confidential as shared before. All data and records will be secure.
- I allotted 1 hour for this interview.
- Do you have any questions?
- Are you willing and ready to proceed? If so, please sign the consent document.
- I will now turn on the recorder.

Turn on recorder. State the following at the beginning of recording:

“This is Erica Shoulders-Royster, interviewing on Date ___________. The interview is beginning at Start Time ___________. I have the privilege of interviewing Pseudonym ____________ who is a North Carolina state legislator ____________. I have been granted permission to audio record this conversation by the participant ________ Yes ________ No and the consent form has been signed ________ Yes ________ No.
Opening Questions

Say: “With this first set of questions I am hoping to gather background information about you.”

Say: “Please tell me your role.”

Say: “How long have you been serving in the legislature?”

Say: “Tell me about your work experience. Do you have any charter, traditional, or private school experience?”

Say: “What is your race? Gender?”

The next questions are designed to address Research Question 1 in my study, which reads as follows: What are the perspectives of North Carolina policymakers about extending to traditional public schools the policy flexibilities available to public charter schools?

Say: “Share your perspectives about the policy flexibility available to charter schools.”

Say: “Describe your level of support for public charter schools in North Carolina.”

Say: “Describe changes in school performance, particularly student achievement, in North Carolina that you believe are linked to policy flexibility.”

Say: “Share specific charter school policy issues that you favored or contested. Why?”

Say: “Do you favor allowing charter-like flexibility in some traditional public schools or districts? If so, why? If not, why not?”

Say: “Describe your level of support for public traditional public schools in North Carolina.”

Say: “Share specific traditional school policy issues that you favored or contested. Why?”

Say: “How do you define flexibility in schools?”

Say: “What level of flexibility do you support for traditional public schools? Why?”

Say: “What kind of flexibility do you think would be of greater value to traditional school(s)?”

Curricular? Instructional? Human resources? Financial? Other?

Say: “What do you perceive is the posture of state legislators generally regarding the types of flexibility that traditional schools should have? Describe the bases upon which legislators tend to differ (e.g., partisan/political, geographic region of the state, rural/suburban/urban, etc.).”

The next questions are designed to address Research Question 3, which is: What are the perspectives of policymakers and school principals about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?

Say: “What kinds of flexibility would you say exist in public charter schools?”
Say: “Do you believe that there are ways that flexibility positively impacts public charter schools? If so, which flexibilities and how?”

Wait for responses. I may consider prompts if the response is particularly limited. In particular, I would like to hear perspectives regarding:

The impact of flexibility on student achievement.

The impact of flexibility on student behavior.

The impact of flexibility on parent satisfaction and support for the school.

The impact of flexibility on the school’s financial management.

The impact of flexibility on human resources, including recruitment, retention, staff satisfaction.

Say: “Do you believe that flexibility negatively impacts public charter schools?”

Say: “If so, which flexibilities and how?”

Say: “What kind of flexibility do you anticipate having for the school(s) in the Innovation Project?”

Say: “What tangible outcomes do you anticipate will be related to the flexibility received by schools in The Innovation Project?”

Closing

Say: “This concludes our interview. In addition to what I have asked today, do you have any additional information that you would like to add? Are there informational sources, bills, documents that you would recommend that I review as I continue this research?”

Say: “At the conclusion of the study, would you like to see the results? How would you like that information to be shared with you?”

Say: “Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Thank you so much for your time.”
Appendix F: Interview Protocol – Principal

Erica Shoulders-Royster, Ed.S.
North Carolina State University

Traditional Schools and Charter Schools: An Examination of the Impact of Policy Flexibility

Introduction

Say: “I greatly appreciate you taking time out of your schedule to talk to me today. I value your service with students. I respect your time and promise to stick within the allotted time.”

Say: “My name is Erica Shoulders-Royster and I am a doctoral student attending N.C. State University. I am conducting a study on the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools and impact that charter-like flexibility is having on schools participating in The Innovation Project. My goal is to study and learn through the perspective of state policymakers, charter school principals and survey results from The Innovation Project regarding the actual impact of flexibilities charter schools receive.

I currently serve as a School Principal of an Early College High School and have served in traditional public schools all of my career; however, my children attend a charter school and I often observe some of the differences in what their school does versus what educators in traditional schools do. I am very passionate and interested in learning from principals like you about my topic.”

Say: Before we begin, I’d like to review a few disclosures with you:
- Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your decision to participate in this study or not. By signing the consent form, you have indicated your willingness to participate. Please note you are free to stop participating in this study at any time.
- The session will be recorded digitally in order for me to have a complete record of our discussion. The discussion will be kept confidential; any information obtained from you that can identify you only be disclosed with your permission. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name.
- Everything will be kept confidential as shared before. All data and records will be secure.
- I allotted 1 hour for this interview.
- Do you have any questions?
- Are you willing and ready to proceed? If so, please sign the consent document.
- I will now turn on the recorder.

Turn on recorder. State the following at the beginning of recording:

“This is Erica Shoulders-Royster, interviewing on Date __________. The interview is beginning at Start Time __________. I have the privilege of interviewing Pseudonym who is the Principal serving Pseudonym School.
I have permission from the participant to audio record this conversation. Yes___ No___
The consent form has been signed. Yes___ No___

Opening Questions

Say: “With this first set of questions I hope to gather background information about you.”
Say: “Please tell me your role.”

Say: “What made you decide to pursue a career in education?”

Say: “How long have you been serving in this school as the principal?”

Say: “What is your race? Gender?”

Say: “What traditional schools did you serve as principal? For how long?”

These next questions are designed to address Research Question 2, which is: What are the perspectives of northeast North Carolina charter school principals regarding policy flexibility in their schools and in traditional public schools?

Say: “Share your perspectives about the policy flexibility available to charter schools.”

Say: “Are there some things that you thought you had the flexibility to do that it turns out you don’t have the flexibility to do?”

Say: “Describe your level of support for public charter schools in North Carolina.”

Say: “Share specific charter school policy issues that you favored or contested. Why?”

Say: “Do you favor allowing charter-like flexibility in some traditional public schools or districts? If so, why? If not, why not?”

Say: “Describe your level of support for public traditional public schools in North Carolina.”

Say: “How do you define flexibility in schools?”

Say: “What level of flexibility do you support for traditional public schools? Why?”

Say: “What kind of flexibility do you think would be of greater value to traditional school(s)?”

Curricular? Instructional? Human resources? Financial? Other?

Say: “What do you perceive is the posture of public charter school principals generally regarding the types of flexibility that traditional schools should have?”

The next questions are designed to address Research Question 4, which is: What are the perspectives of school principals about the impact of flexibility in public charter schools?

Say: “What kinds of flexibility would you say exists in public charter schools?”

Say: “Do you believe that there are ways that flexibility positively impacts public charter schools? If so, which flexibilities and how?”

Wait for responses. I may consider prompts if the response is particularly limited. In particular, I would like to hear perspectives regarding:
The impact of flexibility on student achievement.

The impact of flexibility on student behavior.

The impact of flexibility on parent satisfaction and support for the school.

The impact of flexibility on the school’s financial management.

The impact of flexibility on human resources, including recruitment, retention, staff satisfaction.

Say: “Do you believe that flexibility negatively impacts public charter schools?”

Say: “If so, which flexibilities and how?”

Say: “What kind of flexibility do you anticipate having for the school(s) in the Innovation Project?”

Say: “What tangible outcomes do you anticipate will be related to the flexibility received by schools in the Innovation Project?”

Closing

Say: “This concludes our interview. In addition to what I have asked today, do you have any additional information that you would like to add? Are there informational sources, bills, documents that you would recommend that I review as I continue this research?”

Say: “At the conclusion of the study, would you like to see the results? How would you like that information to be shared with you?”

Say: “Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Thank you so much for your time.”
Appendix G: Expert Panel Review Protocol

Traditional Schools and Charter Schools: An Examination of the Impact of Policy Flexibilities

Thank you for volunteering to serve on the expert panel for evaluating the interview questionnaires designed for this study. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of policy flexibility in charter schools and impact that charter-like flexibility is having on schools participating in The Innovation Project. The research will focus on archival data collected from The Innovation Project to find correlations between the interviews of policymakers and charter school principals. This information will be used to help me learn through the perspective of state policymakers, charter school principals and survey results from The Innovation Project regarding the actual impact of flexibilities charter schools receive. The study will further research the impact of flexibilities in the northeastern region of North Carolina.

Your time, expertise, and assistance are needed to evaluate the content validity of the interview questionnaires. The attached interview questionnaire is designed to identify policy flexibilities implemented in charter schools that traditional schools could potentially benefit from implementing. The responses will be analyzed to examine how the flexibilities in charter schools is impacting schooling and how schools in The Innovation Project is also impacted.

Your input and feedback are extremely important, greatly appreciated, and will provide useful information about the clarity, appropriateness, and relevance of the interview questionnaires. Your knowledge and experience in education qualifies you to serve as an expert panel member. Your input and feedback will provide valuable insight for possible adjustments or revisions to the interview questionnaires.

Please take your time and critique the attached questionnaire by answering either “Yes” or “No” to the questions below, as well as providing feedback for your reasoning(s) behind any responses that receive a “No” on the lines that follow.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>If you selected No, please write why, and provide any feedback and/or suggestions that you feel would correct this aspect of the survey. This section of feedback will be most helpful.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Are the interview questions/statements direct and specific?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Are the questions/statements designed in such a way that participants can understand them?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Please note that in order for the survey to be successful, the language needs to be understood by policymakers and charter school principals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you feel additional information is needed in order for participants to answer these questions regarding the actual impact of flexibilities charter schools receive.?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do the interviews adequately address an examination of the impact of policy flexibilities?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain sufficient information regarding the impact of policy flexibilities?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain sufficient information traditional schools and charter schools?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Are there any particular items within the interviews that you would modify?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Please specify the item number(s) with your response if you selected “Yes”.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Are there any survey items that you feel should be included that are not currently included on the questionnaire attached?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>If you selected “Yes” please write your suggested statement(s) below:</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-Ended Questions</td>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What recommendations do you have to make the interviews more comprehensive to obtain information relating to flexibilities?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you have any suggestions related to the ‘readability’ of the interview questions (i.e.: wording of the questions, the layout of the questions, etc.)?</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>
Appendix H: Restart Flexibility Survey

As you work through the Restart redesign process this school year, The Innovation Project (TIP) will be documenting your goals and how you use restart flexibility to re-envision your school model. This documentation will become a resource to help you collaborate with other Restart schools pursuing similar goals.

Contact Information

Name: ________________________________
Email address: ___________________________
District: ________________________________
School: ________________________________

School Level
☐ Elementary
☐ Middle
☐ High

Restart Flexibility

1. As a Restart school you have additional flexibility in several important areas. In a few sentences, please briefly describe any innovative practices your school is putting into place in each of the following categories.
   a. Staffing (licensure, evaluation, staff roles, pay, duties)

   b. Use of Space and Time (calendar, scheduling, innovative learning spaces)

   c. Curriculum (education programs, materials, tests)

   d. School Culture and Discipline

   e. Community Engagement (staff and community buy-in)

2. Are there other innovative practices your school is putting into place as a Restart?

3. How will you use financial flexibility to enable the innovations you discussed above?

4. What is your plan for getting the word out to your school and community about your Restart?

5. Do you have a written Restart plan outside of your School Improvement Plan and Restart application?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No
Appendix I: Permission Correspondence

Joe Ableidinger <jableidinger@tpcn.org>
to me, Eric, Ann

Hi Mike and Eric,

I’ve attached all of the principal responses (first document) plus the three responses we received from district staff (second document). Both documents exclude names, schools, and districts.

Joe

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Michael Ward <mward@ncsu.edu>
to Joe, Eric, Ann

WOW!! That was quick and so helpful. Thanks, Joe!

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Erica Shoulders-Reyester <estater@ncsu.edu>
to me, Joe, Ann

Thank you so much for the information! I am truly grateful!!! Have a blessed day.

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