RELIGIOUS CHARTER SCHOOLS:
SUPERINTENDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS IN A CATHOLIC CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

RELIGIOUS CHARTER SCHOOLS:
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This qualitative study was exploratory and analyzed an emerging form of schooling – “religious” charter schools – within the context of urban Catholic elementary education in America. Specifically, it examined the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to this form of schooling. The study investigated if a common understanding of religious charter schools was salient among Catholic school superintendents. In addition, it analyzed the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to the benefits and challenges to this type of school in a Catholic context.

The research design was a basic qualitative research study. The data collection methods used were the distribution of a semi-structured questionnaire and the conducting of follow-up open-ended interviews. A descriptive contemporary historical analysis of the relevant literature on religious charter schools was a component of the research design and influenced the development of the semi-structured questionnaire and open-ended interview protocol. The synthesis of the literature on religious charter schools is the first of its kind in a Catholic school context.

The findings of this study indicate that while the religious charter school terminology is problematic in a Catholic context, the concept of such schools are perceived to be
potentially beneficial, but challenging to implement in practice. The clear benefit to religious charter schools in a Catholic context is perceived as financial. This perception was shared by the superintendents against the backdrop of the current closing crisis faced by many urban Catholic elementary schools in the United States.

The most likely beneficial scenario that emerged from this study is the leasing of former Catholic school facilities to charter schools and subsequently developing “wraparound” religious education programs. Developing positive relationships with charter schools may result in additional income for struggling urban parishes as well as opening new doors for religious education programming and outreach to the urban poor. Challenges to religious charter schools in a Catholic context include church and state complications related to public funding, religious identity issues, legal concerns and the fact that they are not Catholic schools.
To Sophia and Matthew

May your lives be filled with love and learning
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The completion of this dissertation is the result of countless experiences, interactions, meetings, conversations, moments of prayer, and much more. An undergraduate theology professor of mine convinced me that every person we meet throughout our lifetime is somehow linked to all of our successes and failures. This dissertation represents great success to me, as well as certain failures, but none of these things occurred in isolation.

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CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The Roman Catholic school system in the United States is in serious, even desperate financial trouble. In Milwaukee this month, the Catholic office of education announced that 18 schools in the ten-county archdiocese will close this year for lack of funds. In Detroit, eight schools have already announced closing, and 42 others have been told that they must decide between consolidation and shutting down. In Philadelphia, the Catholic school system has mounted a mammoth fundraising drive to head off a possible $10 million deficit next year. In at least half a dozen states, parochial-school lobbies are badgering their state legislatures for some kind of immediate help. It is needed: last year alone, 637 Catholic schools in the United States shut their doors, and the total will be higher in 1969. (“Catholic Schools” 1969)

This chilling description of the state of Catholic schools in the United States was published in Time magazine over forty years ago. The extremely disheartening reality for Catholic school advocates and the communities that they serve is that the same situation still exists today, only it is far worse. The Catholic school system has continued to assume the aftermath of steady school closings in the forty years since the publication. If Catholic education is to remain viable in the very near future, this long-term downward trend cannot continue. Sufficient alternatives clearly have not been identified to halt or reverse the
Catholic school closing trends that began decades ago. Research that supports innovative solutions to the threats faced by Catholic schools is desperately needed.

**Focus of the Study**

Two salient trends in American education – urban Catholic elementary school closings and charter school growth – provide the immediate background for this investigation. The current overarching problem faced by Catholic schools and the urban communities that they serve is the severe national trend of closing urban Catholic schools in the United States (Convey, 1992; McDonald, 2010; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2007). At the same time of these closings, public charter schools are rapidly increasing in numbers and serving similar populations as urban Catholic elementary schools (McDonald, 2009; United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2011). This new competition in the form of public charter schools coupled with additional factors adversely affecting the viability of urban Catholic elementary schools is of grave concern for those invested in Catholic education. Catholic schools are facing numerous threats to their sustainability and public charter schools are perceived by some Catholic scholars as one of the threatening factors (Hamilton, 2008; Saroki and Levenick, 2009).

This study analyzed an emerging form of schooling – “religious” charter schools – within the context of urban Catholic elementary education in America. The most succinct, catch-all definition offered posits that a school may be considered a religious charter school or “faith-based” in the broadest sense of the term “because the parents started it because of their faith” (Weinberg, 2008, p. 146). However, this does not necessarily mean that the founders view their school as faith-based or religious. Even though this description may
sound confusing, contradictory, or even esoteric, the existence of these schools demands attention. The central issue is that within the charter school sector, there are particular schools that fall into this sub-classification – religious charter schools – and the implications of their existence and potential growth are increasingly significant for the Catholic school sector.

There is not a clear consensus regarding a working definition of religious charter schools (Weinberg, 2009). In addition, there is no research-based investigation of the potential challenges and benefits that religious charter schools may have in a Catholic context. As a result, this exploratory qualitative study focused on religious charter schools at the diocesan level and investigated the perspectives of Catholic school superintendents regarding the potential challenges and benefits of these schools.

**Research Questions**

This study was exploratory and investigated the topic of religious charter schools in the context of Catholic education. Specifically, the study focused on the following research questions:

1. What is the common understanding of a religious charter school as perceived by Catholic school superintendents?
2. What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to these schools?
   a. What are the benefits to such a school in a Catholic context?
   b. What are the challenges to such a school in a Catholic context?
Theoretical Rationale

Catholic School Effectiveness

Catholic schools have a strong legacy of providing social, cultural, educational, and economic benefits to students in America (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Convey, 1992; Greeley, 1982). In addition, Catholic elementary schools have traditionally served recent immigrant, low-income, and ethnic minority populations in urban settings, providing them with high quality educational opportunities (Cibulka, O’Brien, & Zewe, 1982; Convey, 1992; Greeley, 1982; O’Keefe, et al., 2004). Catholic schools now serve Catholic and non-Catholics alike, and it has been convincingly argued that Catholic schools can be more effective at serving urban populations than public schools (Bryk, et al., 1993; Coleman, et al., 1982; Convey, 1992; Greeley, 1982). This study embraces the evidence that urban Catholic elementary schools have a strong history of providing students with access to quality educational opportunities. As a result of the important role of urban Catholic elementary schools in American education, they are worthy of investigation in order to identify factors that may help sustain their future viability and vitality.

Catholic School Closings

The American Catholic school system reached its pinnacle in the mid-1960s. In 1965-1966 the largest number of Catholic schools in the nation’s history, 13,292, enrolled approximately 5.6 million students (Convey, 1992). The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) statistics for the 2010-2011 academic year reveal that Catholic enrollment currently is just over 2.1 million students in 6,980 schools. This is more than 60% fewer students and just over half the number of schools compared to the mid-1960s (McDonald, 2011). However, there is an even greater concern regarding Catholic school
closing trends in the urban or inner-city sector compared to Catholic schools in general with the most serious closing trends found in the elementary schools.

Current research shows a steady decline nationwide in all faith-based urban schools. Between the 1999-2000 and 2005-2006 school years, the faith-based central city or urban school sector lost 14% of its schools and approximately 20% of its students (USDOE, 2006). Catholic schools nationwide have seen 12% of schools close and a 17% decline in enrollment since the 1998-1999 school year (McDonald, 2009). Specific to Catholic elementary schools in the twelve large urban areas of the country, there has been a loss of 18.8% of schools since 2003 and enrollment has declined by 29.6% since 2000 (McDonald, 2009). The urban Catholic elementary school closure and enrollment declines are far more acute than in the broader Catholic school and faith-based urban education sectors – which also are alarming.

To the detriment of the urban populations these schools serve, there are no signs of the drastic trends reversing. As closing trends continue and enrollment projections remain questionable, urban Catholic elementary schools currently face a severe crisis in terms of their future sustainability. The continued loss of urban Catholic elementary schools is of great concern and significance not only for Catholic school advocates, but for the diverse constituencies that have benefited from Catholic schools.

Charter Schools

At the same time that urban Catholic elementary schools are experiencing drastic declines, another trend related to urban education is moving in an opposite direction – the rapid growth of charter schools (Center for Education Reform; 2010; Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, 2009; USDOE, 2011). A charter school is a publicly funded school that operates independently of the local school district with the intent of providing greater
autonomy and accountability for the individual school. The Center for Education Reform (2009) states that charter schools are “innovative public schools that are accountable for student results” that are designed by educators, parents, or civic leaders; open and attended by choice; free from most rules and regulations governing conventional public schools (“What is a Charter School,” para. 1).

A charter school may also operate in pursuit of a specific set of educational objectives determined by the school's developer and agreed to by the authorized public chartering agency (USDOE, 2004). In fact, the U.S. Department of Education (1997) found that the most common reasons for founding charter schools are to realize an educational vision; have more autonomy over organizational, personnel, or governance matters; serve a special population; receive public funds; engender parent involvement and ownership; or attract students and parents. This charter school start-up profile matches the same factors considered by Catholic and other religious educational populations when considering the needs of their prospective school communities – a particular mission or purpose, autonomy or decentralization, and a focus on parent and community involvement (Bryk, Lee, Holland, & Carriedo, 1984; Coleman, et al., 1982; Convey, 1992; Greeley, 1982).

**Charter School Growth**

Charter schools are a fast growing educational sector, boasting steady annual growth over the past several years. For example, the first charter school opened in 1992 and just six years later nearly 800 schools were opened in 29 states and the District of Columbia, serving 100,000 students (Georgiou, 2005). During the 2004-2005 school year 3,400 schools were opened across 40 states and the District of Columbia, enrolling almost a million students.
Charter school enrollment now represents almost 3% of all K-12 student enrollment in the United States (USDOE, 2009). In contrast, private schools currently account for approximately 10.5% of student enrollment nationally (USDOE, 2010). To help illustrate the charter school market share comparison in a Catholic school context, consider the following. In 1960, Catholic schools represented the lion’s share of all private school enrollments at almost 90% (Convey, 1992). Today Catholic schools represent fewer than 40% of private school enrollments (Convey, 1992; USDOE, 2006). This translates into an overall market share of just 4.4% for Catholic schools compared to twice that market share at their peak in 1960. As urban Catholic schools face what seems like the possibility of virtual extinction, charter schools are enjoying unprecedented growth and support (Bruce, 2009; Center for Education Reform, 2009; Hamilton, 2008).

The Relationships Between Charter Schools and Catholic Schools

The student demographics served by charter schools mirror those currently served by urban Catholic schools. They both enroll larger percentages of Black and Hispanic students and lower percentages of White and Asian students than conventional public schools (McDonald, 2009; USDOE, 2008). As a result of the similar populations that each sector serves and the opposite enrollment trends, it has been argued that charter schools are a competitor cutting into the marketplace of urban Catholic schools (Cooper & Randall, 2008; Ladner, 2007). If these trends in charter and Catholic schools continue, it is reasonable to
anticipate that charter school enrollment will meet and eventually surpass that of Catholic schools in the not too distant future.

As a rallying cry in the face of this perceived growing threat to Catholic schools, it has been argued that Catholic schools continue to offer something that public charter schools cannot – a faith-based or religious education (Karp, 2009; National Catholic Education Association, 2009). This position rebuts a passive acceptance that Catholic schools should quietly pass the urban education baton to public charter schools. Rather, Catholic schools still maintain a unique and sought after educational approach that public charter schools are simply unable to provide – a faith-based or religious education – or so it seems on the surface.

This study explored an alternative and more complex possibility. Instead of thinking of charter schools as competitors that are overtaking the Catholic marketplace, perhaps a more symbiotic relationship can exist between these two sectors. For example, Catholic school populations may have substantial influence over the formation of the growing charter school sector. Since charter schools tend to serve similar populations in similar geographic areas as urban Catholic schools, Catholic school supporters in these areas might benefit from working with charter schools versus viewing them as competitors. In circumstances where urban Catholic schools have no other option besides closing their doors, they may find that contributing positively to the conversation and development of charter schools is more beneficial to the students and communities they have historically served than merely sitting idly by as another school is closed and the Catholic voice in the community disappears. In fact, charter schools may provide new options for Catholic communities seeking sustainable
models of schooling. Envisioning what this new model of schooling may look like in practice is complex, uncertain, and perhaps controversial to even consider, but if Catholic schools take seriously O’Keefe’s call to “innovate or perish,” any and all options for new models of Catholic schools should be explored at the very least (O’Keefe, et al., 2004, p. 62).

**Religious Charter Schools in a Catholic Context**

The assumption that only Catholic or overtly religiously affiliated schools can accommodate a faith-based education leads to the core theme of the study – the emergence of religious charter schools and their potential influence on the Catholic educational sector and beyond. Cooper and Randall (2008) define a third educational sector, residing between the traditional private and public school sectors. This new sector consists of charter schools, voucher programs, increasingly diverse private schools, and the opening of new “religious charter schools” (Cooper & Randall, 2008; p. 217). The topic of charter schools is already highly political and polarized. Adding a religious component raises the debate to new levels. This still undefined sector of schooling challenges basic assumptions about the very nature of schooling in America and requires investigation (Cooper & Randall, 2008; Daniel, 2007; Harvard Law Review Association, 2009; Weinberg, 2007). For example, it is quite possible that a religious charter school could make many similar accommodations regarding religious beliefs as other religiously affiliated schools (Weinberg, 2007). Or, a charter school may close for religious holidays as a religious accommodation, provide space for its students to pray, and provide kosher or other religiously required foods (Weinberg, 2008).
Governance Structure Lens

This study also views the potential relationship between the Catholic and charter school education sectors through the overarching lens of alternative governance structures. Alternative governance structures are being tested in the field as an attempt to curb or reverse the closing trends faced by Catholic schools and to support students in urban areas (Goldschmidt, O'Keefe, & Walsh, 2004; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2007). These models of governance range from consortium models to network models, yet they all share a common goal – to provide viable administrative structures that secure the financial and operational future of urban Catholic schools. Catholic education scholars have argued that governance structures are a major problem facing Catholic schools and that research in this area is scant and needed (Bryk, et. al. 1984; Schuttlöffel, 2007; Traviss, 2001). Traditional, parochial Catholic school governance models are failing, and without new structures that can respond better to the current educational marketplace, urban Catholic schools will continue to fail. Recent research contends that charter schools may offer another new form of governance structure for ailing Catholic schools and communities interested in the values promoted by Catholic education (Hillman, 2008; Karp, 2009; Smarick, 2009). The emergence of this new subcategory of religious charter schools makes this argument even more complex. This has increased the compelling need for research on religious charter schools and the potential benefits and challenges they present in a Catholic context.

Religious charter schools may be viewed as a viable alternative model of schooling to Catholic schools from an academic and faith-based or religious perspective. Some view this new model of schooling as a competitor to Catholic schools and not as an option for an
alternative governance structure and not as a solution to the Catholic school closing crisis (Ladner, 2007; National Catholic Education Association, 2009; Saroki & Levenick, 2009). Others view this model of schooling as a potentially promising alternative governance structure or option for Catholic schools in peril (Hamilton, 2008; Saroki & Levenick, 2009; Stephens, 2009). Regardless of the perspective that one takes on the role of religious charter schools in a Catholic context, the emergence of this new model affects the Catholic school sector and has even broader implications for American education. If religious charter schools, which are publicly funded, can successfully accommodate a faith-based education in practice then the face of public schooling in America may be facing a revolution (Bailey & Cooper, 2009). Whether or not this is possible depends on one’s perspective of “faith-based,” but under certain definitions of “faith-based” these schools already exist. Examples of these schools that are already in existence are addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

Significance of the Study

This study offers the first synthesis of religious charter school literature to date. This research develops a research-based framework to analyze the benefits and challenges associated with the evolution of religious charter schools in a Catholic context from the perspectives of Catholic school superintendents. In other words, this exploratory study applies a Catholic lens to the question of religious charter schools, what they may look like in practice, and how they may or may not serve communities that have traditionally relied on Catholic schools. Upon the completion of this study, the first available research-based data will exist to inform the larger question of how religious charter schools may serve as a viable alternative governance structure for ailing urban Catholic elementary schools as well as other
communities interested in forming charter schools based upon Catholic values. This alternative governance model (or so-called religious charter school) may act as part of the solution or possibly a panacea to the crisis faced by urban Catholic elementary schools.

Analyzing the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents yielded findings that may crystallize important considerations regarding religious charter schools in a Catholic context and help set appropriate future research and public policy agendas. Furthermore, if there is widespread support for this type of school in the Catholic or public school sectors, there may be broader support across denominational, religious, and secular lines. This conclusion is based on the fact that if Catholic schools, as the largest religiously affiliated school sector in the country, find a way to adapt charter schools to their liking, than many other religiously affiliated schools may follow. Identifying either strong support or opposition to religious charter schools has implications for the future viability and growth of this emerging education sector. For example, strong support could bolster the continued growth and investment in religious charter schools, which may significantly influence the issue of Catholic school closings in urban areas. While this may be simple logic, the reality of the Catholic backing of charter schools has very real, practical, financial, political, and educational ramifications for the Catholic and public school sectors.

**Research Design**

This study was exploratory in nature. The research design was a basic qualitative research study, which used a hybrid of social science strategies, but relied mainly on a semi-structured questionnaire and open-ended interviews. A qualitative approach allowed for a detailed and “thick description” of Catholic school superintendents’ perceptions of religious
charter schools aiding in the formulation of a deeper understanding of the nature and impact of these schools (Geertz, 1973). The qualitative methods used were the distribution of semi-structured questionnaires, follow-up open-ended interviews, and memoing (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1980). A descriptive contemporary historical analysis of the relevant literature on religious charter schools was a component of the research design and influenced the development of the semi-structured questionnaire and open-ended interview protocol (Yin, 1984).

**Data Collection**

The research design focused on the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents, and the analysis was at a diocesan level. This group of high-level educational administrators was chosen as the unit of analysis because of their broad perspectives and potential administrative influence on policy and the development of religious charter schools. Catholic school superintendents from the 12 largest urban dioceses – Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angles, Brooklyn, Cleveland, St. Louis, Newark, Boston, Cincinnati, New Orleans, and Detroit – as determined by the National Catholic Education Association were targeted as participants (McDonald, 2009). In addition, the Catholic school superintendents from Washington, D.C. and Miami were chosen because of the recent charter school conversions in these dioceses (Brinson, 2010; Cruz, 2009). This purposive and theory-driven sampling approach allowed for predetermined criteria – urban education sectors and locations where Catholic conversion charter schools exist – to drive the sample selection in order to fulfill the research objectives (Guest & Arwen, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).
An open-ended questionnaire was administered to selected participants electronically. This allowed access to Catholic school superintendents from around the country. The questions were descriptive and exploratory in nature and designed in concert with the existing literature on religious charter schools in a Catholic context. After receiving the completed questionnaires, follow-up open-ended interviews were scheduled and conducted. Unstructured interviews may provide greater breadth than structured interviews; however, more structured designs may provide greater focus, so a balance was sought in the interview schedule design (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These interviews were conducted over the telephone. It was not feasible to conduct the interviews in person. The intention was to interview each participant that completed a questionnaire. At the conclusion of the data collection, five of the six superintendents that completed a questionnaire subsequently participated in an open-ended interview.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis and interpretation includes making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, and then integrating what these people have said in meaningful ways (Patton, 1980). This study engaged in this sense-making process by creating a provisional “start list” of potential themes prior to conducting fieldwork that came from the research questions and key variables identified in the literature (p. 58). This list guided the development of some questions on the semi-structured questionnaire. Specific codes were built using the “grounded” approach where the researcher allows the data to mold the codes, but the ultimate objective was still to match the data with a theory or construct (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994).
This study used grounded theory research techniques of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, 1990). A “constant comparative method” was applied to help refine the codes, concepts and categories during analysis and interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998). This means that the development of codes and categories was not a process that was set in stone once the initial codes were determined. Rather, “playing with and exploring the codes and categories” throughout the coding process was important, and this allowed the researcher to think through possibilities and interpretations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 46).

**Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation of this study was that the sample is limited to Catholic school superintendents. This research design excluded additional constituencies such as school board members, teachers, parents, students, and local community members. Although this study investigated perceptions of high-level educational administrators at the diocesan level, the perspectives of multiple constituencies at various levels of school organization would provide greater depth and breadth to the findings. A study that investigates the perceptions of additional constituencies may be appropriate now that this exploratory, diocesan-level study is complete.

A second potential limitation is that the research design does not allow for an analysis of the benefits and challenges of any particular religious charter school that currently exists. A case study design would allow for detailed evaluation of religious charter schools in practice (Yin, 1984). Because most educational research is applied, investigating benefits
and challenges of religious charter schools in practice may provide additional insights for researchers and practitioners. However, conducting a case study was not attainable for the researcher. Due to the lack of identified religious charter schools in close proximity to the greater Boston area, there were overriding logistical and financial constraints.

A third limitation of the study is the final sample size. In order to keep consistency with the unit of analysis (Catholic school superintendents) and to take into account geographic considerations – large, urban centers and states with charter school laws – the questionnaire was distributed to 14 Catholic school superintendents in 14 major cities. The final yield was six respondents or 43%, which is consistent with the average survey response rate in academic studies, but the sample size is small (Baruch, 1999; Baruch & Holtom, 2008; Guest & Arwen, 2006).

**Definition of Terms**

*Charter School:* A charter school is a publicly funded school that operates independently of the local school district with the intent of providing greater autonomy and accountability for the individual school.

*Religious Charter School:* This is a charter school that the founders started because of their faith in the broadest sense. These schools may intentionally accommodate student’s religious backgrounds and beliefs in more specific ways than generic charter schools.

*Faith-based Charter School:* This term is found in the limited literature on the topic and is basically synonymous with religious charter schools. This study uses the term religious charter school because it is more prevalent in the literature.
**Private School:** A private school is any school that is not part of the public school system and is privately financed. This term was once virtually synonymous with Catholic schools because of their large market share. Today, there are sectarian and non-sectarian private schools that serve a variety of purposes and constituencies.

**Parochial Schools:** Catholic schools, usually elementary schools, that are associated with a local parish and primarily educate the children of families affiliated with the parish.

**Urban/Inner-city Schools:** Both of these terms – urban and inner-city – are used in the literature to describe a particular geographic location often categorized by factors such as population size and density. There is not a clear, operational definition of inner-city or urban in educational literature. When using the terms to describe schools, the classification can become more problematic because the school may be located in an urban or inner-city area, but the students may reside elsewhere. This study uses both terms interchangeably and accepts the basic understanding that schools located in geographic areas with high population density are generally considered urban. In addition, the study accepts the NCEA’s classification of large urban sectors for sampling purposes.

**Governance Structure:** The administrative, financial, and legal structure that governs the operations of a school.

**Vowed Religious:** An individual who has taken formal vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience in the Roman Catholic Church and is then considered to be living a religious or consecrated life in the Church. This generally includes priests, brothers, nuns, and sisters.

**Lay Person:** Any baptized Catholic that is affiliated with the Catholic Church, but has not taken religious vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.
Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 includes a description of the focus of the study and the research questions used to investigate the topic of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. The initial chapter provides a theoretical rationale for the organization of the study and a brief summary of the research design. Limitations of the study and its significance are also discussed.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature including a brief history of Catholic schools in America, research on Catholic school effectiveness, and an overview of the current state of Catholic and charter schools. In addition, the first synthesis of scholarly and popular literature related to the topic of religious charter schools in a Catholic context is offered.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, design of the study, data gathering procedures, and a description of the data analysis process. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study in a descriptive fashion. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the major findings, a discussion of the findings, and implications and recommendations for practice and further research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This dissertation chronicles the undefined and controversial classification of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. There is scant scholarly research, and no empirical research has been conducted on the subject of religious charter schools. The limited historical and philosophical scholarly writing that does exist alludes to both promise and concern depending on one’s perception of the purpose and impact of these schools (D'Adamo, 2008; Hillman, 2008). The following literature review frames the immediate background for the investigation of religious charter schools in a Catholic context and clarifies the importance and uniqueness of the study.

First, a brief historical overview of early Catholic school history and subsequent growth in the United States is provided. This narrative is supplemented by illustrating how legal challenges and public funding issues played a role in Catholic school evolution. This is then followed by a synthesis of scholarly research on Catholic schools in the United States. Next, an examination of Catholic school decline and the closing crisis illustrate the educational and cultural backdrop as it relates to the topic of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. The rise of charter schools in America is discussed and this leads into the final section on the limited religious charter school research available.

Early Catholic School History

The first Catholic school in America was successfully established in 1727 in New Orleans; however, it is generally agreed upon that the Catholic school system began in 1808 when Elizabeth Ann Seton began a school in Emmitsburg, Maryland for the purpose of
educating the daughters of Catholic families (Buetow, 1970; Burns & Kohlbrenner, 1937; Convey, 1992). The enormous influx of new immigrants to America in the 19th century was the catalyst for a Catholic school system that grew rapidly throughout the 19th and into the 20th century. In fact, the arrival of tens of millions of immigrant Catholics during the years 1820 to 1920 is a primary factor that enabled Catholic schools to flourish (Walch, 2003). Both English-speaking and non-English-speaking immigrant communities built parochial schools in large numbers during this time period, and these populations acted as the driving force behind the rapid growth and success of Catholic schools (Buetow, 1970; Burns & Kohlbrenner, 1937; Walch, 2003).

Parochial schools grew in larger numbers over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but the creation of these schools and Catholic immigrants’ experience assimilating to the New World was hardly free from strife. The Protestant influence in the New World dominated general societal norms including the “common” or public schools (Walch, 2003). In addition, simply being a Catholic immigrant caused many to suffer from anti-Catholic sentiment, particularly from the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority. The discrimination was so severe that Catholicism was actually a prohibited religion in virtually all English colonies and this prohibition was codified into law in the years between 1690 and 1776 (Walch, 2003). For example, in Massachusetts, “Catholics were prohibited from holding religious services, preaching Catholic doctrine, or organizing their own congregations” (Walch, 2003, p. 13).

This historically hostile environment made maintaining a familiar sense of community in a foreign land extremely challenging for Catholic immigrants. As a result, the
importance of preserving new immigrants’ culture and religion was intimately linked to the purposes and vast growth of parish communities and parochial schools. It is widely noted that the primary characteristics of Catholic colonial schools was their religious purpose and focus on cultural preservation (Burns & Kohlbrenner, 1937; Buetow, 1970; Walch, 2003). Embracing the parish school provided a means to preserve both the religious and cultural identity of immigrants while simultaneously offering a refuge from a hostile Protestant majority (Walch, 2003).

**Catholic Schools and Public Funding: Perennial Challenges**

As time moved on, Catholic schools slowly began to enjoy greater support and acceptance, but the road traveled still presented challenges along the way. Increased assimilation of Catholics immigrants and Catholic schools into American civic life paid huge dividends. This paved the way for broad cultural and legal acceptance allowing Catholic schools to plant firm roots in American society. Although over time state legislators dropped restrictions regarding Catholics’ right to practice their religion, James G. Blaine, the Republican leader of the U.S. House of Representations in 1875 attempted to insert an amendment into the U.S. Constitution prohibiting public funds from coming “under the control of any religious sect” (Fossey & LeBlanc, 2005, p. 350). Blaine’s proposal narrowly failed, but it has been argued that the attempt was “motivated by Blaine’s desire to capitalize on a wave of anti-Catholic feelings that swept through the United States in the years following the Civil War” and as a result “similar provisions were added to many state constitutions; and several western territories were required to insert a Blaine-type amendment into their proposed state constitutions as a condition of achieving statehood” (Fossey and
Approximately fifty years after the Civil War, “the policy of specifically prohibiting the distribution of public aid to religious schools, of which nearly all were Catholic, was incorporated into the constitutions of all but three states” (Walch, 2003, p. 152).

Even though progress was made regarding religious expression and freedom, severe anti-Catholic sentiment stemming from the colonial period and the Civil War was widespread and continued into the 20th century. This reality culminated in the 1920s as evidenced by an attempt in the state of Oregon to make attendance at public schools compulsory. This legislative endeavor went miles beyond previous pursuits to simply limit public aid to private religious schools – it sought to ensure that attending any Catholic school was illegal. Despite more than one hundred years of anti-Catholic strife, by this point in American history Catholic schools had secured a significant enough place in American society that the Oregon legislation was not only challenged, but deemed unconstitutional. The Supreme Court ruling *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925) assured Catholic schools of the right to operate without interference in America. This was a landmark ruling for Catholic schools and Catholics in general, attesting to a new level of social and political acceptance.

While Catholic schools enjoyed a newfound security in American society and continued to flourish over the next 40 years, their right to public funding has a mixed history. In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, the court also recognized a distinction between the right to attend a private/religious school and the legality of receiving public funds to attend a private/religious school (Weinberg, 2007). Five years after *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, the *Cochran v. Louisiana State Board of Education* (1930) decision legitimized the concept that
indirect aid in the form of schoolbooks to private schools was constitutional (Walch, 2003). Subsequently, *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) authorized indirect aid to Catholic schools in the form of publicly funded bus transportation. In approving this aid to Catholic school students, “the Court also detailed specific conditions for the constitutionality of such aid that limited future efforts to obtain more assistance” for Catholic schools, but this ruling did not end the debate regarding funding for Catholic schools (Walch, 2003, p. 164). These cases symbolize that small steps were made in the eyes of advocates for Catholic schools to receive public funding. However, in the early 1970s several holdings relevant to public funding for Catholic schools were issued. The aftermath of these rulings squashed the hopes of those who supported increasing the public funding mechanisms for Catholic schools for a significant period of time.

In 1971 the “Lemon” purpose test was born out of *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) and outlined a three-tier approach that assisted future courts in determining the constitutionality of actions related to the Establishment Clause. The Lemon test indicates that the state action must have a secular purpose, must have a principle or primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion, or must not foster an excessive entanglement with religion. In the federal court cases that followed *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) over the next two years, the Court emphasized the use of the Lemon test in its rulings and handed down several decisions that made it clear Catholic schools would not receive any meaningful public assistance (Walch, 2003). These decisions in the early 1970s, initially devastated the Catholic community, but eventually Catholics turned to a “slim glimmer of hope”—the concept of voucher plans (Walch, 2003, p. 219).
Two Significant Rulings: Zelman and Locke

*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) initiated significant change regarding the question of public voucher funds and religiously affiliated schools. This U.S. Supreme Court case is the most recent federal legal source cited regarding public aid to Catholic schools. *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* addresses the voucher component of a state scholarship program in a Cleveland, Ohio school district. This program provides educational choices to public and private school students and it was argued that the program is a constitutional violation of the Establishment Clause because public funds are being used at private religious schools.

In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002), the Court states that “there is no dispute that the program challenged here was enacted for the valid secular purpose of providing educational assistance to poor children in a demonstrably failing public school system,” thus the question of whether the program has the “forbidden ‘effect’ of advancing or inhibiting religion” is the focus of the Court’s analysis (p. 3). Based upon previous rulings relative to the questions of neutrality and the Establishment Clause, the court reaffirmed that “where a government aid program is neutral with respect to religion, and provides assistance directly to a broad class of citizens who, in turn, direct government aid to religious schools wholly as a result of their own genuine and independent private choice, the program is not readily subject to challenge under the Establishment Clause” (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002, p. 5). As a result, the court held that the Ohio program is entirely neutral with respect to religion because there is no funding preference for one type of school over another.

The court asserted that the Ohio program “is a program of true private choice” and thus the Establishment Clause was not offended (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002, p. 5).
Catholic schools scored a huge victory in their quest to receive public funds in the form of vouchers. Some believed that *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* definitively answered the question regarding public voucher funding for religious schools. It was argued that *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* had built on case law that established a trend toward government inclusion of religion, that school voucher programs should proliferate post-*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* and “a day may come when the government must fund religious schools in the same capacity as it funds non-religious schools” (Edelstein, 2004, p. 15). However, others disagreed, and one significant factor quickly altered the possibility that religious schools would enjoy the same funding as public schools. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme court addressed the perennial tension between the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause (Mawdsley & Russo, 2003).

In *Locke v. Davey* (2004) the court addressed the State of Washington’s Promise Scholarship Program, which assists academically gifted students with postsecondary education expenses. The program is funded through the state’s general fund. According to the State constitution, students may not use the scholarship at an institution where they are pursuing a degree in devotional theology. The respondent, Joshua Davey, argued in part that the denial to use his Promise Scholarship based on his decision to pursue a theology degree violated the Free Exercise Clause. A divided U.S. Court of Appeals declared Washington’s Promise Scholarship unconstitutional, but the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the decision.

Acknowledging the “room for play in the joints” between the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause, the U.S. Supreme Court highlights the state’s prerogative to avoid an establishment of religion by prohibiting against using tax funds to support the
ministry (Locke v. Davey, 2004, p. 1312). The important distinction is the difference between supporting education with public funds and supporting education that leads to professional ministry with public funds. The U.S. Supreme Court cites the antiestablishment interests found in many early state constitutions regarding the denial of funds to support formal ministry as reinforcing its conclusion that “religious instruction is of a different ilk” (Locke v. Davey, 2004, p. 1314). The court also recognizes that the Washington State Constitution is “more stringent” in its antiestablishment interest than the U.S. Constitution and does not find fault in this reality (Locke v. Davey, 2004, p. 1313).

The U.S. Supreme Court declared that the State of Washington could have chosen to permit Promise Scholars to pursue a degree in devotional theology in light of the Zelman v. Simmons-Harris ruling and other case law precedents, and this would be consistent with the Federal Constitution; however, it is the state’s own constitution that is the question before the Court in Locke v. Davey. Ultimately, the state’s substantial interest based upon its more restrictive constitutional antiestablishment language rules the day. Herein lies the impact of the Locke v. Davey decision as the question of public voucher funds at religious schools continues to be addressed in the legal system. As such, state constitutional language regarding antiestablishment becomes an extremely influential factor regarding the efficacy of the Zelman v. Simmons-Harris ruling regarding the use of public voucher funds at religious schools in lower court rulings post-Locke v. Davey. Furthermore, and most relevant to this study, is that the more stringent state antiestablishment interests are akin to the Blaine amendments previously mentioned and may have significant influence over court rulings if and when potential religious charter schools legal challenges are made in the future.
This brief review of the historical progression of Catholic schools – establishment, growth, successes, and challenges regarding public funding throughout the 19th and 20th centuries – contextualizes the early purposes, evolution, and funding challenges of Catholic schools. This context is instructive when considering religious charter schools as an alternative governance structure for failing Catholic schools.

Research on Catholic School Effectiveness

Despite anti-Catholic sentiment, legal disputes, and limited public funding, Catholic schools have made significant contributions to the education of American students while simultaneously influencing and shaping the American educational landscape. By the 1965-1966 school-year, there were more than 13,000 Catholic schools in the United States, with approximately 5.6 million students enrolled – the largest number in the nation’s history (Convey, 1992). Catholic school enrollment represented 11.5% of the total student population in the United States and an astonishing 87.5% of all private schooling in the United States (Convey, 1992).

Once a far-reaching Catholic school system was established, the next coup for Catholic schools was the advent of academic research on private and Catholic schools attesting to their merit and success. Coinciding with the apex of Catholic school growth in the mid-1960s, the first scholarly research on Catholic schools was conducted, and subsequently the effectiveness of Catholic schools was documented. While certain findings have been controversial and contested, over the years the argument has been convincingly made that Catholic schools provide students with successful educational opportunities that meet and even exceed national norms (Convey, 1992). How the research community and
educators came to accept this argument about the value and quality of Catholic school education is chronicled in the next several sections of this literature review.

**Early Catholic School Research Studies – 1965-1980**

Prior to 1965, the research conducted on Catholic schools was minimal. In 1960 the delegates to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) convention were challenged to promote research on Catholic schools because “very few facts had ever been collected about the size and number of Catholic schools and even less about their organization or outcomes” (McDermott, 1997, p. 13). The call was answered, and by 1966 the first two major studies on Catholic schools were published. The fact that Catholic schools were finally being studied was important, although the first two major studies focused heavily on religiosity, which was of great interest to the Catholic community, but did not resonate as well with a national audience (Convey, 1992). Nonetheless, initiatives occurred and notable research supporting the value and effectiveness of Catholic schools was produced. Ultimately this work provided the basis for more significant and generally accepted findings as Catholic school research progressed.

The first national study of Catholic schools, *Catholic Schools in Action*, was published in 1966. It was a large study of Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Statistics were gathered from every diocese in the country, save four, that included a total sample of 9451 elementary schools and 2075 secondary schools (Neuwien, 1966). The study covered a range of topics such as enrollment, finance, effectiveness, and religious attitudes and behaviors. While its methods were critiqued for being descriptive
rather than evaluative and “popular” in nature, it was well funded and the most far-reaching study on Catholic schools at that point in time (Convey, 1992, p.12; McCluskey, 1968).

Major accomplishments of the study included the sheer breadth and depth of the study, but particular findings are instructive in beginning to paint a picture of the Catholic context that acts as the backdrop for this study on religious charter schools. In the area of finances, it was noted that about half of Catholic elementary schools and three-fourths of Catholic high schools charged tuition (Neuwien, 1966). In addition, teaching salaries were steadily increasing during this time period because more lay staff were hired and required higher salaries than vowed religious living in community. Regarding achievement, Catholic schools were shown as being successful. Students performed well on standardized tests, their score averages were above national norms, and the majority of students attending Catholic high schools went to college (Neuwien, 1966). The study is also well known for its development of the Inventory of Catholic School Outcomes (ICSO) which measures student’s religious knowledge, values, and attitudes (McCluskey, 1968).

A federal initiative occurred around the same time, in 1964, when Congress commissioned the first major study of the nation’s schools. *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) was published two years later. In this report there was some focus on Catholic schools. A controversial finding of the study, known as the “Coleman Report” (because one of the commissioned researchers was the well known sociologist James S. Coleman), stated that “the school had little effect on a child’s achievement that is independent of the child’s family background and general social context” (Convey, 1992, p. 3). This caused great controversy, and other studies were launched critiquing the research
and findings of the report. The great stir caused by the report spawned extensive research that focused on school effectiveness (Convey, 1992). The report is also noteworthy because Coleman would go on to publish influential works that were more widely accepted and became seminal in the body of Catholic school literature on school effectiveness.

The other major studies on Catholic schools that occurred before 1980 were *The Education of Catholic Americans* (1966) by Andrew Greeley and Peter Rossi and *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (1976) by Andrew Greeley, William McCready, and Kathleen McCourt. The first study was an even more ambitious analytical study than *Catholic Schools in Action* (1966) and it attempted to rigorously analyze the effects of Catholic schools on its graduates using the most advanced statistical methods of that time period (Manno & Graham, 2001). The researchers used the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) data to study whether Catholic students were better educated than public school students and to determine if Catholic schools had a divisive effect on American society, a concern at that time (Greeley & Rossi, 1966).

The study reported greater levels of success in the areas of economic and occupational advancement among those who attended Catholic schools (Convey, 1992; Greeley & Rossi, 1966). Greeley and Rossi argued that the “emotional well-being” of students at Catholic schools was a result of the school’s ability to integrate students into the Catholic community and proved to be a main factor in the success of the schools (Convey, 1992, p.14). This finding turned out to be very similar to future conclusions found in studies conducted by James Coleman which argued that the support of the “functional community” was a reason for Catholic school superiority (Convey, 1992, p. 20). Greeley and Rossi
(1966) also concluded that there was no evidence to support a claim that attending Catholic school created divisiveness towards non-Catholics. Furthermore, the Catholics in the sample presented as more tolerant towards civil liberties than those not attending Catholic school. The study found no distinct difference in the effectiveness of one level of schooling versus another (elementary, secondary, higher education) – Catholic schools at all levels were presented as effective and non-divisive (Greeley & Rossi, 1966). This work established the argument that Catholic schools are more effective than public schools and that the sense of community contributed to this success.

The follow-up project *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (1976) that Greeley was involved in ten years later included more advanced statistical models and looked at the effects of the Second Vatican Council. The conclusion was that effectiveness of Catholics schools had increased over the past ten years making them even more important than before, but they also faced major challenges due to declining enrollments and cost increases that threatened their future (Convey, 1992). Many of the challenges stemmed from the broad social and societal shifts that occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as from institutional changes within the Catholic Church itself. Specific factors that brought about these challenges for Catholics schools will be addressed when discussing the Catholic school closing crisis later in this chapter. At this stage it is important to note that Greeley’s study presented early empirical-based findings that foreshadowed the future for Catholic schools in America regarding enrollment and market-share declines.
Major Catholic School Research 1980 – Present

The major studies involving Catholic schools prior to 1980 were really only of interest to the Catholic community; however, after 1980 “the research concerning Catholic schools enjoyed national prominence and had an important impact on educational policy, both in the Catholic and public sectors” (Convey, 1992, p. 1). The U.S. Department of Education brought national attention to Catholic schools during a time when public schools were receiving great criticism (Manno & Graham, 2001). In 1980 the U.S. Department of Education brought about new leadership and money to research the effectiveness of high schools. As a result, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was established. The NCES collected data that made it possible for researchers to analyze the data for diversified outcomes (McDermott, 1997). At that time, NCES developed what has proven to be an extremely important longitudinal study, High School and Beyond, which includes information on public and Catholic schools.

The national attention on Catholic schools was sparked by James Coleman and his colleagues’ publication High School Achievement (1982) which was based upon the High School and Beyond data set. In this study there were three important and highly contested findings: students in Catholic schools exhibit higher cognitive achievement than students in public schools; Catholic schools are safer and offer a more disciplined and ordered environment than public schools, which contributes to their success; and Catholic schools are less internally segregated than public schools (Coleman, et al., 1982; Manno & Graham, 2001; McDermott, 1997). These findings created great debate among the educational community, and the methodology of the study came under attack (Manno and Graham,
2001). However, Convey (1992) notes that even though the research methods came under severe scrutiny because of their implications, “studies that use longitudinal data to determine school effects generally are methodologically superior to those that use cross-sectional data” and as a result others considered the study to be methodologically sound (p. 7).

*High School Achievement* (1982) provided strong arguments based upon a national data set collected by the U.S. Department of Education that Catholic schools demonstrate higher achievement than public schools. The study suggested that these effects were even more significant among minority students (Coleman, et al., 1982). Furthermore, based upon the study’s findings, it has been argued that public funds might be used to support vouchers and tax credits for private and religious schools, which politicized and intensified the debate (Manno & Graham, 2001). This argument confirms that the public funding debate regarding Catholic schools was alive, well, and part of the national debate in the early 1980s. This high profile controversy is a great catalyst for continued research and debate – both ensued.

The new *High School and Beyond* data set coupled with Coleman’s controversial findings spawned an onslaught of new research focusing on Catholic schools over the next two decades. In addition, two more national databases, the *National Assessment of Education Progress* (NAEP) and the *National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988* (NELS: 88) were established in the 1980s and have been mined for data on Catholic schools. NAEP has proven to be the largest group of studies on student achievement available and allows for analysis of achievement over time (Meegan, Carroll, & Ciriello, 2000). NAEP is conducts its assessment every other year and provides results on subject-matter achievement, instructional experiences, and school environment for populations of students and subgroups
based on representative samples of students at grades 4, 8, and 12 for the main assessments (USDOE, 2010c). NELS:88 surveyed a cohort of eighth graders on various topics including achievement tests; school, work, and home experiences; educational resources and support; neighborhood characteristics; educational and occupational aspirations; and other student perceptions. NELS resurveyed through four follow-ups in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000 (USDOE, 2010b).

These three national data sets have been used to provide strong evidence that Catholic schools have higher achievement test scores, lower dropout rates, higher rates of college attendance, and higher rates of completing college than their public school counterparts (Convey, 1992). For example, Greeley’s *Catholic High Schools and Minority Students* (1982) used the *High School and Beyond* data to measure the impact of Catholic high schools on Black and Hispanic students. It was the first study to specifically focus on minority students in Catholic schools (Greeley, 1982). Greeley’s work confirmed Coleman and his colleague’s suggestion that Catholic schools had greater effects on minority students, stating that the evidence analyzed points to an explanation that minority group members display superior performance in Catholic schools (Greeley, 1982; Manno & Graham, 2001). Coleman and Hoffer subsequently conducted their own follow-up study in 1987 based upon the newly released *High School and Beyond* data. This study also confirmed what became known as the “common school effect,” where “student achievement was higher for those attending a Catholic school and achievement differences between affluent and poor students or minority and White students were less in Catholic schools” (Manno and Graham, 2001, p. 289).
Five years later, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (1993) was published by Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland. Many of the themes found in Coleman and Greeley’s work were confirmed yet again. In addition, the study has proved to be a seminal piece of literature in Catholic school research. The researchers set out “to examine the distinctive features combined to form supportive social environments that promote academic achievement from a broad cross section of students” (Bryk, et al., 1993, p. ix). In this work the researchers took a risk by attempting to analyze a “very soft idea – that good schools have a sense of community – and subject it to rigorous specification and empirical scrutiny” (Bryk et al., 1993, p.xii).

Because of the debate about whether a sense of community can influence school effectiveness, these scholars attempted to analyze the claims empirically. Bryk and his colleagues also built upon earlier studies and analyzed two sets of *High School and Beyond* data, but they applied more complex statistical methodology than previous studies, which relied on path analysis and hierarchical linear modeling techniques to analyze the relationship between variables and student achievement (Manno & Graham, 2001). The findings from this rigorous analysis established greater legitimacy among the broad educational research community and have helped the study stand the test of time.

The study’s conclusion was that effective Catholic schools function on the basis of four foundational characteristics: A delimited technical core, communal organization, decentralized governance, and an inspirational ideology (Bryk et al., 1993). Having a focused and constrained curriculum, a strong sense of community, more autonomy to react to different situations, and providing a clear sense of purpose and mission were identified as
features unique to Catholic schools that were likely increase school effectiveness and help disadvantaged students (Bryk, et al., 1993; Manno & Graham, 2001). As strong as these conclusions were it remains important to note that research comparing Catholic and public schools is complex. Factors such as self-selection, selectivity bias, and the proper specification of statistical models can create problems in isolating direct cause and effect (Convey, 1992). Yet, putting research debates aside, at the very least, Catholic schools had gained a national reputation for being effective schools, particularly among minority students, with a great deal of success attributed to their strong sense of community.

**Elementary School Research: Few Major Studies**

In his review of twenty-five years of research in Catholic education, John Convey (1992) identified new longitudinal studies as a methodological priority for future Catholic school research. Furthermore, he called on national leaders of Catholic schools to give the “highest priority to sponsoring a comprehensive, empirical study of Catholic elementary schools in the United States” describing this as a national research priority (Convey, 1992, p. 184). Convey made this declaration because of the dearth of scholarly research available on Catholic elementary schools.

In 1982 *Inner-city Private Elementary Schools: A Study* was published in part due to the fact that “very little scientific information” was available on inner-city elementary schools (Cibulka, et al., 1982, p. 17). It synthesized the limited existing information on inner-city private education by providing rich, descriptive data to illustrate why these schools are attractive and achieve great success (Cibulka, et al., 1982; Manno & Graham, 2001). The study concluded that private inner-city elementary schools are successful due to their local
control, shared decision making, a safe school environment, and clarity of mission and shared purpose (Cibulka, et al., 1982). These conclusions clearly support the later findings from Bryk and his colleague’s work on Catholic high schools.

Two other important findings noted in this study are relevant to the question of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. One study found that despite the success regarding student achievement, internal threats to these urban elementary schools included the socio-economic conditions of the parents who use them; the ability to maintain quality faculty; and problems maintaining physical facilities (Cibulka, et al., 1982). These findings added further confirmation to Greeley’s (1976) concerns. In the second study, the authors posited that two major policy options – tuition tax credits and educational vouchers – deserved careful consideration because they could produce positive benefits for inner-city private schools (Cibulka, et al., 1982). The argument to turn to public funds as a remedy for the financial problems that threaten inner-city Catholic elementary schools was alive and well in the early 1980s.

It was not until over twenty years later that a more current, comprehensive study on inner-city, Catholic elementary schools was conducted. *Sustaining the Legacy* (2004) was published and sought to answer Convey’s call by gaining insights into what had by then become a closing crisis of urban Catholic elementary schools. Through an investigation of student enrollment, staffing issues, and school structure, the study set out to articulate a comprehensive understanding of what these schools endure and can hope to accomplish in the future. *Sustaining the Legacy* conducted a study of a nationally representative sample of inner-city Catholic elementary schools. Analyses were conducted with respect to minority
composition and poverty status. The study examined school characteristics, student body demographics, teacher and principal characteristics, student family information, the school’s community involvement, curriculum and instruction, school finances and development, and religious identity.

Findings were reported under the heading of students, staffing, and structure. Relevant findings include the following. Contrary to a popular perception, these schools did not cater to an inner-city elite. This agrees with Cibulka and his colleague’s (1982) findings. The students came from low-income families, many with single parents, and a significant number were immigrants and from ethnic minority groups. Highly qualified, experienced, and aging religious sisters, most of whom worked for small stipends, made up 40% of the principals (O’Keefe, et al., 2004). Physical plant issues were a cause for concern; over half of the schools were founded before 1926, and most of them were in their original buildings (O’Keefe, et al., 2004). Reminiscent of Greeley (1976) and Cibulka and his colleague’s (1984) earlier findings, the fact that inner-city Catholic elementary schools serve minority populations and are threatened by aging physical plant and rising costs continues to be confirmed. The problem that remains today is that significant and effective steps towards addressing these threats have either not occurred or have not been successful.

Two important new themes also emerged from Sustaining the Legacy. First, the schools that served the neediest children and showed the most measures of success were those that formed collaborative relationships with other Catholic or public schools, with Catholic universities, with healthcare providers, with social service agencies, and with the business community (O’Keefe, et al., 2004). If one can conceive of Catholic schools as
partnering with the public school sector when considering the question of religious charter school establishment, then this finding is instructive. Second, the religious identity of the students is diverse. The study posits:

Perhaps the most provocative characteristic of these Catholic elementary schools is the religious identity of non-Catholic students which, in its breadth, reveals the literally ecumenical nature of these inner-city schools. On average, for the primarily minority elementary schools, only 66% of the students are Catholic, 17% are Baptist, and the remaining students enrolled are other types of Protestants. (O’Keefe, et al., 2004, p. 24)

National trends tell a similar story regarding the evolution of Catholic school students’ religious affiliation. While most Catholic school students are Catholic, non-Catholic student enrollment rose from 2.7% in 1970 to 11.2% a decade later and currently is 14.9% (McDonald, 2010, 2011). This data illustrates that fact that student demographics are shifting.

**Current Catholic School Research**

Since the publication of *Sustaining the Legacy*, recent research has continued to confirm the unique and highly effective nature of Catholic schooling. These findings are even more convincing in urban school environments. It has been argued that “the survival of Catholic schools appears to be one of the most effective ways to link poor, minority students to integrated, productive learning environments” (Ilg, Massucci, & Cattaro, 2004, p. 364). While the bulk of research on Catholic schools historically focused on high schools, and
continues to do so, the findings are still instructive. In addition, more advanced research methodologies have been applied to Catholic school settings to further establish the legitimacy of the conclusions as compared to the early studies that were more descriptive and spoke primarily to a sympathetic Catholic audience.

For example, through the use of quantile regression statistical analysis, it has been noted there is evidence that one potential benefit associated with Catholic schooling is matriculation at more selective colleges and universities (Eide, Goldhaber, & Showalter, 2004). Another recent statistical analysis of Catholic high schools based on data obtained from the NELS used propensity score matching methods found that Catholic schooling improves math test scores, with stronger effects for males than for females, and also raises high school graduation rates and substantially increases the likelihood of enrollment in a four-year college (Nguyen, Taylor, & Bradley, 2006). Furthermore, qualitative research has noted additional benefits beyond test score achievement and college attendance. The benefits of Catholics schools for urban children range from a strong sense of personal responsibility in their own learning to perceiving their schools as caring environments – themes regarding the importance of community and the value of a clear mission have been reconfirmed qualitatively (Bempechat, Boulay, Piegross, & Wenk, 2008; Borneman, 2008; Owens, 2005).

Research continues to support the value and benefits of Catholic schools. This brief review focused primarily on Catholic school effectiveness in order to highlight the strong case that Catholic schools are, at the very least, on par with their public school counterparts. They perform well on standardized tests with scores above national norms, offer safe and
community oriented environments, are less internally segregated than public schools, have autonomy and clarity of purpose and mission, and boast high graduation rates. Based upon these facts alone, Catholic schools are worthy of continued study and future investment. Perhaps even more compelling is the effectiveness that Catholic schools have displayed with minority students. Raising achievement levels and closing the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions have been pointedly targeted since the advent of the systemic reform movement in the mid-1980s, which culminated in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. But it has been argued these goals have come up short and challenges remain for lower socio-economic and minority populations (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Pullin, 2007; Shaul & Ganson, 2005; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Based upon the Catholic school effectiveness research, Catholic schools are well equipped to serve these populations that have historically struggled with academic achievement.

Serving disadvantaged communities is not only a call from the Catholic Church, but from the public school community. Collectively, the American community must strive to ensure that all children are given the opportunity and learn and excel academically. Catholic schools are positioned to continue to meet these needs with success; however, significant threats to the future viability and vitality of Catholic schools exist in particular for urban Catholic elementary schools. It has been noted that increasing costs as they related to salaries and facilities, as well as a changing student demographic, have contributed to the struggles experienced by Catholic schools. Although these issues have been raised over the past 40 years, closing trends continued and have now reached a crisis level. In the next section, the cultural and demographic shifts that have contributed to this crisis will be
explored in more detail. Once this context is understood, it will be possible to consider potential solutions.

**Catholic School Decline: Social and Cultural Factors**

Assimilation into the fabric of American society proved to be a major asset throughout the first half of the 20th century, as initially evidenced in the *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925) ruling, but the continued evolution of Catholic socialization and integration into society that provided Catholics schools with strong social capital in the 1920s, currently threatens the historical purposes and future viability of these same schools. As previously discussed, the commitment to Catholic schooling provided an incredible sense of community for immigrant Catholics. “Perhaps the greatest asset of parochial schooling – even to the present day – is that these schools reflected the goals, aspirations, and even the prejudices and fears of neighborhood Catholics who supported these institutions” (Walch, 2003, p. 4). Maintaining a collective identity allowed for this strong sense of community to perpetuate. While this clear sense of Catholic communal identity existed well into the 20th century, change did eventually occur. Walsh (2003) summarizes similar sentiments specific to the Catholic school experience today in his statement:

For most of its existence, the Catholic school was seen as a safe haven for a religious minority that did not feel welcome in the public schools. But after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, and for the next generation, the differences between Catholics and non-Catholics on educational issues seemed to fade away. The justification for maintaining a separate, very costly
school system seemed less compelling. Many schools closed and those that remained were redefined. (p. 5)

The rise of the Catholic school system in the United States reached a pinnacle in the mid-1960s. As noted earlier there were more than five million students in Catholic schools in the 1965-1966 school year. However, the growth that occurred throughout the early 20th century was wiped out quickly. By 1974, just nine years later, there were a record number of school closings – more than 2400 elementary schools and over 700 secondary schools – which neutralized a 35-year increase (Convey, 1992). Albeit at a slower rate, the school closing and enrollment trends continued over the next decade. By the 1989-1990 school year, 8,719 schools remained open and enrollment dropped to approximately 2.5 million, representing only 11.5% of the total school enrollment in the United States and 48.7% of private school enrollment according to data collected in 1988 (Convey, 1992).

NCEA statistics for the 2010-2011 academic year reveal that Catholic enrollment is now approximately 2.1 million and 6,980 schools remain open – a 60% decline in enrollment (McDonald, 2011). Just over half the number of schools is open compared to the mid-1960s, and the numbers have been consistently dropping over the past 10 years (McDonald, 2011). Related research shows a steady decline in all faith-based urban schools nationally. Between the 1999-2000 and 2005-2006 school years, the faith-based central city or urban school sector has lost 1,163 schools or 14% and approximately 425,000 or 20% of its students (USDOE, 2009). Between the 2000 and the 2009 school years, there were 1,429 Catholic schools that closed (17.5%) and the number of students declined by 460,507 (17.4 %) (McDonald, 2009). Since 2000, urban Catholic elementary school enrollment has declined by
29.6% in the twelve large urban dioceses and 18.2% in the rest of the United States (McDonald, 2009). The urban Catholic elementary school closure and enrollment decline trends are far more acute than the broader faith-based urban sector as well as the national trends for all Catholic schools. This data indicates that Catholic school closings are of grave concern nationally with the most acute problems impacting urban Catholic elementary schools.

There are a variety of factors that have contributed to the steep decline in the overall Catholic school enrollment and number of school closings over the past 40 years. One of the factors that played a significant role in the unprecedented decline experienced from 1965 to 1990 was family demographics. Significant realities included a declining birth rate in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s affected all school enrollments and the migration of Catholics to new areas of the country where there were no Catholic schools established (Convey, 1992). Other important factors influencing the decline were cultural and religious in nature. First and foremost, public education became less threatening to Catholics as anti-Catholic sentiment declined in the United States. For example, the election of John F. Kennedy as the first Catholic President of the United States was an important symbol of this shift. As a result of immigrant assimilation and waning anti-Catholicism, more Catholic families enrolled their children in public schools. Another major factor that put pressure on Catholic schools during this period was increasing operating expenses.

In the wake of the extreme cultural and religious shifts that occurred during the 1960s, the Catholic Church experienced significant attrition of vowed religious. This trend continues today in the American Catholic Church. Due to the decline in the number of
vowed religious teaching in Catholic schools in the 1960s and 1970s, the number of lay Catholic teachers hired increased significantly during this time period (Convey, 1992). In 1950 vowed religious accounted for 93% and 83% of the teachers in Catholic elementary and secondary schools respectively (Convey, 1992). In comparison, lay Catholic school teachers currently represent over 96% of all Catholic schools teachers (MacDonald, 2010). The sharpest drop in the number of vowed religious occurred in the 1990s with the percentage of teaching sisters declining 54% and priests and brothers declining 42% (Cook, 2002).

Traditionally, vowed religious were not paid market rate salaries for their service at Catholic schools. This allowed for only 50% of elementary schools to charge tuition in the early 1960s, a reality that is no longer financially feasible (Neuwien, 1966). As a result, with the drastic increase in lay faculty and staff requiring market rate salaries, operating costs skyrocketed. Schuttloffel (2007) notes that questions related to lay leadership and financial support for them require thoughtful responses. Despite the resistance by some authority figures, lay teachers are almost exclusively the population teaching in Catholic schools today and lay administrative leadership is on the rise (McDonald, 2010). “With over 85% of religious sisters nearing, or at, retirement age, questions arise about how best to maintain the religious, spiritual identity of such schools while recognizing that the leadership has and will continue to become the job of the lay population” (O’Keefe, et al., 2004, p. 66). As a result of these major shifts, the leadership structures, financial models, and personnel and student demographics of Catholic schools have change severely.

Another shift is the perception that receiving a quality education is now seen as vitally important in a market of choice where allegiance to one institution versus another can change
quickly. For example, the public policies and popular conversations around public schooling have influence over parent decisions when considering school choice for their children. The systemic reform movement was catalyzed by *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and its influence continues to play itself out through the high-stakes testing and accountability movement. There is now a general schooling environment shaped by national and state standardized testing and high-stakes accountability which influences both the public and private school worlds. This powerful national education policy shapes client expectations and Catholic schools are not insulated from this reality (Schuttloffel, 2007). Qualified teachers and academic standards are important considerations for non-Catholic and Catholic families in today’s educational marketplace. For example, in one of the few quantitative studies focusing explicitly on inner-city private elementary school it is argued that a principle factor in the decision process of choosing a private religious school in the inner-city is the quality of education that the school is perceived as providing (Cibulka, et al., 1982). This represents a shift from the cultural and religious motivations that historically compelled families to send their children to Catholic schools. Most recently, new data regarding the educational and religious landscapes in America provide further insight into factors contributing to the challenges faced by Catholic schools.

**Recent Social, Cultural, and Religious Shifts**

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) published a report, *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future* (2007) that identified the economy along with the achievement gap and demographic trends as powerful factors affecting America’s future. In light of the recent global economic turmoil, even greater financial stresses loom for the
nation and fall squarely on at the doorsteps of urban Catholic elementary schools. Catholic schools are highly dependent on individual philanthropy, and this type of giving is bound to diminish in the current economic climate. Prior to this acute economic downfall, the data on the economy and workplace referenced by the ETS was already of concern to urban Catholic elementary schools. For example, in 1950, manufacturing’s share of total employment was 33.1% and by 2003 it was 10.7% (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007). Furthermore, employment in management-related, professional and technical occupations combined grew by 2.9 million or 6.4% – more than double the growth rate for all other occupations in the labor market – and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics job growth projections indicate that professional, management, technical, and high level sales positions will generate about 46% of all job growth in the nation over the 2004-2014 decade (Kirsch, et al., 2007). The economy is changing. The workforce subsequently must change in kind. To meet these needs, inner-city Catholic schools are not only faced with the challenges of adapting new curriculum to meet social, economic, and societal needs, but they are working with some of the most underprivileged populations with inadequate funding while attempting to respond to these challenges.

The achievement gap is a symptom of inequities that exist in America, the second critical factor noted in the ETS report. For example, in 2001 national public high school graduation rate for disadvantaged minorities was 50% Black and 53% Hispanic compared to 75% White and 77% Asian with the Black-White and Hispanic-White achievement gaps remaining large and relatively stable since 1984 (Kirsch, et al., 2007). These achievement gap trends fall squarely upon the shoulders of all Catholics schools. In fact, the percentage of
minorities in Catholic schools has tripled in the past 40 years. In 1970 minorities accounted for 10.8% of the Catholic school population and in 2010 it is at 29.8% (McDonald, 2010).

Regarding American demographic shifts, from 2000-2005 the U.S. population grew by about 15 million, with net international migration of 6.3 million constituting about 42% of the growth; however, among new immigrants age 18 and older living in the United States in 2004, approximately one-third lacked a high school diploma (Kirsch, et al., 2007). By far the largest number of immigrants during this period came from Mexico with almost 2.2 million new residents – India is a distant second at 345,000 (Kirsch, et al., 2007). It can therefore be inferred that inner-city Catholic schools which serve larger numbers of immigrant Hispanic populations are faced with the increased challenges of education populations that statistically lack in literacy skills and academic achievement. In fact, the poorest of inner-city Catholic schools demonstrate a greater likelihood of enrolling foreign-born students, as do 9 out of 10 Hispanic schools (O’Keefe, et al., 2004). Moreover, almost 30% of Catholics in America are Hispanic (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Changes in American religious demographics are also instructive when considering the unique factors that fuel the intensity of the crisis effecting Catholic schools. In 2008 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey which includes a sample of over 35,000 Americans beliefs and attitudes about religious affiliation. Two major relevant findings include that fact that since 1972 the number of people with no religious affiliation in the United States has risen from below five percent to 16.1%, and while there has been a net loss of seven percent regarding Catholic affiliation over the past generation, the number of American Catholics, approximately one-quarter of
the total population, has remained stable thanks in large part to Hispanic immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2008). This trend of non-religious and non-Catholic affiliation among Americans hints at challenges faced by Catholics schools today in terms of their purpose, mission and the demographics of their student body and staff. Particular to inner-city Catholic elementary schools, Hispanics continue to be an important subgroup regarding the makeup of these schools and represent approximately half of all minority students enrolled in Catholic elementary schools in America (McDonald, 2010).

Additional data from a 1999 survey specific to American Catholics shows that weekly Mass attendance among all American Catholics dropped to 37%, steadily decreasing since the 1940s and 1950s when about three-quarters of American Catholics attended Mass weekly (D’Antonio, Davidson, Hoge and Meyer, 2001). More recent data collected from a national sample of U.S. Catholics by Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (2007) reports that weekly Mass attendance currently hovers around 31% indicating a continued decline. This general decline of religious affiliation and practice influences popular conversations and attitudes regarding the role of religion in society and at institutions such as Catholic schools. The effects of these general societal changes can be seen in the changing religious demographics specific to Catholic schools.

Catholic assimilation, a drastic decrease in vowed religious participation, changing student demographics, and an increasingly competitive educational marketplace all have contributed to the closing trends in Catholic schools. Comingled with these factors, it has also been widely noted that issues related to finances, such as tuition, salary expense, and maintaining facilities, continue to be one of the largest factors in causing school closings.
(Cibulka, et al. 1982; O’Keefe, 2004,2007; Staud, 2008; USDOE, 2008). Of even greater concern are the specific effects these economic circumstances have on the poor – a demographic central to the Church’s mission of service and education (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). Furthermore, O’Keefe and Grace (2007) argue that the consequences of these financial realities on the poor increase where vowed religious congregations are declining and there is inadequate financial support from the government, which is the case in America. As such, it has become increasingly clear that the proud legacy of Catholic inner-city schools in America is threatened.

The purpose of Catholic schools in the 21st century has changed. As a result of these changes “the charter for Catholic schools shifted from protecting the faithful from a hostile Protestant majority to pursuing peace and social justice within an ecumenical and multicultural world” (Bryk, 1996, p. 30). Catholic schools have begun to serve different purposes and populations in this modern context, yet the key component of these schools is worth retaining: providing culturally responsive education for students (O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). It is this belief coupled with the Church’s mission to serve the poor and provide a gospel-based education that drives the importance of researching ways for Catholic schools to respond to these challenges successfully in order to continue their strong legacy which began centuries ago (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

**Catholic School Future Viability**

The scope of this literature review focuses on providing a backdrop for the research questions regarding religious charter schools in a Catholic context. It has been illustrated that financial threats faced by urban Catholic elementary schools are of grave concern.
Furthermore, throughout Catholic school history, identifying ways to access public funding for Catholic schools has a long and mixed history. The need to explore and identify alternative governance structures and funding mechanisms to strengthen the viability of Catholics schools is necessary due to additional and significant internal threats such as leadership and demographic changes.

The establishment of alternative governance structures is a practice being tested in the field as an attempt to curb or reverse the closing trends faced by Catholic schools and to support students in urban areas (Goldschmidt, O'Keefe, & Walsh, 2004; Meyer, 2008; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2007). Governance structures are the administrative, financial, and legal structures that govern the operations of a school. O’Keefe and his colleagues (2004) describe governance structures simply as the “governing body of the school” (p. 59). The traditional parochial governance structure consists of a school that is operated and funded by its adjoining parish. Today, governance structure models vary in structure and design, yet they all share a common goal – to provide viable administrative structures that aim to secure the financial and operational future of urban Catholic schools. Catholic education scholars have argued for some time that governance structures are a major problem facing Catholic schools and that research in this area is scant and needed (Bryk, et al., 1984; Schuttloffel, 2007; Traviss, 2001). More recently, it is being argued that charter schools may offer another new form of governance structure for ailing Catholic schools and communities interested in the values promoted by Catholic education (Hillman, 2008; Karp, 2009; Smarick, 2009). The emergence of charter schools coupled with their possibilities as an
alternative governance structure for Catholic schools has increased the compelling need for research.

There are a variety of public funding sources that can affect Catholic schools – indirect aid such as textbook funding and bus transportation, tuition tax deductions, states sending teachers into Catholic schools to provide federally funded and mandated programs for disadvantages students, and government-issued vouchers. The most commonly discussed options over the past ten years have been tax credits and vouchers. Advocates for providing public funds to private religiously affiliated schools should explore all available options. However, neither vouchers nor tax credits have proved to have a substantial influence on the future sustainability of Catholic schools (Hamilton, 2008; James, 2007; Mawdsley and Russo, 2003; Meyer, 2007). As such, this study does not delve into the multiple avenues of public funding. Having that said, public charter schools are financed with public education dollars. Therefore, when considering religious charter schools in a Catholic context, the issue of public funding as it relates to charter schools is relevant and is highlighted in the next section.

New organizational models are a way to enable Catholic schools to confront the multitude of challenges faced and adapt to a new educational marketplace perhaps with greater success. New governance structures have emerged in response to the recent challenges. For example, the NativityMiguel Network of Schools are governed locally, but are part of a 64-school network serving 5,000 students in 27 states across the country (NativityMiguel Network of Schools, 2011.) These Catholic elementary schools serve
students and families in low-income neighborhoods and they are committed to providing high quality education.

Some advantages to being part of the Network include professional development opportunities for school presidents and development directors, principals, teachers, and graduate support directors. Other advantages include: sharing best practices through the Mission Assessment Program, of which the collegial visit process is the primary component; the Network seeks broad-based, national funding and marketing opportunities to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the Network schools (NativityMiguel Network of Schools, 2011). The Network has one governing board for all of the member schools, in contrast to traditional parochial models where the school functions independently. While the schools have reported success, the Network represents a small fraction of the nearly 6000 Catholic elementary schools in the country (McDonald, 2010). In addition, the Network relies heavily on philanthropy, and for these reasons it is not a hopeful systemic solution for failing Catholic schools.

Another emerging model is the consortium model. Usually smaller than a large network of schools, the consortium model involves a group of local schools clustering together in a single administrative body (O’Keefe and Scheopner, 2007). This model has been implemented to avoid school closures through the pooling of resources. One example is Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy in Dorchester and Mattapan, Massachusetts. Five former parish schools came together to create one new school with five “campuses” and each one offers the same curriculum and services (Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy, 2009). This type of structure allows the former individual parochial schools to pool their resources
and centralize certain aspects of schooling to achieve cost savings, efficiency, and a high-quality standardized curriculum. What it does not do is inherently bring in any new sources of funding, which is ultimately the driving factor in adopting the religious charter school model. The initial pooling of resources achieved through the consortium model may be successful over time, but it has yet to prove to be a sustainable model.

Another example of this type of consortium that failed occurred in 1997 in Washington D.C. when the archdiocese formed the Center City Consortium in an effort to save eight ailing parochial schools. However, even after the consortium began, increasing competition from local charter schools in the Washington D.C. area continued (Miller, 2008). As a result, the archdiocese moved forward with plans to “convert” the schools to public charters to avoid their seemingly inevitable closure (Robelen & Davis, 2007).

The Archdiocese’s investigation and ultimate conversion of seven of its Catholic parochial schools to public charters did not mark the first time a Catholic school converted to a public charter. In 2001 St. Mary’s Academy in Beeville, Texas became a charter and St. Anthony’s in Dallas followed in 2003; however, it was the first to garner major national attention (Fisher, 2008; Miller, 2008; Robelen, 2008; Toppo, 2008). If a large urban archdiocese could convert multiple parochial schools to public charters, what might this mean for the future of other ailing urban Catholic elementary schools in the country? The potential implications surrounding this potential new type of governance structure as an alternative of choice for Catholic schools drives the research questions of this study.
Charter School Nuts and Bolts

At the same time that urban Catholic elementary schools are experiencing drastic declines, another trend related to urban education is moving in an opposite direction – the rapid growth of charter schools (Center for Education Reform, 2010; Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, 2009; USDOE, 2011). In 1991 Minnesota passed the first charter school law, and since their inception charter schools have been one of the fastest growing innovations in education policy, enjoying broad bipartisan support from governors, state legislators, and past and present secretaries of education (U.S. Charter Schools, 2010b). A charter school is a publicly funded school that operates independently of the local school district with the intent of providing greater autonomy and accountability for the individual school.

Charter schools are a fast-growing educational sector, boasting steady annual growth since their inception. For example, the first charter school opened in 1992 and just six years later nearly 800 schools were open in 29 states and the District of Columbia, serving 100,000 students (Georgiou, 2005). In only one year, the number of schools nearly doubled to 1,542 and charter schools represented 1.7% of all public schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010). By 2005 the number of schools had more than quadrupled since 1998, with 3,400 schools open across 40 states and the District of Columbia, enrolling almost a million students (Center for Education Reform, 2010). Current statistics show that more than 5,400 schools are serving approximately 1.7 million children across the United States and they represent almost 5% of all public schools in the United States, nearly triple the
market share from ten years ago (Center for Education Reform, 2010; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010).

As is the case with education law in America, public charter school laws begin at the state level and the specifics of each law vary state by state. All charter school legislation covers seven basic policy and legal areas:

1. Charter development: who may propose a charter, how charters are granted, the number of charter schools allowed, and related issues;

2. School status: how the school is legally defined and related governance, operations, and liability issues;

3. Fiscal: the level and types of funding provided and the amount of fiscal independence and autonomy;

4. Students: how schools are to address admissions, non-discrimination, racial/ethnic balance, discipline, and special education;

5. Staffing and Labor Relations: whether the school may act as an employer, which labor relations laws apply, and other staff rights and privileges;

6. Instruction: the degree of control a charter school has over the development of its instructional goals and practices;
7. Accountability: whether the charter serves as a performance-based contract, how assessment methods are selected, and charter revocation and renewal issues (U.S. Charter Schools, 2010a).

Examples of provisions that may differ among states include: limiting or not limiting the number of charter schools and applications in the state; placing restrictions on new charter schools or only allowing conversion schools to operate; identifying which entities can authorize charter schools; determining exemptions regarding school district’s laws and regulations; and answering questions of funding formulas and fiscal autonomy (Center for Education Reform, 2009).

These points are raised in light of the historical context provided regarding the potentially restrictive nature of certain state constitutions when considering the establishment clause. In a similar fashion, various restrictions that appear in state charter school legislation may create an environment that is more or less favorable for the establishment of charter schools, and especially religious charter schools. However, this study is limited to highlighting the fact that charter schools currently operate in 40 states, and they have achieved a substantial stake in the public school market share. The national charter school market share has tripled over the past ten years and in the top ten market share states, charter schools represent from 22% to as high as 56.6% of the all public schools in the respective states (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009). Their presence and increasing impact is undeniable nationwide.
The Complementary Nature of Charter and Catholic Schools

The student demographics served by charter schools mirror those currently served by urban Catholic schools – they enroll larger percentages of Black and Hispanic students and lower percentages of White and Asian students than conventional public schools (McDonald, 2009; USDOE, 2008). As a result, it has been argued that charter schools are a competitor cutting into the marketplace of urban Catholic schools (Ladner, 2007). This study explores an alternative and more complex possibility. Instead of thinking of charter schools as competitors that are overtaking the Catholic marketplace, perhaps a more symbiotic relationship can exist between these two sectors. Catholic school populations may have substantial influence over the formation of the growing charter school sector. In addition, charter schools may possibly provide new options for Catholic communities seeking sustainable models of schooling. The greatest contribution of both sectors working together is the opportunity to continue to provide effective educational opportunities in value-based community oriented schools for the often underserved demographic of urban, minority students that both sectors currently serve.

The Center for Education Reform (2009) states that charter schools are “innovative public schools that are accountable for student results” that are designed by educators, parents, or civic leaders; open and attended by choice; free from most rules and regulations governing conventional public schools (“What is a Charter School?,” para. 1). Charter school legislation in all states varies, but charter schools are based upon the ideas of increased autonomy, local control, and community involvement (U.S. Charter Schools, 2010a, 2010b). Charter schools’ autonomy is reflective of the decentralized governance
structure of Catholic parochial schools, which has been attributed to Catholic schools effectiveness (Bryk, et al., 1993; Cibulka, et al., 1982).

A charter school may also operate in pursuit of a specific set of educational objectives determined by the school's developer and agreed to by the authorized public chartering agency (USDOE, 2004). In fact, the U.S. Department of Education (1997) found that the most common reasons for founding charter schools are to realize an educational vision; have more autonomy over organizational, personnel, or governance matters; serve a special population; receive public funds; engender parent involvement and ownership; or attract students and parents. Charter schools may establish a particular vision and value-set that drives the purposes of the school. Having an inspirational ideology and clarity of mission and purpose are also factors attributed to Catholic school success (Bryk, et al., 1993; Cibulka, et al., 1982). Key aspects of the charter school start-up profile match similar factors that are reflective of the best practices of Catholic schools.

As urban Catholic schools face what seems like the possibility of virtual extinction, charter schools are enjoying unprecedented growth and support (Bruce, 2009; Center for Education Reform, 2010; Hamilton, 2008). If these trends in charter and Catholic schools continue, it is reasonable to anticipate that charter school enrollment will meet and eventually surpass that of Catholic schools in the not too distant future. These statistical facts – the rapid growth and market share increase of charter schools, coupled with the steep declines in urban Catholic elementary school numbers and enrollment – frame the focus of this study and support the need to investigate the research questions related to religious charter schools in a Catholic context.
Religious Charter Schools: What Are They Conceptually?

The classification “religious charter school” may seem to be a misnomer. The central reason is because the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 states that a charter school “is nonsectarian in its programs, admissions policies, employment practices, and all other operations, and is not affiliated with a sectarian school or religious institution” (e.g., SEC. 5210). This is consistent with church-state relations bearing upon other public schools in the United States. However, this does not mean that religion must be completely void from these schools. Consider the charter school program non-regulatory guidance statement that:

As with other public schools, charter schools may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach about religion from a secular perspective. And though charter schools must be neutral with respect to religion, they may play an active role in teaching civic values. The fact that some of these values are also held by religions does not make it unlawful to teach them in a charter school. Furthermore, as discussed below, faith-based and religious organizations can be involved with charter schools in many ways, and religious expression by students is allowed in charter schools to the same extent as in other public schools. (USDOE, 2004, “Non-regulatory Guidance Handbook,” p. 15)

Charter schools are ripe for developing a model of schooling not seen before in the United States – the religious charter school. Charter schools are autonomous by nature and their specific definitional purpose is to serve the needs of founding
communities, plus they have the ability to teach religion and promote values held by religious.

A religious charter school is a conceptual term that is used in this study to demarcate a certain category of public charter schools. However, it should be noted that the federal government or state charter school legislation does not use the language of religious charter schools. The reason for the distinction in terminology is to help categorize certain public charter schools that have established their particular purpose or mission based upon values or beliefs that coincide with religious values and beliefs. The term may also be applied to public charter schools that do not self-identify as faith-based or religious, but in practice, the structure and composition of the school may come across to an objective party as highly reflective of a traditional religious school – with certain marked differences discussed below. Given the potential similarities and differences of religious charter schools as compared to traditional Catholic schools, the question becomes – what are the perceptions of key administrators as to the benefits and challenges of these schools in a Catholic context?

The limited research and popular writing on the topic provides a skeleton outline of some of the broad themes to be considered.

**Religious Charter School Research**

There is very little to report on the existing body of scholarly knowledge available on the topic of religious charter schools, and there is no synthesis of
scholarly and popular literature. This section is the first attempt at compiling a
review of the literature available on religious charter schools in a Catholic context. If
a seminal piece of literature were to be identified, it would be Lawrence Weinberg’s
book *Religious Charter Schools: Legalities and Practicalities* (2007). This is the
only published book with a specific focus on religious charter schools.

After providing a historical overview of the legal issues faced by private schools
seeking public funding and addressing church-state relations to religious charter schools,
Weinberg examines theoretical questions related to the operation and creation of religious
charter schools; however, these questions are asked of hypothetical schools (Weinberg,
2007). This book is not an empirical study, but Weinberg does makes important
clarifications regarding religious charter schools that set the stage for future debate and
research on this new category of schools. Weinberg’s best attempt at defining these schools
is that religious charter schools are simply charter schools that in some sense are based on
faith (Weinberg, 2008). He concludes his book with the argument that religious charter
schools present an opportunity for parents and communities to form schools that will
accommodate their beliefs; however, the constitution does not allow them to form schools
that endorse their beliefs (Weinberg, 2007). This is a reoccurring theme – public charter
schools can teach and accommodate religion, but they can not endorse religion. It is an issue
of “neutrality” when considering how religion can be accommodated in the classroom (*Locke

Grounded in his historical, political, and educational research Weinberg (2007) comes
to the conclusion that religious charter schools are inevitable. He argues that religious
charter schools are likely to form for three reasons: (a) many parents have the desire for religion-based charter schools; (b) some states may possibly eliminate some of the secular requirements in charter legislation; (c) recent Supreme Court decisions invite the argument that religious charter schools are constitutional (Weinberg, 2007, p. 7). Weinberg also notes that many schools are already in operation that can be classified as religious charter schools and are constitutional.

Weinberg (2007) delineates the features of a constitutional religious charter school: (a) the school is likely to be run by a separate nondenominational foundation; (b) the primary mission of the school is couched in general pedagogical terms; (c) the school’s religious elements are likely to be couched in cultural terms; (d) the school will not have religious requirements; (e) the school cannot require that students profess any particular faith; (f) the school will have features that are wholly unrelated to religion. The close link between culture and religion is what makes the idea of religious charter schools both possible and difficult to define. That is why another way to think about religious charter schools is by using the term “cultural charter schools” (Weinberg, 2007). Weinberg notes specific existing schools as cultural charter schools and discusses how they relate to the religious charter school question. A review by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools found that of more than 4,600 charters nationwide, 113 have mission statements speaking to a particular cultural theme (Gootman, 2009). In addition, the New York Times also reported that 30 of Minnesota’s 138 charter schools cater directly to specific immigrant ethnic group cultures, such as East Africans, Hmong, and Latinos (Rimer, 2009). Immigrant parents are often choosing these charter schools to combat the influences in American culture (Rimer, 2009).
Weinberg argues that while some founders may view their schools as cultural-based or language-based, it’s important to understand that faith-based does not necessarily mean it’s a religious school, and it certainly doesn’t mean that it is unconstitutional (Weinberg, 2007, 2008). What it does mean to be a religious charter school is that the school culture accommodates particular faith-based or religious perspectives and beliefs. Currently, there are numerous schools that can be defined as cultural-based or religious charter schools. In reviewing the limited body of scholarly literature and investigating popular literature such as periodicals and reputable websites, the following schools were identified as high-profile schools that fit Weinberg’s definition of a constitutional, culturally-based or religious charter school.


- Hellenic Classical Charter School, New York, New York, includes the study of classical Greek and Latin and many of the students attend a religious Greek Orthodox school after school (Bailey & Cooper, 2008).

- Khalil Gibran International Academy, Brooklyn, New York opened in September 2007 and is the first English-Arabic public school in the country to offer a curriculum emphasizing the study of Arabic language and culture (Feldman, 2007; Khalil Gibran International Academy, 2010).

- Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy (TIZA), Inver Grove Heights and Blaine, Minnesota, curriculum focuses on historical civilizations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East,
and teaches the Arabic language in addition to English and has a primarily immigrant student body from Muslim countries (Bailey & Cooper, 2009; Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy, 2010).

This list is short and far from complete, but it provides a sense of the type of school that might be categorized as a religious charter school and certainly as a culturally-based charter school. At the time of Weinberg’s first publication, he did not identify any existing religious charter schools in a Catholic context, but he alluded to the potential reality. As it turns out, it is a reality – and a growing one.

**Religious Charter Schools in a Catholic Context**

Weinberg did not focus specifically on the Catholic context in his work published in 2007, but headlines are now plentiful regarding new “controversial” moves by certain archdioceses to “convert” failing urban Catholic schools to public charters (Brinson, 2010; Hernandez, 2009a; Rodriguez-Soto, 2009; Robelen, 2009; Vitello & Hu, 2009; Weinberg, 2009). The question of Catholic school conversion to public charters hit the national scene when the Archdiocese of Washington began discussing the conversion of eight Catholic parochial schools to public charters because the Archdiocese could no longer afford to keep them open (Labbé, 2007).

The evolution of the charter proposal discussion for these Catholic schools hit national news, and in 2008 *USA Today* reported on the Archdiocese’s plan to “convert a handful of schools to secular ‘values based’ charter schools that reflect Catholic morality, but don't overtly teach church doctrine” (Toppo, 2008, p.13D). Subsequently, the charter was
approved and seven former Center City Consortium Catholic schools were converted to the Center City Public Charter Schools in 2008, which now operate on six campuses in Washington, D.C. (Center City Public Charter Schools, 2010). Most recently, another large-scale model of Catholic school conversion has been adapted in Miami, Florida. The Archdiocese of Miami’s conversion of eight Catholic schools to public charters in 2009 includes the addition of offering religious instruction after school (Brinson, 2010; Rodriguez-Soto, 2009). This additional higher profile public charter school conversion confirms that while controversial within the Catholic community and wider public community, this type of new governance model is being put into practice in lieu of shutting urban Catholic school doors completely.

During the review of scholarly and popular literature, the following schools were identified as potential examples of religious charter schools with strong ties to Catholic culture and belief.

- **St. Mary’s Academy Charter School, Beeville, Texas**, is a former Catholic school that converted to a Texas Open Enrollment Charter School in 2001 and currently displays a Catholic statue on its website home page (St. Mary’s Academy Charter School, 2010).

- **Catalyst Circle-Rock and Catalyst Howard**, Chicago, Illinois, were opened in 2007 in poor parts of the inner-city in accordance with the philosophy of St. John Baptist De La Salle. In 2009 the website described that the educational model of the school was rooted in the Lasallian tradition, with core values of: Faith, Dignity, Excellence, Community, and Service. The website now states that “The

- Center City Public Charter Schools, Washington, D.C., were formerly the Center City Consortium Catholic schools, and the current school mission states “As a secular public institution, Center City retains its historic roots by teaching a broad liberal arts and humanities curriculum under the core principle of ‘Cura Personalis’ – care of the whole person: mind, body and spirit,” a common Jesuit school motto (Center City Public Charter Schools, 2010).

- Thea Bowman Preparatory Academy Public Charter School, Washington, D.C., was chartered in 2007 and is named to honor Sister Thea Bowman, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (Thea Bowman Preparatory Academy Public Charter School, 2010).

- Somerset Academy, Miami-Dade and Broward County, Florida, is a non-profit educational organization operating over 13 charter schools across seven campuses in Florida and Texas with at least three of the former Catholic schools from the Archdiocese of Miami joining the organization in 2009 (Rodriguez-Soto, 2009; Somerset Academy, 2010).

- Academica, Miami, Florida, is a charter school management organization that collaborated with the Miami Archdiocese by leasing former Catholic school facilities for six charter schools (Brinson, 2010).
These schools do not explicitly call themselves religious charter schools or charter schools that are particularly accommodating to the Catholic culture or faith. In fact, it can be inferred by the change in language at the Catalyst schools and the explicit language stating the secular nature of the Center City Public Charter Schools that great lengths have been taken to ensure the opposite public persona – these are not Catholic schools anymore, but rather secular public schools with a mission based upon particular values. It is clear that being values-based is within the bounds of charter schools. It is not clear what is actually happening in practice at these schools. For instance, how drastically does a culture change when many of the same students, teachers, and administrators are in the same building that less than a year ago housed a Catholic school? As such, controversy and debates continue.

The Controversy Surrounding Religious Charter Schools

In the short time since Weinberg’s publication, the topic of religious charter schools has gained national attention. Two of the schools just mentioned – TIZA and Ben Gamla Charter School – have drawn the most initial attention. Each of these schools has come under great scrutiny regarding the alleged inappropriate and illegal promotion of religion – Islam and Judaism, respectively – while functioning as publicly funded charter schools (Bailey & Cooper, 2008, 2009; D’Adamo, 2008; Daniel, 2008; Feldman, 2007; “Florida Charter School Halts,” 2007; Gootman, 2009; “Lawsuit Says,” 2009; Lemagie, 2009).

TIZA is the most high-profile school because the ACLU filed suit in 2009 alleging that the public school promotes the Muslim religion, violating the Constitution's First Amendment (Lemagie, 2009). The school has filed a counter suit claiming defamation and to date TIZA remains in operation (Boldt, 2009). Ben Gamla Charter School was ordered by
the county superintendent to discontinue Hebrew classes in 2007 until school officials could determine whether teachers were advocating the Jewish faith in contrast to public charter law (“Florida Charter School Halts,” 2007). After further review, concerns were cleared up and the school has since resumed its Hebrew classes (Associated Press, 2007). In fact, the founder of Ben Gamla, has since spoken of the possibility of creating a network of Hebrew language charter schools across the country, a concept that is attracting attention from sociologists, educators, and community leaders focused on strengthening Jewish identity and culture (Gootman, 2009). Despite controversy, religious charter schools have weathered initial storms and their evolution continues. They are finding ways to walk the delicate line between church and state and provide culturally relevant and responsive education to their students. Providing a culturally relevant and responsive education is a key component for urban Catholic elementary schools to continue to strive for despite the shifts in their historical purposes (Bailey & Cooper, 2009; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009).

**Concerns and Benefits Noted in the Catholic Community**

In addition to the concerns and accusations faced by TIZA and Ben Gamla charter schools, some Catholic scholars and members of the Catholic community have raised specific concerns about the loss of religious identity, mission, and education at former Catholic schools that convert to public charters. They have also raised concerns about increased competition for students from public charters, thus questioning their appropriateness and sustainability in a Catholic context (Brinson, 2010; National Catholic Education Association, 2009; Russo & Cattaro, 2009). Other Catholic school sympathizers speculate that these newly formed schools may offer new possibilities to a Catholic system
that is struggling deeply with few, if any, meaningful alternative solutions identified to help ailing urban Catholic schools (Brinson, 2010; Hamilton, 2008; Smarick, 2009).

Perceptions about a loss of religious identity and mission once a Catholic school is turned into a public charter have been discussed theoretically by select scholars and noted in popular media stories (Bailey & Cooper, 2008; Hernandez, 2009a, 2009b; Morken & Formicola, 1999; Robelen, 2008; Russo & Cattaro, 2009). Furthermore, prior to eight Catholic schools closing and charter schools subsequently leasing the vacant space, concerns were also noted that these new charters would provide additional competition to remaining Catholics due to the lure of tuition-free charters (Brinson, 2010).

Potential benefits arising from the conversation of Catholic schools to public charters have also been discussed (Hernandez, 2009a; Karp, 2009; Smarick, 2009; Stern, 2009; Stephens, 2009). For example, Susan Gibbs of the Washington archdiocese noted that the new public charters were able to keep their former staff and most of their students; that 71% of the students in the converted schools were not Catholic in the first place; the parishes that now house the public charter schools get paid rent, which they can use toward after-school and religious education; and charter schools in Washington also spend $11,000 per child, much more than Catholic schools can afford to spend (Karp, 2009). In fact, the average tuition and per pupil costs for Catholic elementary schools are $3,383 and $5,486 respectively (McDonald, 2010). In addition, teacher salaries at the schools in Washington, D.C. increased 22% since the conversion (Hernandez, 2009a). In Miami, the rental income received from leasing former Catholic school facilities to public charter schools provided critical income to the parish (Brinson, 2010). Different models of how to provide religious
education service to former Catholic school students and new charter school students are still being explored in Miami (Brinson, 2010).

In sum, the dominant concerns raised about Catholic schools converting to public charters pertain to a loss of religiosity and increased competition from the new charter schools. The main benefit of converting failing Catholic schools to a public charter school is more money – much more. However, these themes are drawn from limited popular literature, not research-based literature, save two quasi exceptions. Seaton Education Partners commissioned two reports that address potential benefits and challenges of the relationship between Catholic and charter schools. The information presented in both reports contributes to the literature on “religious” charter schools in a Catholic context, but transparency regarding the research methodology is problematic thus creating concerns with the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn.

Two Popular Catholic and Charter School Reports

In 2009, in collaboration with Seaton Education Partners, Andy Smarick published his study Catholic Schools Become Charter Schools: Lessons from the Washington Experience and chronicled the Archdiocese’s conversion of Catholic schools to public charters. The publisher notes in its promotional summary of the study that the collective experiences of those involved with the charter school process in Washington “provide invaluable lessons for other cities and religious communities contemplating the future of their financially struggling inner-city faith-based schools” (Seaton Education Partners, 2010, “Washington, D.C.,” para.2). Furthermore, the publisher states that the purpose of the “case study” is “not to advocate a certain course of action—such as mass conversion of Catholic
schools into charters or staunch opposition to any further such conversions—but rather to learn from the pioneers of this strategy in Washington: how was it done, what worked, what did not, and what lessons should others struggling to sustain their Catholic schools glean?” (Seaton Education Partners, 2010, “Washington, D.C.,” para.3).

Many of the conclusions of the study focus on operational strategies for communities to consider that are possibly contemplating a similar type of conversion from a Catholic school to a public charter school. In addition, similar themes presented in this literature review are confirmed, such as the benefit of receiving additional funding for ailing Catholic schools when converting to a charter school and the mixed feelings about the perception of a loss of Catholic identity from within the community when a former Catholic school becomes a charter school. This study is informative and deals directly with the issue of “religious” charter schools in a Catholic context. Unfortunately, the data collection methods used in this study are neither explained nor shared. The only clue regarding sampling can be found in the references section, which includes the names of certain participants whom are quoted in the study, but nothing regarding sampling procedures, data collection or data analysis is mentioned.

In 2010, also in collaboration with Seaton Education Partners, Dana Brinson published her study Turning Loss into Renewal: Catholic schools, Charter schools, and the Miami Experience which chronicles early lessons gleaned from the closure of eight Catholic schools and the subsequent leasing of these former Catholic school facilities to public charters. Similar to Smarick, this study notes concerns amidst the Catholic community about the loss of religious education opportunities and the weakening of the surrounding Catholic
schools when a public charter school takes the place of a Catholic school (Brinson, 2010). The main benefit of leasing former Catholic school facilities to public charter schools noted in the report is the rental income received that directly supports the operating budget of the affiliated Catholic parish (Brinson, 2010). The study also reviews the thought processes of select pastors and community members when deciding if leasing former Catholic school facilities to public charter schools would be prudent for the parish and local communities involved. For example, it is noted that the charter school that replaced a former Catholic school at one parish was chosen in part because it “would provide an atmosphere that was similar to the school Fr. Menendez was closing” due to “its school uniforms, safe and disciplined learning environment, and focus on character development” and because of its strong academic track record (Brinson, 2010, p.7). Early lessons from the parish communities that decided to lease former Catholic school facilities to public charters are also offered in the report.

In sharing the “early results” from the parishes that leased facilities to public charters, Brinson does caution that these charter schools are “in the first year of operation” and much is “in a state of transition;” however, “these charter schools have had some early results that illuminate what has done well in the process and where continued work may be necessary” (Brinson, 2010, p.12). Keeping this caveat in mind, a multitude of early “results” and “lessons” that focus on practice are noted. These range from specific information about how to structure leases with charter schools in light of certain Cannon law requirements to recommending charter school networks and organizations with strong academic track records. Perhaps the most important take away from this report is the simple fact that eight
Catholic schools explored ways to work with charter schools, decided to do so and have shown that certain successes are feasible in practice. However, while it is meaningful to read various reflections shared by pastors and community members throughout the report, from a scholarly research perspective there are major concerns. The technical use of the term “case study” must be questioned because of the complete omission of any information about sampling procedures, data collection and data analysis thus creating concerns with the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn.

Based upon the absolute omission of a research methodology used when conducting the two studies commissioned by Seaton Education partners, the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn from both reports are questionable (Guest & Arwen, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). While the information presented in these two reports is informative regarding the topic of “religious” charter schools in a Catholic context, the lack of a clear methodology confirms that there is a deep need for research-based studies on this topic. Keeping in mind these two quasi-exceptions, there are no studies to date that focus on the perceptions of a collective group of educational leaders about the benefits and challenges of religious charter schools in a Catholic context that use a transparent research methodology.

Summary

Catholic schools have a long and accomplished legacy in the United States. They have successful served generations of Catholics and non-Catholics, immigrants and the urban poor. In particular, urban Catholic elementary schools have shown particular success with minority and low-income populations. Serving disadvantaged communities is not only a call from the Catholic Church, but from the public school community as well. Collectively, the
American community must strive to ensure that all children are given the opportunity and learn and excel academically. Catholic schools are positioned to continue to meet these needs with success; however, significant threats to the future viability and vitality of Catholic schools, in particular urban Catholic elementary schools, exist and have become extremely acute over the past ten years.

As a result of the changes that have occurred over the past half century “the charter for Catholic schools shifted from protecting the faithful from a hostile Protestant majority to pursuing peace and social justice within an ecumenical and multicultural world” (Bryk, 1996, p.30). Catholics schools have begun to serve different purposes and populations in this modern context, yet the key component of these schools is worth retaining: providing culturally responsive education for students (O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). Catholic schools historical success and the emergence of charter schools as a fast growing educational sector that shares a complementary profile with urban Catholic elementary schools has increased the compelling need for research.

These statistical facts – the rapid growth and market share increase of charter schools, coupled with the steep declines in urban Catholic elementary school numbers and enrollment – frame the focus of this study and support the need to investigate the research questions related to religious charter schools in a Catholic context. What is known based upon the religious charter school literature reviewed is that in just the past few years, schools have continued to open which fit the still unauthenticated or agreed-upon profile of a religious charter school in both Catholic and non-Catholic contexts. Speculation has been made
regarding the viability and purposes of religious charter schools as well as the benefits and challenges associated with them in a Catholic context.

What is clear is that regardless of any particular constituency’s opinion about religious charter schools, these schools have been established and are becoming more prevalent in many states with Catholics and Evangelical Christians poised to embrace them in larger numbers (Bailey & Cooper, 2008, 2009). What still remains rather unclear is exactly what is meant by a religious charter school. It is virtually impossible to determine the merits and pitfalls of a type of school that is misunderstood. In fact, Weinberg’s most recent publication is titled *Religious Charter Schools: Gaining Ground but Still Undefined* (2009). A clear leader in this emerging field recognizes the ambiguity surrounding religious charter schools. In order to better understand these schools and their potential influence on the Catholic school sector, data must be gathered and analyzed through the use of scholarly research techniques. Next, Chapter 3 will describe the design of this research study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study analyzed an emerging form of schooling – “religious” charter schools – within the context of urban Catholic elementary education in America. Two salient trends in American education – urban Catholic elementary school closings and charter school growth – provide the immediate background for this investigation. The concept of a religious charter school appears as a misnomer to some and the category has yet to be definitively defined or even accepted as appropriate. The first goal of this study is to ascertain a common understanding of religious charters schools in a Catholic context. The central issue to grasp is that within the charter school sector, there are particular schools that some claim fall into this potential sub-classification – religious charter schools – and the implications of their existence and possible growth are increasingly significant for the Catholic school sector and beyond (Bailey & Cooper, 2008, 2009; Cooper & Randall, 2008; Daniel, 2007; Harvard Law Review Association, 2009; Hillman, 2008; Weinberg, 2007, 2008, 2009).

This study also viewed the potential relationship between the Catholic and charter school education sectors through the overarching lens of alternative governance structures. The establishment of alternative governance structures is a practice being tested in the Catholic school sector as an attempt to curb or reverse the closing trends faced by Catholic schools and to support students in urban areas (Goldschmidt, et al., 2004; Meyer, 2008; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2007; Saroki & Levenick; 2009). These models range from consortium models to network models, yet they all share a common goal – to provide viable administrative structures that aim to secure the financial and operational future of urban
Catholic schools. More recently, it is being argued that charter schools may offer another
new form of governance structure for ailing Catholic schools and communities interested in
the values promoted by Catholic education (Karp, 2009; Smarick, 2009; Saroki & Levenick,
2009). The emergence of this new subcategory of religious charter schools makes this
argument even more complex. This has increased the compelling need for research on
religious charter schools and the potential benefits and challenges they present in a Catholic
context.

Research Questions

This study was exploratory and investigated the topic of religious charter schools in
the context of Catholic education. Specifically, the study focused on the following research
questions:

1. What is the common understanding of a religious charter school as perceived by
   Catholic school superintendents?

2. What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to these
   schools?
   a. What are the benefits to such a school in a Catholic context?
   b. What are the challenges to such a school in a Catholic context?

Research Design

This study was exploratory in nature and the research design utilized qualitative
techniques to investigate the research questions. Qualitative research is any kind of research
that produces findings that were not determined through the use of statistical procedures or other types of quantification methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative research allows for inquiry into selected issues in great depth with special attention to context and detail while remaining analytically flexible (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Through the use of qualitative techniques the researcher can hone in on particular situations, peoples and contexts enabling him or her to gather data that is rich and holistic with a potential for revealing complexity of life that resonates with the reader (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This qualitative approach allowed for a detailed and “thick description” of Catholic school superintendents’ perceptions of religious charter schools and a deeper understanding of the potential influence of these schools (Geertz, 1973). In addition, qualitative research is particularly useful for new areas of study and can provide a wealth of data about a smaller number of people or cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Qualitative research studies serve a variety of purposes along a continuum from theory to action (Patton, 2002). When a topic is new or theories are first being developed, then basic research studies are appropriate. As more knowledge and data is established on any given topic, then more evaluative purposes of research become necessary and can provide contributions regarding improvement recommendations and immediate action to be taken by appropriate parties (Patton, 2002). The purpose of this study is to better understand the concept of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. This is the same general purpose of basic qualitative research – to understand, explain and ultimately work to generate new theories and knowledge (Patton, 2002).
The next step on the qualitative research continuum is applied research, which makes contributions to theory that can be used to formulate problems-solving interventions (Patton, 2002). This qualitative purpose is also relevant in light of the themes and implications that frame the study. Urban Catholic elementary schools are closing and solutions are needed in a Catholic context. Qualitative research techniques are also useful because they can be flexible and adaptive in the midst of field research allowing them to understand the complexity of an individual, case, or phenomenon (Crestwell & Clark, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This aspect of qualitative research is important because of the ambiguous and complex nature of the research topic. Qualitative research thus enables the researcher to explore new topics and their potential complexities that can result in making a contribution to theory and practice (Patton, 2002; Yin, 1984).

**Research Methodology**

Qualitative research is often advocated as the best strategy for “discovery” and exploring new areas of study (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). Yin (1984) posits that there are five major research strategies that exist in the social sciences – experiments, surveys, archival analysis, histories and case studies. He asserts that different forms of research questions (who, what, where, how much, etc.) ought to appropriately coincide with the strategies he notes depending on the nature of the research question(s). However, he also notes that if the research questions are exploratory and focus mainly on “what” questions, then all five research strategies can be justifiable used (Yin, 1984, p.17). This study asks exploratory “what” questions. In light of Yin’s analysis, the study utilizes a hybrid of strategies that are all methodologically appropriate.
Histories can deal with the “dead” past or contemporary events and are a preferred strategy when the researcher has no access or control over behavioral events (Yin, 1984, p.19). When this strategy is applied to contemporary events, it begins to overlap with the case study, which is also used for examining contemporary events when behaviors cannot be manipulated (Yin, 1984). What the case study adds to its sources of evidence that are absent from a pure historical approach are direct observation and systematic interviewing (Yin, 1984). This study utilizes aspects of a contemporary historical analysis through the review of relevant, contemporary literature and documents regarding the development of religious charters schools. However, primary documents and physical artifacts are not examined and analyses of these types of items are usually associated with pure histories (Yin, 1984). This study uses a key strategy of the case study – in-depth interviews – but it does not include participant observation, which is associated with the technical definition of a case study (Yin, 1984). This study can therefore be classified as a basic qualitative research study, which uses a hybrid of social science strategies, but relies mainly on interviews and open-ended questions.

**Interviewing Strategy and Methodological Fit**

Interviewing is a commonly used qualitative strategy, but it is also one of the most “powerful ways we try to understand our fellow human beings” and their interaction in society (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p.361). Interviewing can take the form of face-to-face interchange, but it also includes mailed or self-administered questionnaires and telephone surveys (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The type of interview to use for a study is often based upon the amount of structure desired (Merriam, 1988). On a continuum, highly structured
questionnaire-driven interviews are at one pole and they are useful when a large sample is to be surveyed, a hypothesis is being tested, or quantification of results is important (Merriam, 1988). On the other end of the pole are open-ended, conversational interview formats that “assume individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (Merriam, 1988, p.73).

The purpose of less structured interview formats “is not to put things in some else’s mind (for example, the interviewer’s preconceived categories for organizing the world) but rather to access the perspective of the person being interviewed” (Patton, 1980, p.196). This study seeks to understand the perspectives of Catholic school superintendents’ regarding religious charter schools in a Catholic context in order to identify appropriate research-based categories and themes related to these schools. Interviews are used to find out things from people such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, and how people organize the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world that we cannot directly observe (Patton, 1980). Furthermore, unstructured interviewing provides greater breadth than other types and is appropriate when the purpose of the study is exploratory (Fontana & Fey, 1994). Conducting open-ended interviews that are not highly structured is an appropriate strategy for this study.

The nascent state of prior theory and research on the topic of religious charters schools in a Catholic context is another strong argument for the methodological fit of this qualitative approach (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This study relies upon the use of open-ended questions and personal interviews to establish a better understanding of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. Nascent theory research should be qualitative, ask open-ended research questions, apply interview
methods to collect data and use data analysis methods that code for evidence of thematic constructs and identify patterns (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Contributions to theory can invite future research on the issue or establish a road map for new avenues of research to be conducted (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Reliability and Validity

All research aims to provide reliable and valid conclusions and qualitative research is no exception (Merriam, 1988). There are various understandings and debates regarding what is meant by the terms reliability and validity in qualitative, educational inquiry, but the general consensus is that inquirers need to demonstrate the their studies are credible – that others can trust the results of research (Crestwell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 1988). More specifically, reliability is concerned with the “reliability of procedures and findings” and validity is understood as the “trustworthiness of the inferences drawn from data” or put another way, validity refers to the “interpretation and generalizability of results” (Eisenhardt & Howe, 1992, p. 644; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005, p.264). In sum, reliability and validity are “concerns that can be approached through careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data were collected, analyzed and interpreted” (Merriam, 1988, p.165).

The most commonly agreed upon procedure for strengthening reliability and validity in qualitative, educational research is triangulation (Merriam, 1988; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005; Yin, 1984). Triangulating data can “help the researcher to establish the validity of the findings by cross referencing, for example, different perspectives obtained from different sources, or by identifying different ways the phenomena are being perceived” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 323). Popular practices associated with
triangulation include collecting data through multiple methods such as interviews, questionnaires, mixing types of questions, conducting observations, reviewing documents, undertaking peer-examination, memoing, member-checking, providing an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity (Crestwell & Miller, 2000; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Design of the Study**

**Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis for this study is people, in particular Catholic school superintendents. The study focused on these individual’s perceptions of religious charter schools in light of life-context and their professional setting as Catholic educational leaders and decision-makers (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). However, the analysis is not solely focused individual’s private, personal feelings because these people share a common professional experience as Catholic educational leaders. As a result, the unit of analysis is also worldview and structure based as well as geographically focused (Patton, 2002). These individuals are part of a group of leaders that share similar professional roles in Catholic organizations and work in urban geographic contexts.

**Sample**

Quantitative sampling power rest upon randomness and population size (Patton, 2002). In contrast, what is perceived as a weakness in statistical sampling – purposeful sampling – is a great strength in qualitative research because it allows for the selection of information-rich cases for study in depth (Patton, 2002). This is important because
qualitative research deals with much more limited aspects of the universe that reflect social processes with logic and patterns that can be missed by random sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Qualitative research sampling includes both setting boundaries to help connect with the research questions while concurrently creating a proper frame that captures the processes and constructs of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1984). As a result, qualitative sampling is often theory-driven – finding examples of a theoretical construct in order to examine it – to varying degrees and can evolve once fieldwork begins (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The research questions focus on the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents and the analysis will be at a diocesan level. Catholic school superintendents were chosen as the unit of analysis because of their broad perspectives and potential administrative influence on Catholic school policy and the development of religious charter schools. Catholic school superintendents from the 12 largest urban dioceses – Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, Cleveland, St. Louis, Newark, Boston, Cincinnati, New Orleans, and Detroit – as determined by the National Catholic Education Association were targeted as participants (McDonald, 2009). In addition, the Catholic school superintendents from Washington, D.C. and Miami were also targeted because of the recent charter school conversions in these dioceses (Cruz, 2009). This purposive and theory-driven sampling approach allows for predetermined criteria – urban education sectors and locations where Catholic conversion charter schools exist – to drive the sample selection in order to fulfill the research objectives (Guest & Arwen, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The response yield from these 14 dioceses was six Catholic school superintendents. All six participants
completed the open-ended questionnaire and five of the six participated in a personal interview.

**Ethics**

Participants were provided with an informed consent form prior to participating in the study. It was made clear to participants that they could refuse to answer any questions posed, for whatever reason, at anytime and that they had the option to end the interview at any time. Participants were informed of the researcher’s intention to keep their remarks strictly confidential – by never using their real names, or those of anyone else at their place of employment, in any writing (either unpublished or published) and by changing non-essential contextual aspects of what is written (e.g., the gender of an administrator) so as to make it difficult to identify specific persons.

The risks involved for those who chose to participate in this research should be minimal. Suggesting that there are no risks is unrealistic. Sharing perspectives on this new and controversial topic can be sensitive. In light of the participants’ professional positions, any research findings interpreted as suggesting that a particular stance regarding religious charter schools is being promoted by a Catholic school superintendent or group of superintendents could create negative repercussions or political ramifications. To address this concern to some degree, any published findings from this research will first be presented to those persons who contributed directly to the research (such as through an interview), within reason. Specifically, participants will then have an opportunity to respond to these findings, including adding pertinent data or important perspectives that they feel may have
been overlooked. In this way, any written products will represent “negotiated” understandings of what it reported regarding the participants perceptions.

**Data Gathering Procedures**

The first method of data collection was the distribution of a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire did not consist of basic demographic information questions because of the purposive nature of the sampling and the time constraints of Catholic school superintendents. The questionnaire consisted of broad open-ended questions as well as open-ended questions categorized by themes identified in the literature review (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was distributed electronically in order to reach the national sample of Catholic school superintendents effectively and efficiently. The questionnaire was administered through *Survey Monkey*, which allows for password protected access to the data and data encryption in the transmission of the questionnaire over the internet.

The second data collection method was follow-up open-ended interviews. Basic approaches to collecting data through open-ended interviews range from an informal conversational interview to an interview with a set of questions that are carefully worded and arranged (Patton, 1980). This study used the “general interview guide approach” which “involves outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent before the interview begins,” but the order of the questions and actual wording is not predetermined (Patton, 1980, p.198) (see Appendix B). The interview guide simply serves as a checklist to ensure that all relevant issues are covered in each interview (Patton, 1980). This approach to the open-ended interview is appropriate because of the exploratory nature of the study (Fontana & Frey, 1994).
The interviews took place by telephone. The interviews were taped with the consent of the participants and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher offered to rely on field notes only for any participants whom did not wish to be audio taped; however, all participants provided consent for audio recording. Each participant was assigned a code number so that even if someone were to gain access to any research data, they would be unable to identify any participant by name. In addition, all memos, tapes and transcripts were kept inside a secure, locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office, which will also be locked. All electronic versions of the audio recordings and transcripts are password protected. Moreover, in publishing any findings from this research all contributors will be assigned pseudonyms.

The third data collection method was achieved through constant memoing. Similar to field-notes, which are descriptive and include what people say formally and informally, contain the researcher’s own feelings and reactions to experiences, as well as his or her insights, interpretations, and working hypothesis, constant memoing can serve similar purposes, but they are not restricted to physically being ‘in the field’ such as during a formal observation (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1980). Memoing is the researcher’s way to consistently engage with the data, theorize, and conceptualize meaning about codes (Glaser, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Memos don’t just report data; they tie together pieces of data, help construct concepts and are “one of the most useful and powerful sense making tools at hand” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.72). Memos “represent the written form of the researcher’s abstract ideas” and help him or her gain analytical distance from the materials (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 198-199). During this study, memos were taken throughout the entire data
collection process as well as throughout the entire data analysis process. All memos were dated in order to also provide an audit-trail of the data collection and analysis procedures.

**Method of Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis and interpretation includes making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, and integrating what different people have said (Patton, 1980). Analysis is the process of organizing the data after it has been collected, identifying patterns, placing it into categories and basic descriptive units (Patton, 1987). Interpretation involves “attaching meaning and significance to the analysis” and “explaining descriptive patterns” (Patton, 1987, p.144). Data reduction is also a part of data analysis that occurs continuously throughout the life of a qualitative study and “sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data” to support final conclusions that can be verified (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.11). Data collection and analysis are both selective processes and they must be in order to avoid data overload that subsequently leads to the inability to condense and make sense of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To review data and dissect them meaningfully while keeping relationships in tact is the business of coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A “constant comparative method” was applied to help refine the codes, concepts and categories during analysis and interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998). This means that the development of codes and categories was not a process that was set in stone once the initial codes were determined. Rather, “playing with and exploring the codes and categories” throughout the coding process was important and this allowed the researcher to think through possibilities and interpretations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.46).
Codes and Categories

Codes are labels for “assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). A useful method of building codes applied in this study is the “grounded” approach where the researcher is more “open-minded” and “context sensitive” allowing the data to mold the codes, but the ultimate objective is still to match the data with a theory or construct (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 58). This is a more inductive type of analysis which means that the codes, patterns, categories and themes emerge from the data rather than being predetermined prior to conducting field work (Patton, 1987). This study used grounded research techniques of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

Open coding.

The initial coding process is referred to as “open coding” (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). The open coding process is at the most general level and it is a “first step in organizing the data into meaningful categories” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 36). Open coding is also defined as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). There are variations on ways of doing open coding, which range a from line-by-line analysis to asking questions of an entire document (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is the first step in identifying and creating categories our of the raw interview data.

For this study, the data was initially reviewed line-by-line within each paragraph of every open-ended questionnaire. Then the same approach was used for every interview
transcript. This generated an initial list of over 250 codes. During this process it was noted in a memo that data displayed language that was “very rich and multi-layered in meaning,” which perhaps accounted for the large number of initial codes. In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1990) posit that line-by-line analysis is “perhaps the most detailed type of analysis, but the most generative” (p.72). Furthermore, during the initial coding process it was noted that different codes applied to the same sections of data. Miles and Huberman (1994) posit that “multiple coding is actually useful in exploratory studies” and they suggest that computer software programs are helpful because they permit “overlapping” codes (p.65). Due to these factors, HyperResearch, a qualitative research computer software program was used to aid in the organization of the codes.

A second line-by-line analysis was conducted, this time using the research questions and literature review as lenses to help interrogate the appropriateness of the codes. Using “conceptual frameworks and research questions are the best defense against overload” and this proved to be very true during the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.55). After applying these lenses to the coding process a new list of 79 codes was established. The process of reviewing the data line-by-line and eventually by paragraph or multiple paragraphs was replicated several more times in order to further refine the codes and begin to conceptualize themes and categories. In addition, HyperResearch was also used to help identify the frequency of codes within and across cases in the study.

**Axial coding.**

The process of continuing to refine the codes led to the next step in coding process – axial coding – which “puts those data back together in new ways by making connections
between a category and its subcategories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.97). At times this process was challenging because of the complex nature of data. Axial coding is complicated and it tries to “capture as much of the complexity and movement in the real world as possible, while knowing we are never able to grasp all of it” (Strauss & Corbin, p.111). Keeping in mind the fact that it is impossible to completely grasp all of the real world meaning from the data, it was also important to remember that structuring the data in meaningful ways was the goal. That is what the process of axial coding can accomplish. It gives the categorized data context and precision (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During the process of open and axial coding, coding notes and memos were taken to help with the conceptualization of categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, at the beginning of the axial coding process, the codes “charters are free” and “charters are attractive because they are free” both existed. During axial coding, themes and connections started to emerge and all codes were tested and retested against the data collected in light of these potential themes. What happened is that some codes remained, such as “charters are free,” others codes were refined and became more encompassing, such as “charters are attractive to parents,” and new codes emerged, such as “charters are perceived as mission-driven.” In addition, new potential categories emerged that illustrated the relationships between certain codes, such as “positive public perceptions of charter schools”.

**Selective coding.**

Selective coding is the process of “selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.116). During the selective coding
process, memos and diagrams will be used to show the “depth and complexity of thought that serve as mirrors of the evolving theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.217). This analysis of data should eventually evolve from coding to “the development of conceptual categories, typologies, or theories that interpret the data for the reader (Merriam, 1988, p.133). It is at this stage in the analysis when a theory or theories are developed.

It was during the selective coding process that a final list of 38 codes was determined. These codes were checked and re-checked in order to “make sure all codes fit into a structure, that they relate to or are distinct from others, in meaningful, study-important ways” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.65). Throughout the refinement of codes, memos were taken and graphic organizers were utilized to navigate the complexity of the relationships between the codes. It was important to remain mindful that there is “constant interplay between proposing and checking” and the “final theory is limited to those categories, their properties and dimensions, and statements of relationships that exist in the actual data collected – not what you think might be out there but have not come across” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.111-112). Eventually, 11 categories were established based upon the data and relationships between the codes.

**Triangulation**

*Triangulation is a technique that is employed by qualitative researchers in response to criticism about the rigor of qualitative research design and techniques (Anfara, Brown, and Mangione, 2002). In order to achieve triangulation, the researcher must obtain multiple sources of data and use multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings (Merriam, 1988). This study utilizes multiple validity procedures to strengthen confidence in the results. Three*
different methods of data collection – questionnaire, interviews, and memoing – were used to promote triangulation (Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additional validity procedures that were used include member-checking, creating an audit trail, and disclosing researcher bias (Crestwell & Clark, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that member-checking is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” in a study (p. 314). The process of memoing and keeping a research log of activities, which includes data collection chronology and data collection procedures, enables an external auditor to review the research process. This gives the narrative account and findings more credibility (Crestwell & Clark, 2007). It is important for the researcher to divulge any bias by openly stating assumptions, beliefs, and theoretical orientations. The researcher needs to maintain an awareness of these personal biases throughout the study (Merriam, 1988).

These additional procedures are noteworthy because while triangulation is commonly mentioned in qualitative research, there is rarely evidence offered regarding how the strategies were achieved (Anfara, et al., 2002). The “accountability of the researcher” is paramount when establishing internal validity and theme development in order to protect the integrity of qualitative research (Anfara, et al., 2002, p.6). Including additional procedures such as memoing about the member-checking process and creating an audit trail provides more confidence in the procedures employed by the researchers and therefore in the findings of the research itself.
Researcher Bias

The study may be influenced by the researcher’s personal and professional experiences. I am an Italian-American, Catholic, male that has lived and worked in the inner-city with elementary students and families. This experience impacted me in many ways, on many different levels. Most relevant is my belief in a societal obligation to provide quality educational opportunities to inner-city communities and families. I also believe that education is most effective when it is steeped in strong core values.

I hold an advanced degree in theology from a Catholic affiliated school, I am studying educational administration at a Catholic university and I teach 7th and 8th grade religion in an urban, Catholic school. These experiences also influence me in a variety of ways, but most importantly they influence the type of core values – those based in Jesuit philosophy and Judeo-Christian morality and ethics – I personally embrace and believe serve schools well. I have worked professionally in the private and public sectors in areas of finance, social services, ministry, and education. These experiences undoubtedly shape the lenses through which I view the world and research topic. In particular, I view education and our responsibility to educate our youth through the lenses of professionalism (high standards for all), service (educators are servants of the public good), values (education must be holistic to be of the highest quality and have the greatest impact), and quality education is a fundamental right for all.

Regarding this study specifically, I am particularly interested in Catholic education because I believe that Catholic schools have the potential to offer extremely high quality educational opportunities that are grounded in core values for urban youth. Perhaps one of
the most important realities about Catholic schools to me is that they can openly incorporate specifics values and faith-based experiences into their school culture. Catholic schools are also positioned be to be responsive and innovative due to their highly autonomous governing structures. These factors coupled with my personal passions and beliefs make me extremely interested in Catholic schools, charter schools, and the potential of religious charter schools. Having said this, my intention is not to bring any particular framework to the study. I will continuously reflect upon the ways in which my social, cultural, and historical experiences may shape my interpretations and strive to bracket these potential biases as the study progresses (Crestwell & Miller, 2000).

**Generalizability**

The issue of generalizabilty deals with the research findings applicability in various contexts. Research generalizations are concerned with the extent to which conclusions uncovered in a particular situation can be expected to hold true in other or all situations (Patton, 1980). In qualitative research, the two most common aspects of generalizability include generalizing within the group or community studied and generalizing to other groups or communities (Maxwell, 1992). For most qualitative researchers generalizing within the group studied is far more important (Maxwell, 1992). Generalizations from qualitative research depend “heavily on the richness and thickness of the data collected, and equally, on the context from which the generalizations arise” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 326).

Qualitative findings are most useful to the settings from which they emerged and to those people who desire to use the information (Patton, 1990). This makes it clear that qualitative research should provide information that is useful, permits action, and is “relevant
to the needs of decision-makers and information users” (Patton, 1990, p. 282). This research will be generalizable to individuals and communities involved with urban Catholic elementary school education. This is because virtually all urban Catholic elementary schools are struggling, and insights into new innovative models of urban schooling can aid in their own individual process of envisioning and creating long-term sustainability plans for their schools. In addition, any decision makers and information users with an interest in religious charter schools, charter schools, private schools, traditional public schools, and education policy and reform in America may deem the findings thought provoking at the very least and potentially instructive regarding what is on the horizon in the American education system.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of the research design and methodology. It described the specific design of the study and the sample selected for investigation. Data gathering procedures and the methods used for data analysis are discussed. Formats for reporting the data are explained. In addition, issues of reliability and validity are addressed to support the subsequent findings as trustworthy. Chapter 4 focuses on the study’s findings.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This study was exploratory and analyzed an emerging form of schooling – “religious” charter schools – within the context of urban Catholic elementary education in America. Specifically, it examined the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to this form of schooling. The study investigated if a common understanding of “religious” charter schools was salient among Catholic superintendents. In addition, it analyzed the perceptions of Catholic superintendents related to the benefits and challenges to this type of school in a Catholic context.

The research questions for this study were:

1. What is the common understanding of a religious charter school as perceived by Catholic school superintendents?

2. What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to these schools?

   a. What are the benefits to such a school in a Catholic context?

   b. What are the challenges to such a school in a Catholic context?

This chapter focuses on reporting the data descriptively (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The responses, comments, beliefs, insights, and narratives presented are the voices of the Catholic school superintendents. They reflect years of commitment and service to Catholic education as well as meta-perspectives that limited Catholic educators can claim. Presenting the findings in this fashion allows the Catholic superintendents’ voices to be heard. Chapter 5
analyzes the data in light of the research questions and literature review. This allows for more interpretation of the data by critically discussing the findings in contrast to the less interpretive presentation exhibited here in Chapter 4 (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Chapter 4 is organized based upon the categories of codes determined through the data analysis process. There are 11 distinct categories, and they fall under three overarching themes. The three overarching themes are used to help further organize the categories and present the data in a clear and accessible manner.

The chapter is organized in the following order:

- **Introduction.** This section provides a review of the focus of the study and an overview of the organization of the chapter.

- **Introduction to the Project.** This section of the chapter explains the approach of the study. It also discusses the participants in the study, including the protection of their identities. In addition, it provides a brief review of the research design and includes a table of categories and codes.

- **Superintendents’ Perceptions of Religious Charter Schools.** This section of the chapter presents the detailed findings of the open-ended questionnaire and interviews, organized by code categories related to Superintendents’ perceptions of religious charter schools.

- **Superintendents’ Perceptions of Catholic Schools.** This section of the chapter presents the detailed findings of the open-ended questionnaire and interviews,
organized by code categories related to Superintendents’ perceptions of Catholic Schools.

- **Superintendents’ Perceptions of Charter Schools.** This section of the chapter presents the detailed findings of the open-ended questionnaire and interviews, organized by code categories related to Superintendents’ perceptions of charter schools.

- **Summary of the Findings.** This section summarizes the findings in relation to the research questions.

- **Conclusion.** This section concludes the chapter and invites the reader to engage in the discussion of findings in Chapter 5.

**Introduction to the Project**

This study was exploratory and focused on an emerging form of schooling – “religious” charter schools – from diocesan and national perspectives. As a result, there is no specific research site as one would find in a case study project, but rather this study identified a purposive sample of Catholic school superintendents in order to establish perceptions of religious charters schools in an urban Catholic context. The unit of analysis for this study is people, in particular Catholic school superintendents. These individuals are part of a group of leaders that share similar professional roles in Catholic organizations and work in urban geographic contexts. This group of high-level educational administrators was chosen as the unit of analysis because of their broad perspectives and potential administrative influence on policy and the development of religious charter schools.
Catholic school superintendents from the 12 largest urban dioceses – Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, Cleveland, St. Louis, Newark, Boston, Cincinnati, New Orleans, and Detroit – as determined by the National Catholic Education Association were targeted as participants (McDonald, 2009). In addition, the Catholic superintendents from Washington, D.C. and Miami were chosen because of the recent charter school conversions in these dioceses (Cruz, 2009). The response yield from these 14 dioceses was six Catholic school superintendents. All six participants completed the open-ended questionnaire and five of the six participated in a personal interview.

For this study, any identifying factors related to the Catholic schools’ superintendents in the final sample were omitted. This includes gender, age, geographic location, years of experience, etc. This determination was made based upon the public and political nature of their professional role as Catholic school superintendents and the controversial nature of religious charter schools in some dioceses coupled with the small sample size. For the purpose of referencing the individuals throughout the chapter and to protect their identity, pseudonyms were assigned to each respondent. The following pseudonyms are used in the study: Samuel, Gregory, Maria, Agatha, Elizabeth, and Joseph.

**Research Design**

This qualitative study was exploratory and collected data on the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents regarding religious charters schools. This chapter presents the study’s findings based upon the data collected from two primary sources. Data was collected through the distribution of an open-ended questionnaire and by conducting semi-structured interviews. In addition, constant memoing was used as a third source of data
collection for triangulation purposes. This study used grounded research techniques of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). After the completion of the data analysis, 11 code categories were established and 38 subcodes related to these categories were determined (see Appendix C). Due to the similarity of responses to the open-ended questionnaire and interview questions, it was determined that presenting the findings thematically and in aggregate provided greater depth and coherence to the findings, versus separating the findings according to the method of data collection.

Superintendents’ Perceptions of Religious Charter Schools

In the open-ended questionnaire, the superintendents were first asked whether or not they were familiar with the term religious charter schools. If they were familiar with the term, they were asked to describe their understanding of these schools, and if they were not familiar with the term, they were asked to explain what they think the term refers to. All of the superintendents, with one exception, were familiar with the term, but their understandings of these schools varied and often raised problems with the term itself. During the interviews, the superintendents were given the opportunity to expand upon their understanding of religious charters schools as well as the term itself. In addition, in both the questionnaire and the interviews, the majority of the questions asked about general and specific benefits and challenges of religious charter schools. From all of this data, four categories were developed related to the superintendents’ perceptions of religious charter schools. The four categories are as follows:

- Religious Charter School Terminology
• Religious Charter School Concept in Theory

• Religious Charter School Feasibility in Practice

• Religious Charter School Religiosity

The detailed findings related to each category are supported by subcodes and evidence drawn from the data sources.

Religious Charter School Terminology

In the open-ended questionnaires and interviews, the superintendents frequently asserted that the religious charter school term is contradictory and misleading. While one superintendent was not familiar with the term at all, the other five superintendents all spoke about their perceptions of the problematic nature of the term. When directly asked about religious charter schools, sentiments regarding the contradictory nature of the terminology were evident among three of the five the superintendents’ comments:

• Samuel: The term “religious charter school” is a bit of an oxymoron in our state. My understanding is that it is a contradiction in terms.

• Maria: So here in our state it almost seems like polar opposites having a “religious charter school.”

• Agatha: I am familiar with the term and believe it is a misnomer.

It was clear that the religious charter school term was viewed as contradictory by these superintendents. Furthermore, not only was the term deemed a “misnomer,” but there
were other concerns about the term being misleading to various constituencies about the nature of these schools. Four of the five superintendents familiar with the term noted the following:

- **Elizabeth:** I think in some ways it’s a loaded term and obviously it comes it with baggage just because of the church/state issues.

- **Joseph:** I am familiar with the term religious charter school. Charter schools are public schools and may not be religious or faith-based.

- **Samuel:** So when people are using it in that way, how fair is that to the public understanding?...If we use the term, how fair is that in creating an expectation that these might indeed might be possible?

- **Agatha:** Why are we calling it religious when we’re compartmentalizing the religious part of it just like we do science and math?...So I think from that perspective we take a little bit of, too much, latitude using the word religious, but that’s my bias.

During one of the personal interviews, Agatha was asked specifically about the religious charter school language and whether or not she felt as though the problem is with the term or the concept of these schools. She responded by retorting:

Well, I have to volley the ball back in your court because I don’t know the intention of whoever is using this term; what their intention is when they say religious charter school. I need to understand what is religious about this charter school before I can respond to your question. I don’t mean to be difficult with you. But it’s a black hole
to me. If I had a better understanding of what the meaning is with a little bit of specificity in where the religious part of it would be in this charter school I would feel more comfortable responding.

When asked a similarly targeted question about the religious charter school term, Joseph was very succinct and to the point stating, “So if we were presenting this to the Bishop he wouldn’t care what terms you are using, charter and public go hand-in-hand. Charter schools are public schools.”

During the interviews, the superintendents were asked to comment on three models of potential religious charter schools based upon the literature reviewed: (a) a brand new charter school that opens as a religious charter school; (b) a Catholic school that closes and re-opens as a charter school; (c) a Catholic school that closes and re-opens as a charter school and offers before-school and/or after-school religious education. Specific findings related to their comments about all three models are reported later in this section; however, one important point was made during the interviews about the use of the religious charter school term in association with the second model.

This particular model of potential religious charter schools reflects a specific situation that has occurred in practice in various parts of the county. On multiple occasions, urban Catholic elementary schools have closed and in their place a charter school has opened. When asked specifically about this potential model of a religious charter school, four of the five superintendents clearly articulated that under these circumstances the new schools should not be referred to as religious charter schools and they certainly are not Catholic schools:
• Agatha: A Catholic school that closes and it just opens as a charter school, where does the religion piece fit into that scenario that you could put it into the title? There’s a void there in my mind. I would dismiss this [as a religious charter school] immediately.

• Samuel: That’s no religious thing at all. But just kind of giving it up and the kids may or may not walk by the statutes anymore….Those really are charter schools. They’re public schools. They’re not Catholic.

• Maria: A Catholic school closing and opening as a charter, we’ve had a number of schools in our state doing this…some of them didn’t have many changes in administration and teachers remained, but again it wasn’t a Catholic entity. It became a public entity. This office doesn’t track what’s going on in those buildings because they’re not Catholic Schools. They’re not perceived as Catholic Schools.

• Joseph: In Washington D.C. we’re just turning Catholic schools over to charter schools where they’re public schools….So what happens in Washington, D.C. is that the schools are now public schools. So there’s nothing Catholic about them.

Religious Charter School Concept in Theory

In the open-ended questionnaires and interviews, the superintendents’ comments frequently addressed the concept of religious charter schools, even though they initially made it clear that the term was contradictory and misleading. As previously stated, during the interviews, superintendents were prompted to comment on three different potential models of
religious charters schools. In addition, the open-ended questionnaire sought responses from the superintendents about their perceptions of specific aspects of religious charter schools. The superintendents’ comments about religious charter schools varied; however, one lucid position amidst the theorizing of five of the six superintendents surfaced. This assertion was that any potential model of a religious charter school would always be reduced to the fact that any concept of a charter school is still a public school and charter schools will never be Catholic schools. While these sentiments reflect the superintendents’ perceptions that former Catholic schools that re-open as charter schools should not be called religious charter schools or Catholic school, what makes their following comments distinct is that they are about various concepts of religious charter schools, not just about the scenario when former Catholic schools close and charter schools open in their place:

- **Gregory:** … from my understanding, there is no such entity as a “religious” charter school. Charter schools in our state are public schools…. The present understanding of a Catholic school relates to its identity as a private school… a charter school is publicly funded whereas a Catholic school is considered a private school and is supported by tuition.

- **Elizabeth:** While having a Roman history class or Latin language instruction may be a way to incorporate a portion of what we teach in a charter school model, it will not be authentically Catholic…. In order for a school to be truly “Catholic” our faith needs to be infused into everything we do. From announcements to discipline to sports and after school activities. This can't be replicated in a charter school.
• **Joseph:** So the culture of the school, it could be positive. I’m not saying I couldn’t drop in and find it to be positive, but it’s not going to be Catholic…. No matter what you call them, no matter what race the people are, what ethnicity, or what cultural context. No matter what kind of values you’re trying to teach. In the Bishop’s mind, this is not Catholicism.

• **Samuel:** Charter schools are by definition public schools.

• **Maria:** Well, here in our state, our view, my view of charter schools is that it is a complete public entity.

In spite of the fact that these superintendents were adamant about their position that the concept of a religious charter school must include an acceptance that these schools would be public schools and not Catholic schools, all five of the superintendents familiar with the terminology still thoughtfully engaged the concept in theory and expressed an attraction to the idea and potential of religious charter schools:

• **Samuel:** I would love to see a religious charter school…. One [the first religious charter school model] could be interesting to explore. The opportunity lies in our exploring the charter “religious” legislation to find resources for our urban school filled with non-Catholics.

• **Elizabeth:** I think it’s still just a really intriguing area as far as where we go from here.
• *Agatha:* I see [the first model of a religious charter school] and [the third model of a religious charter school] as a possibility…. I would challenge my state to create a Catholic charter school as I’m trying to define it.

• *Joseph:* Well, one of the exciting things about thinking of a religious charter school is that we could offer Catholic education at the expense of the state like happens in small, underdeveloped countries.

• *Maria:* Well, having the option of having a faith-based entity in your first model that could have the cultural piece, the whole faith-based piece completely integrated, provides some wonderful options because then you’re getting some funding which would make tuition either a non-entity or so minimal it would make it affordable for families who are seeking that.

Embedded in four of the five superintendents’ statements that addressed the attractiveness of certain religious charter schools models was a simultaneous, multi-layered strain of concern pointing to the complications associated with religious charter schools in theory. For example, Samuel openly shared the rationale behind his attraction to the concept while also acknowledging the complexity of envisioning such a school:

So for me the idea of a religious charter school holds tremendous appeal. It could really be that if you really could in parts of the day... be a religious organization to truly run a charter school and run it with your philosophy. I have no problem with that. I think it ties in very well with social justice and political action and parental choice, that whole thing. But where it becomes confusing and why I believe the term
probably shouldn’t be used until what I just discussed is a reality, is it in fact does not exist by law. There is no such thing as a religious charter school to my understanding in the strictest sense.

Elizabeth actually referenced specific examples of religious or “cultural” charter schools that exist in practice, but she also noted that within a Catholic context the concept becomes more problematic by stating, “I know they’ve got those different kinds of cultural studies charter schools that easily can morph into specific religion like Judaism or Islam, but for Religious Catholic Charter Schools or Catholic Religious Charter Schools I think it’s just dicier.”

Each of the six superintendents clearly stated that separating certain aspects of these potential schools would be needed. This might increase the likelihood of the success of religious charter schools. Some of the superintendents’ statements focused on separating religious components of the school:

- **Samuel:** In other states there are charters which are very much identified with an organized faith. While still public charters, it appears that segmenting the theology and worship pieces has proven both satisfactory to the organizers and to the states.

- **Gregory:** The notion of identity and mission are key to any school's understanding of its purpose. Mission would have to be clearly defined with supporting organizational structures to support that mission.
• Joseph: Well, you can’t do religion in the bulk of the day…. But it would be like having a public school during the day and then you can get all kinds of children from all different faiths and then running a before and/or after school day where you had religious education, or you had Catholic Youth League, or things like that.

When discussing the third model of a religious charter school, Elizabeth asserted the need for “very deliberate thought” and to be “thorough” when addressing the religious perception of these schools. She also puzzled over “the new charter school idea,” stating that “I think the challenge would be how do you define what you’re going to teach?” Agatha addressed similar issues in her attempt to conceptualize how segmenting certain aspects of these schools might work:

Why are we calling it religious when we’re compartmentalizing the religious part of it just like we do science and math?...The first [model of religious charter school] is where there is in my mind a potential to have that conversation…incorporate a particular religion and its religious traditions into the school, to me now that means throughout the entire day. Now you’re getting closer to where I would feel comfortable putting the term religion and charter together, but as you know you’re flying in the face of a lot of opposition by doing that.

Still other comments about the complexity of religious charter schools and the separation needed in these conceptual schools focused more broadly on finances and general school operations. Maria ponders:
So would that mean that these Catholic religious charters would have to go through a fiduciary, which would be the public school system to which they’re linked? It just adds another whole layer of complexity here in our state….How a “religious” charter school is given and handles public funds for operation would have to be clearly defined and monitored…. The financial structure and operation of the school would have to be completely separated from the parish finances. There would have to be clear transparency and the pastor would need training in areas such as board development, budget and finance as regulated by the state or federal government, regulated annual reporting to the state/federal government, facility expectations as it pertains to ADA rules and regulations.

Samuel made a similar comment about the organizational structure of these schools and determining appropriate segmentation by suggesting, “Design something which can be built into both the program and the leases which will withstand legal challenge and still carry the power of the Church's presence to young people and families.”

In light of these comments about the attractiveness and complexity of the concept of religious charter schools in theory, it was noted by five of the six superintendents that there is a lack of research on the topic and that any actual schools in practice that theoretically might fall under the umbrella of the religious charter school concept have not been tested or researched. For example, while discussing the potential in his state to create a religious charter school, he noted that the “wraparound” model (referring to the charter school with a before-school and/or after-school religious education program) requires targeted research:
There is a way to become a charter, especially here with our reputable charters, there might be a way to make it new, reopen and to really make it a truly new school based on Christian values especially when you’ve given up the evangelization piece. I think the wraparound piece, that the model, has never really been explored. You know the wraparound programs right now are not very good and not well researched to see how evangelization is being carried on in the name of the church.

Elizabeth echoed Samuel’s feelings about the lack of research related to the “wraparound” program stating that, “The [wraparound] is something we’ve had here too, where they’ve closed it, then the public charter and then religious education afterwards. And again this is all anecdotal on my end. It’s nothing research driven at this point.” When asked about various aspects of religious charter schools in the survey, several of Gregory’s comments were reflective of his following straightforward statement, “I cannot answer this as I do not have experience with this concept.”

The following statement by Maria summarizes the many considerations expressed by the superintendents about the concept of religious charter schools:

And now I have heard that some of the other denominations, Baptists, Methodist, Presbyterian Churches in the city have charters, but I don’t have any data on that. It’s just something that we have heard, but our schools, our Catholic entities, have not been allowed anything like that that we’re aware of because you can’t conduct your [Catholic identity] or have your Catholic identity. I guess in other areas I have read that there are places, and I think this is where the Miami piece is taking off on is that
the religious activities take place after core curricular is done. But I don’t know if that would even be allowed.

Maria’s thoughts provide an appropriate segue into the realities and considerations of religious charter schools in practice.

**Religious Charter School Feasibility in Practice**

In the open-ended questionnaires and interviews, the superintendents often spoke about practical realities that religious charters schools would face. All six superintendents specifically talked about various types of opposition that religious charter schools would face in practice, challenging these schools’ feasibility. Legal challenges were the most common type of opposition mentioned.

- **Joseph:** Charter schools are prohibited by law from being religious.

- **Elizabeth:** I think anything as blatant as a kind of a religious charter school is going to have issues with the ACLU and other rights organizations because they’re going to feel like it’s an endorsement of religion.

- **Samuel:** Charter schools which are "religious" would have challenges, an immediate civil challenge, by those who have heard us repeatedly say that faith flows through all of the curriculum. Finding the line will be tough.

On the subject of legal challenges, Samuel also made reference to schools that currently exist and have been associated with the religious charter school term stating that, “my understanding is there are no such things as religious charter schools and only through
creative manipulation are some people attempting to do it and winding up, of course, emptying law suits or in the middle of them.” Maria spoke about the Blaine Amendment in her state:

The Archdiocese is located in a state which has the Blaine Amendment in the Constitution. We are not allowed to directly handle any public funds. For Title funds we must operate through a public fiduciary. How a “religious” charter school is given and handles public funds for operation would have to be clearly defined and monitored….We would need a rewrite of our state constitution.

Gregory alluded to the legality issues related to religious charter schools in a roundabout manner within the context of sharing his beliefs about the separation of church and state:

As relates to religious schools and public funding, a misapplication of the belief in separation of Church and state is used. It is obvious that the present funding structure is a violation of a child's rights. The parents are the primary educators of their children. Because of this, they should have the freedom to send their children to whatever school they wish without the added burden of being doubly taxed - taxed for their own family and another family's education while paying tuition. This is an injustice to children and their families. Many democracies including Canada have a different structure.

Four of the six superintendents expressed the viewpoint that religious charter schools would face opposition from public school teacher unions:
• **Samuel:** In our state, this issue is compounded by recent legislation which allows unionization of charter schools.

• **Maria:** Our state is very much a union state. Having public school teachers in the public school system realizing that there’s a breakthrough here and now the whole Catholic institution can tap into the charter piece could be very threatening from that standpoint. That could be a major challenge.

• **Elizabeth:** So I think the other thing that [religious charter schools] would just do is it would really spark interest from people who obviously got a lot of opponents to charter schools anyway. Public school unions and various groups are opposed to charters just in general even secular charter schools, blatantly secular charter schools. So I think anything that’s going to kind of walk that tightrope and try to kind of play maybe both sides of the fence or try to have it both ways would be a detriment to that model.

Joseph mentioned that “charters are starting to unionize” in his state as well. Furthermore, he strongly asserted that religious charters schools would also face opposition from within the Catholic school community by explaining that:

Although we have not experienced the opening of such a school, there is near unanimous opposition to charter schools in our Archdiocese. For example, each time a charter school wants to rent, lease, or buy an empty Catholic school building, the pastors and principals of surrounding Catholic schools strongly object.
He continued by sharing that he has recently received several unsolicited emails from pastors and Catholic school principals voicing their strong opposition to “regular” charter schools occupying former Catholic school buildings, and then he suggested, “Please note that this is a reaction to a regular public charter. From all indications the objections would be as strong or stronger to anything calling itself a religious charter as the competition would be even more direct.”

Despite the discussions about the opposition to religious charter schools in practice, four of the five superintendents familiar with the term also recognized that these schools are feasible on some level based upon their comments that religious charter schools already exist:

- **Elizabeth:** Basically my understanding of the religious charter schools, I know there’s a Hebrew study charter school I think in Florida. There’s an Islamic Studies charter. I know they’ve got those different kinds of cultural studies charter schools that easily can morph into specific religion like Judaism or Islam… .The last two [religious charter school models] I think are obviously happening now. We’ve got those taking place in cities and the different models to kind of look at. So those are actually in existence.

- **Samuel:** In other states (Florida and Louisiana for sure) there are charters which are very much identified with an organized faith.
• Maria: And now I have heard that some of the other denominations, Baptists, Methodist, Presbyterian churches in the city have charters, but I don’t have any data on that.

Despite the fact that Agatha consistently voiced her position that the religious charter school term was a “misnomer,” when she discussed religious charter schools in practice, she did acknowledge that, “I’m familiar with what happened in Washington D.C.… I’m familiar with what attempts were made in Brooklyn. I just finished reading a report that what they’re trying to do in Miami…” displaying her awareness of different situations in practice that have been associated with the religious charter school conversation.

Even though these four superintendents made it clear that they were aware of schools in existence that could be classified as religious charter schools, all four of these superintendents also made conflicting statements positing that religious charter schools, in particular certain models of religious charter schools, cannot and do not exist in practice:

• Samuel: My understanding is there are no such things as religious charter schools and only through creative manipulation are some people attempting to do it…. Religious charter schools don’t exist today. To be legitimately labeled “religious,” a school must embrace and practice religion as part of its daily life.

• Maria: I don’t know how that [a religious charter school] could happen. We would need a rewrite of our state constitution.
• *Elizabeth:* The other model that has been tried is to teach religious education either after school or before school, but our experience has been that this model has not worked.

• *Agatha:* Religious charter schools don’t exist today.

In spite of the superintendents’ concerns about various opposition to religious charter schools and their conflicting feelings about whether or not religious charter schools actually exist in practice, there was a consensus among all six superintendents that one model of religious charter schools exists in practice and perhaps may provide opportunities worth exploring. There was consistent awareness and varying degrees of openness within the superintendents’ comments about the “wraparound program,” or in other words the religious charter school model of having before and/or after school religious education programs associated with a charter school:

• *Samuel:* Three [the third model of religious charter schools] could be interesting to take a look at…. And that’s what I call the wraparound program…. I think the wraparound piece that their model had never really been explored…in fact, the development of "wraparound" religious programs seems to lag far behind the willingness to turn struggling schools over to the charter movement.

• *Maria:* The third one with the before and after school programs that offers another option…that could open the door for having the schools available for families in neighborhoods where this is a strong Catholic population, that again we might get more kids because they don’t have to pay the tuition and that’s the
touch piece with the economic conditions…. I guess in other areas around the country, I have read that there are places, and I think this is where the Miami piece is taking off, and at these places the religious activities take place after core curricular is done.

- **Gregory:** Where the Church cannot sustain any Catholic school, other programs of support for youth and their families need to be offered. For example, they could offer after school programs, tutoring programs, life skills programs, and other initiatives that promote those without resources.

- **Agatha:** Well I see number one [first model of religious charter schools] and three [third model of religious charter schools] as possibilities…. With number three [“wraparound program” I think I’ve already commented to you that yes, you could call that a religious school.

- **Elizabeth:** So I feel the way they’ve [religious charter schools] kind of worked in the past, or I know they’ve tried to do charter schools at Catholic campuses, or even in Catholic populations, where they do the academic instruction kind of from 8-3 and then they offer religious education, kind of post at the end of the day so either at the end of the day or before school. And they’ve kind of tied it in that way as well.

Joseph noted potential with the “wraparound program” as well, but he also raised concerns about the fact that it would be optional for parents, not an integral part of the school
and “not Catholic education” thus alluding to issues with the religiosity of this religious charter school model:

Only one of them seems to offer anything and that’s the third one…. it seems to offer the most by way of having something that’s a little bit Catholic. But it would be like having a public school during the day and then you can get all kinds of children from all different faiths and then running a before and/or after school day where you had religious education or you had Catholic Youth League or things like that… the question is it’s optional. There’s not an integral part of the school. It’s something outside and it’s different, but it’s not Catholic education as designed by the Bishop and many others.

Joseph’s comment about the religiosity of religious charter schools in practice points to the theme of the final category in this section, which highlights various concerns voiced by the superintendents.

**Religious Charter School Religiosity**

In the open-ended questionnaires and interviews, the superintendents spoke at length about the problematic nature of religiosity at religious charter schools. The dominant sentiment among all five of the six superintendents familiar with the concept was that religious charter schools cannot endorse faith practices. In other words, the core issue discussed was that actually practicing aspects of the Catholic faith throughout the school day would not be possible at a religious charter school:
• Agatha: To be legitimately labeled “religious,” a school must embrace and practice religion as part of its daily life…, How can a school have a legitimate religious identity when it would be prohibited from incorporating religion into its daily life?

• Elizabeth: While having a Roman history class or Latin language instruction may be a way to incorporate a portion of what we teach in a charter school model, it will not be authentically Catholic…, In order for a school to be truly “Catholic” our faith needs to be infused into everything we do from announcements to discipline to sports and after school activities. This can't be replicated in a charter school.

• Maria: Teaching of doctrine or traditions of the faith is not allowed while school is in session…, so, the school is no longer a faith-based culture during the school day.

• Samuel: It’s very tricky when you look especially at the charter school legislation in our state to see how to do this in a way that holds on to the mission.

• Joseph: Catholic identity is not possible in a charter school.

The superintendents expanded on this theme by citing specifics related to the issue of not being able to endorse faith practices. During a reflection about the possibility of establishing religious charter schools in his state, Samuel could only conceptualize them existing after having “given up the evangelization piece” at the schools. In one of Maria’s reflections about religious charter schools she noted:
It’s just something that we have heard but our schools, our Catholic entities, have not been allowed anything like that we’re aware of because you can’t conduct or have your Catholic identity…. Because it receives public funding and that religious organizations have really not been allowed to organize or start charters because of the fear of bringing in the religious influence through the course of the day.

Joseph spoke very explicitly about the fact that religious charter schools cannot endorse faith practices:

So a charter school will be a public school. The Bishop has been very emphatic about this. He said at the end of the day…there is no way to determine what is taught to the children so for example in a health curriculum or a sex education class, and you know we’re subject to what the requirements for the state are as opposed to what the requirements of the Church are and they’re not always in agreement. So the beginning and end of life, etc…. And even if you have teaching just about Christianity, or even if the state would allow you just to teach about Catholicism when you’re teaching religion as long as you don’t advocate everyone become Catholic…. You can’t train in church, you can’t train in schools, you can’t have liturgy in the school, you can’t have sacraments take place during the day, you can’t require that the teachers be Catholic, or that they be practicing Catholics. You cannot.

The superintendents’ perceptions were that endorsing faith practices was not possible. Similar concerns were expressed in regards to the more general question of religious identity. Four of the five superintendents familiar with religious charter school concept believed that these schools would have a weak religious identity or no religious identity at all:
• **Joseph:** Catholic identity is not possible in a charter school. It remains to be seen if providing Catholic before and after services which will be voluntary and require tuition payments can produce a Catholic identity.

• **Agatha:** A charter school could certainly have religious characteristics to its curriculum / daily schedule, but not a true religious “identity.”

• **Maria:** Some of the challenges I think of when I think people would fear in some ways that if okay we’re getting public monies would there be hindrances to building the depth of Catholic culture, and so there would have to be reassurances there that alright, if we’re getting this, are we really free to do what we need to do as a Catholic entity?

Elizabeth summarizes this overall sentiment with supporting examples in her response to a question about the religious identity of religious charter schools:

Much weaker than in Catholic schools. We have “values” based charters that attempt to mimic the governance structure, the uniforms, and implement a character education program that is an attempt to instill a moral education foundation for students. But having visited these schools, they don't possess the intangible traits that our Catholic schools possess…. Again, the only way Catholic identity can be established at a charter school is pre- or post- the regular school day. Thus there isn't a strong Catholicity at all – any sense of Catholic identity is tied to a vague sense of morals, ethics, and character without a grounding in a belief in Jesus Christ.
Another consideration raised by three of the six superintendents in their comments about religious charter schools or charter schools opening in place of Catholic schools was the religious demographic that these schools would serve. Their comments reflected not only their opinions, but also at times the reality, that these schools would be created to serve non-Catholics, thus affecting the religiosity of the schools:

- **Maria:** Catholic school closing and opening as a charter, we’ve had a number of schools here in our state doing this…. My thought is that these schools that have charters in them are probably not servicing a Catholic population.

- **Samuel:** The opportunity lies in our exploring the charter “religious” legislation to find resources for our urban schools filled with non-Catholics.

Even though Gregory often qualified his comments by stating that he was not familiar with the religious charter school concept, he did comment on the topic of closing Catholic schools and re-opening charter schools in their place. The non-Catholic demographic was a central factor in his comments about when opening a charter school may be a consideration:

When 99% of the school is non-Catholic and the entity struggles with financial stability, the question of feasibility arises. The entity would need to look at baptismal numbers, conversions to Catholicism, and other markers to determine the feasibility of retaining the school as a Catholic entity. In these instances, closing the Catholic school, dissolving its identity as Catholic, and reopening as a public Charter school might be warranted.
Gregory’s comments also point to some of the harsh realities that urban Catholic elementary schools currently face. In the next section, findings related to the superintendents’ perceptions of Catholic schools are presented.

**Superintendents’ Perceptions of Catholic Schools**

In the open-ended questionnaire and during the interviews, the superintendents were most often asked questions about religious charter schools. However, in their responses to these questions the superintendents often discussed their perceptions of Catholic schools. In addition, the superintendents were asked one question in both the questionnaire and during the interview that was specifically focused on the future of urban, Catholic elementary schools. From all of this data, four categories were developed related to the superintendents’ perceptions of Catholic schools. The four categories are as follows:

- Catholic School Future Sustainability Is Questionable
- Catholic School Finances
- The Purpose of Catholic Schools
- Catholic Schools and Choice

The detailed findings related to each category are supported by sub-codes and evidence drawn from the data sources.
Catholic School Future Sustainability Is Questionable

In the open-ended questionnaire and during the interviews, the superintendents often expressed specific concerns regarding the future sustainability of urban Catholic elementary schools. One of the most common admissions was that Catholic schools located in urban settings are in decline. Five of the six superintendents referenced this reality when sharing their perceptions about the future of Catholic schools:

- **Gregory:** The closing of Catholic schools because of finances and demographic shifts is inevitable. Our only hope is that we can stem the tide so that some schools can remain in the central city as viable alternatives to public education.

- **Elizabeth:** But if you really do have concerns about the school’s future then you’ve got two options. You can continue to head down that road to a cliff, which you’re going to head off eventually and then you know the answer to that route, or you try to make a drastic turn. You try to do something different. Something.

- **Joseph:** In our state, we have closed five schools a year each of the last five years. And that trend has continued and that’s happening all over the country.

After sharing her thoughts about various approaches that Catholic schools might take to shore up their future sustainability, Agatha noted, “Failing any of those things that I just mentioned you’re going to see a decline in the presence of Catholic Schools in the urban areas…. Business as usual is going to tell us exactly where we’re going to be in ten years. And it’s not pretty.” Maria also alluded to Catholic school closing trends in her statement:
And with our population here in the city it seems like the Catholic population in the city particularly has dropped with our demographics. So we're not servicing, and even the schools that we have in the city we have two that have a relatively significant Catholic population, but the other ones do not have a significant Catholic population.

The reality of Catholic school closings at times seemed to prompt another dominant theme that was thoroughly articulated by all six superintendents – Catholic schools need to restructure. This was seen as necessary in order to sustain the future viability of urban Catholic elementary schools:

- **Gregory:** First, the Church needs to restructure its schools, closing individual ones attached to specific parishes and targeting a limited number of schools to remain open.

- **Maria:** We’ve just gone through a restructuring in this Archdiocese and the new Director is very dedicated and our Bishop is very dedicated in taking a look at what are some of the ways that we can make sure that this [Catholic schools] is affordable for our families, and I think from the elementary school perspective to really make sure as we develop schools we develop schools that connect to that community and that remain Catholic and that are affordable for our families.

- **Elizabeth:** My personal belief is that we need to be more innovative in how we look at our Catholic schools. We were charter schools before charter schools. We
have the ability to innovate and to create alternative models that will appeal to families while also teaching the faith to students.

- Joseph: So we have to build a brand. It [Catholic schools] needs to be modernized and we have to be innovative and creative and we need to be good and solid…. So we need to consolidate. We need to build on our traditional strength and bring our new strength and we need to look to the future for how we have a really good model.

Samuel’s comments about Catholic schools restructuring were embedded in his opinion regarding the Church’s role in serving urban communities when Catholic schools were forced to close their doors:

Find a WAY. The research is compelling – good schools impact the health of a neighborhood. Design something which can be built into both the program and the leases which will withstand legal challenge and still carry the power of the Church's presence to young people and families.

When speaking about restructuring options for Catholic schools, Agatha commented that, “I would be making an all out effort to make sure that this community that we’re living in understands, beyond the Catholic community, how important these [Catholic] schools are and why they’re needed…. But it requires a fire in the belly, a willingness to roll up sleeves, and make an investment of a couple of years to do a full-court press and get all of these things.” Agatha’s reference to “all of these things” was in reference to the various financial
restructuring possibilities that she argued should be explored. The theme of finances was highly apparent among the all six of the superintendents’ comments.

**Catholic School Finances**

In the open-ended questionnaire and during the interviews, all six superintendents frequently discussed Catholic school finances and funding structures. First and foremost it was made clear throughout various statements by all six of the superintendents that Catholic schools are in need of additional funding.

- **Elizabeth:** The funding challenge for us is how do we create viable, sustainable finance systems so that Catholic schools can exist long into the future?

- **Samuel:** It’s still a question of trying to find resources to service many of our inner city, Catholic schools.

- **Gregory:** The closing of Catholic schools because of finances and demographic shifts is inevitable…. Active recruitment of people to advocate for funding for Catholic schools, and all private religious schools, should be done through the local parishes.

When discussing the need for additional funding in her diocese, Agatha noted that facilities and other areas would benefit, “I think we can make sure the buildings remain functional, because that’s the other piece to our challenge, is these things [facilities] are starting to ask for a lot of money now. So we just have the resources to do what we need to do and get the schools where we want them to be academically and otherwise…. We can also make sure teachers are getting paid better.” Three of the six superintendents’ also spoke
about that fact that Catholic schools must be affordable for families when commenting on the need for additional funds at Catholic schools:

- **Maria:** We also need to make sure that we are affordable and that’s the challenge that we face because tuition is rising and family income has kind of hit a baseline here and working that through and coming up with creative ways to do that.

- **Elizabeth:** The financial challenge of paying tuition is a challenge.

- **Joseph:** School closures happen for a variety of reasons: demographic changes, declining quality and/or academic achievement, mission creep, financial challenges…. Developing a mixed income school where the tuition of those who can afford to pay will help subsidize the families who cannot afford to pay.

In their comments about funding for Catholic schools, all six of the superintendents addressed the issue that Catholic schools receive little to no public funding at length. They also insisted that Catholic schools should have access to public funds.

Joseph spoke lucidly about his opinion on the topic of public funding for Catholic schools:

Catholic school parents are required to pay twice. Once through their taxes to support public and public charter schools and once in tuition…. Well one of the exciting things about thinking of a religious charter school is that we could offer Catholic education at the expense of the state …. Charters also are eligible for significant state reimbursement for building renovations, repairs, additions, furniture, equipment, fixtures, etc. These reimbursements can be up to 70-80% of the costs. Catholic
schools are not eligible for any of these funds. Catholic schools are at a huge disadvantage financially when compared to charter and regular public schools.

Elizabeth discussed the fact that the “tradition of Catholic schools, it’s made up with fundraising. So there’s a lot of scrambling you’ve got to do at a Catholic School to raise those resources, and obviously if you are getting that full cost it’s still probably about half of what you’d get from the public charter school.” When reflecting upon the benefits of receiving public funding she concluded that it “would obviously be huge.”

Agatha was passionate in her comments about Catholic schools receiving public funding:

It’s going to start at the top with Cardinals and Bishops and they’re going to have to decide whether they want these schools or not. And I think most folks will say, “Yes, we want them.” But I say it from a different perspective. If you want them, then fund them. And I would say to them you reprioritize what funding you have in order to keep them, or if I was wearing a red hat I would say I’m going to start to get very aggressive and find those outside funds to do that. I would challenge my state to create a Catholic charter school as I’m trying to define it. And anybody that says that’s against the Constitution that’s poppycock. It can be done constitutionally. It’s a matter of will…. I would push hard on the voucher system. I would be pushing on tax credits in my state.

Maria cited historical examples of Catholic schools attempting to access public funds in her state:
A little bit of background history for you. About 15 years ago we had a movement here in our state to change the constitutional language, to change the Blaine Amendment, and we were looking for our Catholic schools or our faith-based schools I should say because we also work with the Lutheran Schools, and the Christian International Schools in this area and what we were proposing is that there be a language change and our hope was that we get about 1/3 of what the state allocation was for cost per student. And we were defeated two to one because the unions came on very strong, teacher unions, and said they’re going to take this state money and they’re going to run with it and the Blaine Amendment we can’t change this. Interesting enough when I look back at that, that was before the charters really took hold here in our state. It was shortly after that the Governor opened the door for charters and sometimes I kind of laugh at that. The public sector didn’t realize at that time had they worked with us and given us 1/3 of the cost per student, perhaps those charters would not have come in and now they’re taking the full cost per student.

Gregory also commented on the need to seek additional funding and he posited that the current situation where Catholic schools do not receive public funds is an injustice:

Active recruitment of people to advocate for funding for Catholic schools, and all private religious schools, should be done through the local parishes. This should be a priority of every diocese…. However, as relates to religious schools and public funding, a misapplication of the belief in separation of church and state is used. It is obvious that the present funding structure is a violation of a child's rights. The parents are the primary educators of their children. Because of this, they should have
the freedom to send their children to whatever school they wish without the added burden of being doubly taxed – taxed for their own family and another family's education while paying tuition. This is an injustice to children and their families. Many democracies including Canada have a different structure.

Samuel also noted that Catholic schools receive little public funding and he then argued that they should receive funding in order to benefit Catholic schools:

Clearly, Catholic schools receive almost nothing through the state…. I think our lawmakers need to realize that we do an excellent job for less money. We’ve committed teachers. We have parents with high expectations for learning for their children. The best things we can do right now is to advocate to say give our parents a choice. Give them a piece of that money…. Hand us just a part of that cash that you’re spending and we can make them [Catholic schools] terrific inner-city schools.

While all six of the superintendents displayed their support of Catholic schools receiving public funding, five of the six also noted that receiving public funds often comes with restrictions. Maria noted that as a result of receiving public funding then the school “is expected to meet all state and federal rules/regulations as a publicly funded entity with regards to personnel (administrative and classroom) certification and qualifications, ADA requirements for facility, programming, class size, calendar, standardized testing and AYP.” The others also voiced specific concerns about requirements and restrictions tied to public funding:
• **Agatha:** Challenge would be anytime you take government money. Are there strings attached? More than likely, yes.

• **Elizabeth:** Any funding from the government for Catholic schools comes with a price.

• **Samuel:** We’re raising other people’s children and we should get them [public] money for it, but it’s very tricky when you look especially at the charter school legislation here in our state to see how to do this in a way that holds on to the mission.

• **Joseph:** You know we’re subject to what the requirements for the state are as opposed to what the requirements of the church are and they’re not always in agreement.

Amidst the superintendents’ various comments about Catholic schools receiving public funding, there was a distinction made by four of the six superintendents related to a preferred type of public funding. These superintendents were of the opinion that if Catholic schools sought additional public funding, it would be best to do so by investigating public funding outside of seeking funding through the establishment of charter schools or religious charter schools:

• **Samuel:** If I were to put my money on charter schools or something else I would truthfully rather fight politically to get the money to follow the children in terms of federal and state funding.
• **Gregory:** It seems that tax vouchers – where families can deduct the cost of the education of their children, or where the family can receive a voucher of equal value of the per pupil cost to the public school – would be a better avenue to take.

• **Agatha:** But for us to say at least today that the antidote for our problems that plague us today is to move our schools to charter schools and we have some type of a religious education component at the end of the day is an oxymoron in my mind…. And there’s still a lot more that can be done to make them sustainable or at least a good portion of them if not all…. I would push hard on the voucher system. I would be pushing on tax credits in my state.

• **Joseph:** Our Bishop believes that time spent investigating this model will only divert us from our mission to provide a Catholic education in a Catholic school.

  Joseph’s comment that seeking public funds through a charter school model will distract from pursuing the mission of Catholic education in Catholic schools, which leads directly into the conversation about the purpose of Catholic schools.

**The Purpose of Catholic Schools**

In the open-ended questionnaire and during the interviews, when the superintendents spoke about Catholic schools, three specific themes emerged as critical to the purpose of these schools. The most consistent perception shared by all six superintendents was that the Church’s mission is central to the purpose of Catholic schools. Gregory noted that Catholic schools:
Exist to educate young people in the Catholic faith…. Catholic in mission, their purpose is to evangelize youth to the Gospel through the Catholic Church. They do this by integrating Catholic teaching and belief in academic areas, developing a culture that promotes Catholic Christian values, and participating in outreach and service to the broader community.

Maria shared similar feelings stating:

Well, I think first and foremost we have to stay true to our mission and our identity in that is to be Catholic schools. And to be Catholic schools that are devoted and dedicated to continued faith formation and to academic excellence in our buildings…. And as Catholic schools, we are Catholic throughout the entire day and even though we teach a “religion class” how we handle our kids, what we do through the course of the day is that religion piece, the faith-based piece permeates the entire day.

When commenting on the role of the Church in urban settings, Samuel insisted that it is crucial to find a way to service these communities and “carry the power of the Church’s presence to young people and families.” When discussing Catholic schools Joseph stated that, “We look at it well, Catholic faith, values, permeate everything that we do.” He also reflected upon different pastors comments to him about the purpose of Catholic schools sharing:

A pastor said to me yesterday, Catholic Schools represent hope in a world that doesn’t have a lot of hope. And another pastor said to me, you bring God to the people and the people to God and one of the ways we do that is through Catholic
education. Another one said that Catholic schools are out spreading the good news and his Word.

When discussing different charter school models as potential alternatives to Catholic schools, Agatha stated that turning Catholic schools to a charter school model with “some type of a religious education component at the end of the day” is “an oxymoron” and “undermines what the schools were established for and what their true purpose is.” In addition, Elizabeth argued that by establishing a “values” charter school you could “probably define a mission that’s pretty Catholic or at least Catholic social teaching or service oriented and those types of things, but I mean I think what you probably would be missing obviously is the core of the faith and religious practice and those types of things.” She also posited that, “In order for a school to be truly 'Catholic' our faith needs to be infused into everything we do, from announcements to discipline to sports and after school activities.”

The other two themes that emerged from the superintendents’ comments about the purpose of Catholic schools were both related to the demographic populations that Catholic schools should serve – Catholics and the poor. Four out of six of the superintendents made comments suggesting that the primary population that Catholic schools ought to serve is Catholics. When reflecting upon the reality of Catholic schools enrolling large numbers of non-Catholics, Gregory stated:

When there is a preponderance of non-Catholic students in a school and the school struggles with financial stability, the issue of sustaining it as a Catholic school must be addressed…. Further, the key to a Catholic school is its identity. It exists to educate young people in the Catholic faith. When 99% of the school is non-Catholic
and the entity struggles with financial stability, the question of feasibility arises. The entity would need to look at baptismal numbers, conversions to Catholicism, and other markers to determine the feasibility of retaining the school as a Catholic entity. In these instances, closing the Catholic school, dissolving its identity as Catholic, and reopening as a public Charter school might be warranted.

Samuel made a comment along a similar line of reasoning suggesting that “The opportunity lies in our exploring the ‘religious charter’ legislation to find resources for our urban school filled with non-Catholics – but will this be perceived as racist? Or is the chance to engage Latino populations in some form of catechesis with free education an opportunity to explore?” Maria also reflected upon ways in which Catholic populations could be served through some alternative form of Catholic education, “That could open the door for having the schools available for families in neighborhoods where this is a strong Catholic population that again we might get more kids because they don’t have to pay the tuition and that’s the touch piece with the economic conditions in our state.” Agatha was straightforward in her remarks about Catholic schools serving Catholics when reflecting upon alternative charter school models:

And then the other challenge would be if we move to the charter schools and we still say we give preferential treatment with enrollment to Catholics. It’s the word Catholic as we’re talking about it today is going to remain in the title. So by that virtue, we should be saying this is about Catholics first, and when we have opportunities we welcome folks of all other faiths.
Four of the six superintendents also posited that the Church should serve the poor and that is also part of the purpose of Catholic schools:

- **Gregory:** In many larger cities, the poor reside in the urban region. Because of this, it is important for the Church remain in the central city to fulfill the mandate given to us by Christ to serve the poor.

- **Agatha:** The Church does its best work in urban communities, especially by providing a quality education to those who might not otherwise be able to afford it. If we abandon these areas and eliminate these opportunities, I fear for our future and the preservation of the traditions of our schools.

When talking about “intangible” traits of Catholic schools that make them successful, Elizabeth offered that, “I also think it speaks clearest about why our Catholic Schools tend to be very successful with urban kids, minority kids, kids with difficult backgrounds. Those are the kids that our schools tend to do the best job with.” Joseph noted a commitment on behalf of Catholic schools to the poor and the inner-city by sharing stories of the various attempts to preserve Catholic schools in urban areas, and he stated that, “Some people who can afford to pay so they can help those who can’t afford to pay…. That’s all part of the Catholic model.”

**Catholic Schools and Choice**

In the open-ended questionnaire and during the interviews, all six superintendents made comments related to the idea of school choice. Three of the six superintendents spoke about the Catholic community’s position regarding school choice. They posited that the Catholic community supports school choice:
• Agatha: I am not against charter schools. As a matter of fact I’m a huge proponent for them because we become a little bit hypocritical. The Catholic school community does support choice, because that’s what we’re all about.

• Gregory: The national effort, already underway, that supports the right of families to choose the education of their children needs to be promoted locally.

• Samuel: Give the parents true choice and that’s what I think is an advantage of a charter. It has reception of family’s choice…. The best thing we can do right now is to advocate to say give our parents a choice.

These comments provide a context for the second theme related to school choice. Embedded in remarks made by five of the six superintendents were statements referring to the possibility that families may not make the choice to attend Catholic schools or Catholic education programs. These comments were often made when comparing Catholic schools to various charter school models. The relationship between Catholic schools and charter schools is treated in more detail in the following section; however, highlighting the superintendents’ perceptions that families may not choose Catholic education is addressed in this section.

When discussing the possibility of having Catholic education programs or “wraparound” programs, Elizabeth noted “I think that would be a concern too is that they have a long academic day already and then do they really want to invest the time and energy into the religion instructions after school?” Joseph shared similar concerns about this type of Catholic education program stating, “The question is it’s optional. There’s not an integral part of the school….It would be hard to think that that was going to be the bedrock or
Catholic education we’re struggling with, in our state 16% of our Catholics go to church.”

Gregory also spoke about the parents’ choice to enroll their students in Catholic schools within the context of comparing them to charter schools. He noted that charter schools:

Often serve children of poverty, as does the Catholic school, but there is no tuition attached. This provides a financial incentive to parents to enroll children in the charter school. This can be a challenge to Catholic schools in recruiting students.

Maria’s comments were broader and focused on the demographic realities in her state:

And with our population here in the city it seems like the Catholic population in the city particularly has dropped with our demographics. So we’re not servicing, and even the schools that we have in the city we have two that have a relatively significant Catholic population, but the other ones do not have a significant Catholic population.

Furthermore, when speaking about various financial challenges faced by Catholic schools, Maria noted that certain families “do not have the means to pay tuition,” and therefore cannot attend a Catholic school. Samuel’s comments illustrated a keen awareness of the options available to parents regarding school choice in his statement that “The challenge is already here – we have charter schools which are perceived as strongly mission-driven and which provide choice for parents...and they are free, many of them housed in our former school buildings and competing with our schools in the same neighborhood.”
These comments which raise the question of whether or not families will choose Catholic education, especially when compared to the charter school option, lead directly into the third overarching theme – superintendents’ perceptions of charter schools.

**Superintendents’ Perceptions of Charter Schools**

In the open-ended questionnaire and during the interviews, the superintendents were most often asked questions about religious charter schools. They were asked one question in both the questionnaire and during the interview that was specifically focused on the future of urban Catholic elementary schools. However, in spite of being asked specifically about religious charter schools and Catholic schools, all six of the superintendents spoke at length about their views concerning charter schools. From all of the data, three categories were developed related to the superintendents’ perceptions of charter schools. The three categories are as follows:

- Charter Schools’ Relationship with Catholic Schools
- The Public’s Perception of Charter Schools
- Charter School Finances

The detailed findings related to each category are supported by sub-codes and evidence drawn from the data sources.

**Charter Schools’ Relationship with Catholic Schools**

In the open-ended questionnaires and during the interviews, superintendents often spoke about their perception of charter schools. When discussing various characteristics of
charter schools, frequently comparisons were made to Catholic schools. Specifically, five of the six superintendents noted that charter schools actually mimic various aspects of Catholic schools or are perceived as similar to Catholic schools:

- **Elizabeth:** Charters also kind of traditionally mimic our governance model which is something I’ve always said, they’re very autonomous. They tend to wear uniforms. They have a lot of flexibility with regard to dismissing students or dismissing staff so that whole kind of governance model is very, very similar to what we see….We have “values” based charters that attempt to mimic the governance structure, the uniforms, and implement a character education program that is an attempt to instill a moral education foundation for students.

- **Gregory:** Charter schools are public schools that do not have the same restrictions on organizational practices as do traditional public schools. This flexibility often relates to curriculum, hiring practices, and administration, and student scheduling… they often serve children of poverty, as does the Catholic school.

- **Joseph:** My students used to refer to charter schools as “Catholic schools without religion,” referring to the requirement to wear uniforms and the schools’ usual focus on academics and safety.

Maria reiterated the same notion shared by Joseph regarding academics and safety, two attributes traditionally associated with Catholic schools, stating that charter schools “provide a ‘free’ school with an excellent academic program and a safe school environment.” Samuel noted that “The charter movement in our state is on record with regard to its debt to
private (especially Catholic) schools for many of its policies and mission elements.” He also stated that he is aware of charter schools that “have cloned values – leadership, ecology, service” and that charter schools are “perceived as strongly mission-driven.”

While these five superintendents recognized that charter schools possess similar traits as Catholic schools, this did not necessarily equate to an overall view of charter schools being equal with Catholic schools. Specifically, three of the six superintendents asserted that Catholic schools outperform charter schools academically:

- **Elizabeth:** In our city, charter schools have roughly 2 to 3 times the level of funding that Catholic schools have, but Catholic schools outperform them academically 2 to 1.

- **Samuel:** A committee did a very nice evaluation of the success of charter schools here, and they pretty much came back saying the charter schools are performing better. They’re not as performing well as the Catholic schools. If you were to compare the ACT scores and everything else, Catholic schools still beat everybody.

- **Gregory:** However, in my experience, charter schools frequently cannot compete with Catholic schools academically.

Regardless of which type of school may or may not be of higher academic quality, it was apparent throughout the superintendents’ comments that charter schools compete with Catholic schools. Five of the six superintendents made statements about their perception of this reality:
• **Samuel:** The challenge is already here – we have charter schools which are perceived as strongly mission-driven and which provide choice for parents...and they are free, many of them housed in our former school buildings and competing with our schools in the same neighborhood.

• **Gregory:** Because charter schools are in essence public schools, they are state funded through taxes. They often serve children of poverty, as does the Catholic school, but there is no tuition attached. This provides a financial incentive to parents to enroll children in the charter school. This can be a challenge to Catholic schools in recruiting students.

When discussing the reality of Catholic schools closing in urban areas and charters opening in their place, Elizabeth shared:

If a charter school leases a former Catholic school building, then specific parameters need to be established regarding grade levels that are offered, etc. so it doesn’t become a direct competition for the other Catholic schools in the area,...We’ve actually worked on a policy here about trying to either do a year moratorium and then really controlling what grades get put into that school if it’s going to become a charter so you don’t directly compete with surrounding Catholic schools. So if you have a lot of K-8 Catholic schools surrounding it, try to limit the charter to a K-1 type of environment or something so when they leave that school at the end of first grade they might have an option to go to a second grade for sacraments or something like that.
While Agatha’s general position was that religious charter schools do not exist today, she did concede that, “Again, I don’t believe such schools exist today; however, assuming they do, I believe they would pose some very real problems for our urban Catholic elementary schools if they are not included in the funding for such schools.” In one of Joseph’s reflections about restructuring Catholic schools to make them more viable in the future, he noted:

And you know a lot of money has been going into public education. So they’re more competitive than they ever were, and then the charters in addition… Catholic schools are not eligible for any of these funds. Catholic schools are at a huge disadvantage financially when compared to charter and regular public schools.

One specific example of how charter schools are directly competing with Catholic schools was cited in four of the six superintendents’ comments. This has to do with the fact that charter schools are opening in former Catholic school buildings or attempting to lease space in former Catholic facilities:

- **Joseph:** For example, each time a charter school wants to rent, lease, or buy an empty Catholic school building, the pastors and principals of surrounding Catholic schools strongly object…. I’m struggling right now even with I want to work with charter schools if I could to let them have some of our buildings in exchange for something else.

- **Samuel:** The challenge is already here – we have charter schools which are perceived as strongly mission-driven and which provide choice for parents... and
they are free, many of them housed in our former school buildings and competing with our schools in the same neighborhood.

- **Maria:** I would be remiss in not saying to you that in the years that I worked in this archdiocese that I have received calls from parents, not many, but a few calls over the years inquiring about these “free Catholic schools” because the charter schools they have a sign in front of the building but they don’t cover the St. Barbara or the St. whatever.

- **Elizabeth:** Obviously, the surrounding Catholic schools could potentially suffer enrollment decline because of the charter having the perception of a Catholic kind of environment with no charge of tuition…. So if you’ve got something that’s opening at the site of a former Catholic school, I think there are concerns about how that’s perceived within the community.

Some of the superintendents’ comments about charter schools opening in former Catholic school buildings also contained two additional themes pertaining to the public’s perception of charter schools.

**The Public’s Perception of Charter Schools**

First, some of the superintendents’ comments revealed that charter schools are sometimes incorrectly viewed as “free Catholic schools” thus making them an attractive school choice option for families. Three of the six superintendents raised concerns that at times charter schools are literally mistaken for Catholic schools or perceived as almost the same as Catholic schools by the public. In the same vignette from Maria that was previously
presented to illustrate the basic reality that charter schools are opening in former Catholic school buildings was also this theme that charter schools being confused with Catholic schools:

I would be remiss in not saying to you that in the years that I worked in this archdiocese that I have received calls from parents, not many, but a few calls over the years inquiring about these “free Catholic schools” because the charter schools because the charter schools they have a sign in front of the building but they don’t cover the St. Barbara or the St. whatever. And when families walk in they see that sign and they’re not paying tuition so they’re wondering “Gee, are they -- at least initially -- are these free Catholic schools or what? Where do we find these places?” You know I’d explain to them that no, they’re not Catholic schools. They’re charter schools so they are public entities that are leasing our building so the piece is coming from a different point of view than a Catholic perspective.

Elizabeth’s comments on the issue of charter schools opening in former Catholic school buildings also highlighted the concern of the public having an incorrect perception of charter schools being similar to Catholic schools:

Obviously the surrounding Catholic schools could potentially suffer enrollment decline because of the charter having the perception of a Catholic kind of environment with no charge of tuition….So if you’ve got something that’s opening at the site of a former Catholic school I think there are concerns about how that’s perceived within the community.
Along a similar perspective, Joseph’s comment about certain perceptions of charter schools points to the concern of the two types of schools being confused in his statement, “My students used to refer to charter schools as ‘Catholic schools without religion,’ referring to the requirement to wear uniforms and the schools’ usual focus on academics and safety.”

The second, more dominant theme embedded in these comments, was the fact that charter schools are perceived as attractive schooling options because they are similar to Catholic schools and they are free. When discussing various forms of charter schools, all six superintendents made comments related to the attractiveness of charter schools, especially in light of the fact that they are free:

- **Gregory:** Because charter schools are in essence public schools, they are state funded through taxes. They often serve children of poverty, as does the Catholic school, but there is no tuition attached. This provides a financial incentive to parents to enroll children in the charter school.

- **Samuel:** The challenge is already here – we have charter schools which are perceived as strongly mission-driven and which provide choice for parents....and they are free, many of them housed in our former school buildings and competing with our schools in the same neighborhood.

- **Maria:** A “free” school with an excellent academic program.... More students may opt to attend since the school is state funded.

In her comments related to a Catholic school closing and a charter school opening in its place, Elizabeth noted, “As far as your second one kind of closing down a Catholic school
and then opening a charter, there are a variety of impacts there. Obviously the surrounding Catholic schools could potentially suffer enrollment decline because of the charter having the perception of a Catholic kind of environment with no charge of tuition.”

Joseph’s comments implied the same reality that charter schools do not cost what Catholic schools cost to attend noting, “Catholic schools are at a huge disadvantage financially when compared to charter and regular public schools. Catholic school parents are required to pay twice, once through their taxes to support public and public charter schools and once in tuition.”

When asked about the financial benefits of a religious charter school compared to an urban Catholic elementary school, Agatha’s response was clear, concise and spoke to the reality of all charter schools in comparison to urban Catholic schools, “There would be no comparison. The charter school would have all the advantages – no tuition and more revenue per student.”

These comments allude to the final category in the findings chapter, charter school finances.

**Charter School Finances**

In the open-ended questionnaires and during the interviews, superintendents often spoke about charter school finances. In the last section it was noted that charter schools are “free” to attend and this perception is grounded in the fact that charter schools are public schools and receive public funding. However, the one dominant theme that emerged related to charter school finances was the amount of funding that charter schools receive in contrast
to Catholic schools. Five of the six superintendents specifically noted that per pupil funding at charters schools is significantly higher than at Catholic schools.

Elizabeth shared that, “The financial structure for charter schools is that they receive government funding and Catholic schools need to charge tuition. In our city, charter schools have roughly two to three times the level of funding that Catholic schools have.” She expanded on this statement adding:

But charters are getting anywhere from $8,000 to $9,000 per kid from the state and from the federal government and obviously not costing the family anything. So our [Catholic] schools’ average tuition is probably about $3,000 a year and that’s probably what they’re asking families on average and the cost to educate is probably about $1,000 more or so. So it’s costing about $4,000-$4,500 a year to educate and they’re only getting about $3,000 from families.

Joseph’s comments were very similar to Elizabeth’s regarding the discrepancy in per pupil funding. He noted:

Charter schools receive their funds from the public and receive triple or quadruple the per pupil amount available to Catholic schools. In our state, the average is somewhere around $10,000 per pupil. Catholic schools get their funds from tuition paid by parents and average the tuition is $3,500. Money is not everything, but when year after year, your competition is outspending you $3 or $4 to $1, it is hard to keep up with texts, materials, supplies, technology, building upgrades, etc. Salaries are also out of whack. Our Catholic schools pay an average teacher salary of $30,000. The
urban public schools just told me that they use $80,000 as an average teacher salary…. Not that the teacher is making $80,000, but by the time they get the salary and then the benefits on top of that they use that as the average salary.

When discussing specific benefits of charter school funding, Joseph pointed to additional monetary benefits that charter schools receive beyond salary comparisons:

So all of those things are going to be better than what we have at Catholic education in terms of the finance and facilities because the funding would be triple, quadruple, four times or five times what we’re spending in Catholic schools. So I just met with the charter school people and they have a middle school grades six, seven and eight, and we are charging in our [Catholic] schools $2,600 maybe $3,200 in tuition and they are spending $16,000 per pupil. So if you had a charter school you could have $16,000 per pupil you could offer a very rich curriculum. You could offer up-to-date materials and technology, the charter schools in our state have just been approved by the school building authority board to get reimbursement for additions and renovations and repair work on their building. This is the first. It just happened this year. So they put money aside for charters and public schools get built in the state…. And so Catholic schools their facilities have no such ability to get money without doing a capital campaign.

Samuel shared similar sentiments about charter school funding in his state. He noted that, “Our charters receive start-up monies for renovation, per pupil allocations for rental, and a tidy sum of $6,000+ per pupil funding,” while also stating that Catholic schools get around “$2,500 to $3,000” from tuition.
Maria discussed the funding discrepancy between public schools and Catholic schools when she shared a story about a group of religiously affiliated schools that tried to access some public funding in her state. The Catholic schools sought “1/3 of what the state allocating was for cost per student,” but this movement was not successful. Agatha saw no comparison between charter school and Catholic school funding. She stated, “The charter school would have all the advantages-- no tuition and more revenue per student.”

While Gregory did not discuss the specifics of charter school spending, he did note that “Because Charter schools are in essence public schools they are state funded through taxes. They often serve children of poverty, as does the Catholic school, but there is no tuition attached. This provides a financial incentive to parents to enroll children in the Charter school.”

**Summary of Findings**

The research questions for this study were:

1. What is the common understanding of a religious charter school as perceived by Catholic school superintendents?

2. What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to these schools?

   a. What are the benefits to such a school in a Catholic context?

   b. What are the challenges to such a school in a Catholic context?
These research questions were exploratory and focused on the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents. The first research question aimed to identify a common understanding of a religious charter school among Catholic school superintendents. The second research question focused on benefits and challenges to such a school as perceived by the Catholic schools superintendents. In presenting the data as it relates to the research questions, it is helpful to organize the summary of findings by themes that emerged from the data related to each question in the following manner:

- What is the common understanding of a religious charter school as perceived by Catholic school superintendents?
  - Religious Charter School Terminology
  - Religious Charter School Concept

- What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents regarding the benefits to such a school in a Catholic context?
  - Financial Benefits

- What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents regarding the challenges to such a school in a Catholic context?
  - Charter Schools Compete with Catholic Schools
  - Public Funding Challenges
  - Religiosity Challenges

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Religious Charter School Terminology

When asked to articulate a common understanding of religious charter schools, the superintendents were unable to provide a clear and concise definition of a religious charter school. In fact, the five out of six superintendents that were familiar with the term asserted that the use of this terminology was contradictory or misleading. This belief was generally based upon the fact that charter schools are by nature public schools and therefore inserting the prefix “religious” was perceived as incongruous at the very least and misleading at its worst. These superintendents did not seem to think it was appropriate or fair to imply that a public school could be religious in any true sense of the word. As a result, the use of the term “religious charter school” revealed itself as problematic for these superintendents, and it was basically discarded from their lexicon throughout the remainder of their responses.

Instead, all six of the superintendents preferred to use the general term “charter schools” or “public charter schools” in their responses. Sometimes descriptors such as “cultural” charters were added when discussing potential models of charters schools, but there was little consistency regarding the use of alternative terminology. The one minor exception was the use of the term “wraparound programs” by two superintendents when discussing one potential model of religious charter schools that would offer religious instruction before and/or after school. However, these superintendents were still reluctant to coin this model a religious charter school. On the whole, all six superintendents did not use the term religious charter school with any consistency to describe any specific model discussed. Moreover, it was made clear by four of the five superintendents familiar with the
religious charter school terminology that using the term to describe a charter school that opened in place of a former Catholic school was not an acceptable use of the term.

**Religious Charter School Concept**

The most apparent sentiment regarding the religious charter school concept was the perception of five of the six superintendents that no matter what you call it, all types of charter schools are public schools and they are not Catholic schools. As emphatic as these superintendents were about their assertions that religious charter schools are simply public schools and they are not Catholic schools, they still thoughtfully engaged the concept and expressed an attraction to the potential of such schools. While these five superintendents attempted to positively embrace the concept of religious charter schools, envisioning specific attributes of religious charter schools that would be successful in practice proved more difficult for them. Four of the five superintendents admitted their struggles were based upon various complexities inherent in conceptualizing potential models of religious charter schools. This made it difficult to determine a clear, common understanding of religious charter schools as perceived by the superintendents. However, some themes related to the superintendents’ common understanding of religious charter schools still surfaced.

All six of the superintendents did assert that any concept of a religious charter school would have to maintain extremely clear lines of separation regarding religious programming as well as other various operational considerations. The requirements and legal structures that govern public schools provided the rationale behind these sentiments. Maintaining clear lines of separation seemed to provide the impetus for all six superintendents’ willingness to consider one specific opportunity associated with discussions about religious charter school
models – the “wraparound program.” The wraparound model, or offering religious education before and/or after school to students that attend a charter school, was perceived as having the most potential as a religious charter school model.

Four of the six superintendents mentioned charter schools in practice today that are seemingly embracing particular values often associated with religious institutions, but the complexities of this actually working in practice for a Catholic school dampened their enthusiasm significantly. The major concern within the Catholic context was the perceived lack of religiosity at religious charter schools. This sentiment was shared by all five of the six superintendents familiar with the religious charter school terminology in their attempts to conceptualize a common understanding of these schools. It was noted by five of the six superintendents that religious charter schools require more research to accurately define a common understanding of these schools.

Financial Benefits

Even though the religious charter school terminology was problematic for the superintendents and their understanding of the concept of these schools was generally ambiguous, they were still able to comment on their perceptions of benefits and challenges to these potential schools. Related to benefits to such a school, there was one unifying theme among all six of the superintendents. The clear benefit of a religious charter school in a Catholic context as perceived by all six of the superintendents was financial. This sentiment was expressed against the backdrop of the current closing crisis faced by many urban Catholic elementary schools.
All six superintendents spoke about the demographic and financial challenges faced by urban Catholic elementary schools today. Specific examples include the notions that these Catholic schools are in decline, need to restructure, and must be affordable to families. All six superintendents stated that Catholic schools are in need of additional funding. They also noted that Catholic schools receive little to no public funding, followed by the assertion that Catholic schools should. All six superintendents commented on the attractiveness of charter schools to families because they are “free” or do not charge tuition. In addition, five of the six superintendents specifically argued that the per-pupil funding from the state allocated to public schools in comparison to the per-pupil funding derived from tuition and fundraising at Catholic schools is often two to three times higher. Therefore, the clear benefit of a religious charter school would be the fact that as a public school it would receive public funding and it would not charge tuition.

It was five of the six superintendents’ perception that the obvious benefit to a religious charter school would be the significant increase in per-pupil funding. As a result, the schools would have enough money to make education affordable for families, repair ailing facilities, and improve countless aspects of the schools operations. Regarding additional benefits to religious charter schools, there were no other consistent responses that applied directly to the research question regarding benefits to such a school. While three of the six superintendents did mention that Catholic education supports school choice and charter schools provide choice, a seeming benefit, this theme was not clearly linked to the superintendents’ perceived benefits of a religious charter school. Five of the six superintendents also noted that Catholic schools and charter schools share many similarities,
but once again, this was not articulated as a direct benefit related to potential religious charter schools. On the contrary, both of these themes – choice and charter schools sharing similarities with Catholic schools – were more often linked to superintendents’ perceptions of challenges to religious charter schools.

**Charter Schools Compete with Catholic Schools**

All six of the superintendents mentioned comparisons between charter schools and Catholic schools. Five of the six superintendents noted that charter schools actually mimic various aspects of Catholic schools. These superintendents spoke about the perception of charter schools providing safe and disciplined learning environments, strong academics, and values-based programming – all characteristics often associated with Catholic schools. In fact, five of the six superintendents made specific comments about charter schools directly competing with Catholic schools. Furthermore, four of the six superintendents noted the reality that charter schools occupy former Catholic school buildings and all six superintendents commented on the attractiveness of charter schools in comparison to Catholic schools because they do not charge tuition. The perception of charter schools as being similar to Catholic schools coupled with the fact that they offer a “free” education to parents with the right to choose where their children will attend school created the perspective that charter schools are competitors with Catholic schools.

**Public Funding Challenges**

Even though the idea of receiving a significant influx of funding was seen as a benefit to religious charter schools, this attraction was tempered by five of the six superintendents’
perception that receiving public funding comes with restrictions. These superintendents’ main concern about receiving public funding revolved around church and state complications. They questioned how a religious charter school could hold onto a Catholic mission and remain loyal to certain Church teachings in light of conflicting requirements of state legislation. As such, the restrictive nature of certain state legislation that governs the use of public funding was perceived by these superintendents as potentially having deleterious effects on the religiosity of religious charter schools. In fact, four of the six superintendents shared that investigating public funding options outside of seeking funding through the establishment of religious charter schools was a preference in order to avoid certain complications and restrictions.

Religiosity Challenges

All five of the six superintendents familiar with the religious charter school terminology noted concerns regarding the religiosity of these potential schools in a Catholic context. These superintendents posited that religious charter schools could not endorse faith practices and the religious identity of a potential religious charter school would be weak or non-existent because of various complications and restrictions. In light of the fact that all six superintendents articulated their belief that the Church’s mission is central to the purpose of Catholic schools, compromising that mission because of state restrictions was perceived as a significant challenge to religious charter schools in a Catholic context. Furthermore, three of the six superintendents hypothesized that as a result of the lack of religious identity at religious charters schools, these schools would therefore be better suited for serving non-Catholic students. Since four of the six superintendents also posited that a main purpose of
Catholic education is to serve Catholics, these two incongruous perceptions created another potential challenge regarding the religiosity of religious charter schools in a Catholic context.

**Religious Charter Schools Face Opposition**

All six of the superintendents expressed the concern that any model of religious charter schools would face various types of opposition, such as legal challenges and push back from public school teachers unions. First and foremost, they articulated their belief that these schools would face significant legal challenges regarding their structure and practices. The superintendents felt that various concerns would be raised about religious charters schools endorsing religion in violation of state and federal legislation. In fact, one superintendent referenced schools that are currently in existence which have already faced law suits because of allegations regarding their legality. The superintendents also noted the potential for strong opposition from public teachers unions to religious charter schools. The often contentious relationship between public teachers’ unions and charter schools was referenced as a catalyst for elevated acrimony regarding the idea of a religious charter school.

**Conclusion**

This chapter focused on reporting the data descriptively, under three overarching themes – superintendents’ perceptions of religious charter schools, Catholic schools and charter schools. The data was further organized into 11 categories. Each category was placed under one of the three overarching themes to aid in the presentation of findings. The superintendents’ perceptions and opinions were highlighted throughout the presentation of findings. The chapter concluded with a summary of the findings as they related to the
research questions. The final chapter of this study focuses on analyzing and interpreting the data through the lenses of the literature reviewed and research questions. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and implications of the findings.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This study was exploratory and analyzed an emerging form of schooling – “religious” charter schools – within the context of urban Catholic elementary education in America. Specifically, it examined the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to this form of schooling. The study investigated if a common understanding of “religious” charter schools was salient among Catholic superintendents. In addition, it analyzed the perceptions of Catholic superintendents related to the benefits and challenges to this type of school in a Catholic context.

The research questions for this study were:

1. What is the common understanding of a religious charter school as perceived by Catholic school superintendents?

2. What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to these schools?
   a. What are the benefits to such a school in a Catholic context?
   b. What are the challenges to such a school in a Catholic context?

Chapter 4 focused on reporting the data descriptively, under three overarching themes – Superintendents’ Perceptions of Religious Charter schools, Catholic schools, and Charter schools. The data was organized into 11 categories. Each category was placed under one of the three overarching themes to aid in the presentation of findings.
While Chapter 4 focused on reporting the data descriptively, Chapter 5 focuses on analyzing the data in light of the research questions and the literature reviewed. This allows for more interpretation of the data in contrast to the less interpretive presentation of data in Chapter 4 (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings as well as a review of the implications and recommendations for practice and further research based upon the findings.

This chapter is organized in the following order:

- **Introduction.** This section provides an overview of the organization of the chapter.

- **Summary of the Major Findings:** This section summarizes the major findings related to the research questions.

- **Discussion of Findings:** This section relates the findings, viewed through the lens of the research questions, to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. As such, the major themes identified in the summary of the findings are analyzed in light of the literature reviewed. In addition, interpretation and speculation about the findings are discussed. The following themes, drawn from the summary of findings and literature reviewed are used to organize this section as follows:
  
  o Religious Charter School Terminology
  
  o Religious Charter School Concept
  
  o Financial Benefits of Religious Charter Schools

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Summary of the Major Findings

Overall, the religious charter school terminology proved problematic for all six superintendents. Their common understanding of these schools was muddled in part by the term, but even more so by the potential complexities associated with the existence of these schools in practice. As a result, the most apparent common understanding of religious charter schools as perceived by five of the six superintendents was displayed in the assertion that they are public schools and they are not Catholic schools. Moreover, it was made clear by four of the five superintendents familiar with the religious charter school terminology that
using the terminology to describe a charter school that opened in place of a former Catholic school was not an acceptable use of the term. In addition, all six of the superintendents posited that any potential model of these schools would require clear separation regarding religious programming and various operational considerations.

The superintendents’ position that religious charter schools would require clear separation enabled all of the superintendents to acknowledge some potential with one model of religious charter schools discussed – the “wraparound” program. The “wraparound” model, or offering religious education before and/or after school to students that attend a charter school, was perceived as having the most potential as a religious charter school model. However, the five out of six superintendents familiar with the religious charter school concept asserted that separating the religious aspects of the school presented a significant challenge to the religiosity of these schools. It was also noted by five of the six superintendents that religious charter schools require more research to accurately define a common understanding of these schools.

The clear benefit to a religious charter school in a Catholic context as perceived by all six of the superintendents was financial. This sentiment was shared by the superintendents against the backdrop of the current closing crisis faced by many urban, Catholic elementary schools. All six superintendents commented on the attractiveness of charter schools to families because they are “free” or do not charge tuition. Five of the six superintendents argued that the clear benefit to a religious charter school would be the significant increase in per-pupil funding. These superintendents noted that the per-pupil funding from the state allocated to public schools in comparison to the per-pupil funding derived from tuition and
fundraising at Catholic schools is often two to three times higher. As a result, the schools would have enough money to make education affordable for families, repair ailing facilities, and improve countless aspects of the schools operations.

There were many challenges noted by all six of the superintendents regarding religious charter schools. Five of the six superintendents discussed the fact that charter schools compete with Catholic schools. Five of the six superintendents also noted that charter schools mimic or are similar to Catholic schools. These superintendents spoke specifically about the perception that both types of schools can provide safe and disciplined learning environments, strong academics, and values-based programming. All six superintendents commented on the attractiveness of charter schools in comparison to Catholic schools because they do not charge tuition. The perception of charter schools as being similar to Catholic schools coupled with the fact that they offer a “free” education to parents with the right to choose where their children will attend school created the perspective that charter schools are competitors with Catholic schools.

Five of the six superintendents had reservations about receiving public funding due to church and state complications. They questioned how a religious charter school could hold onto a Catholic mission and remain loyal to certain Church teachings in light of conflicting requirements of state legislation. As such, the restrictive nature of certain state legislation that governs the use of public funding was perceived by these superintendents as potentially having deleterious effects on the religiosity of religious charter schools. In fact, four of the six superintendents shared that investigating public funding options outside of seeking
funding through the establishment of religious charter schools was a preference in order to avoid certain complications and restrictions.

All five of the six superintendents familiar with the religious charter school terminology noted concerns regarding the religiosity of these potential schools in a Catholic context. These superintendents posited that religious charter schools could not endorse faith practices and the religious identity of a potential religious charter school would be weak or non-existent because of various complications and restrictions. In light of the fact that all six superintendents articulated their belief that the Church’s mission is central to the purpose of Catholic schools, compromising that mission because of state restrictions was perceived as a significant challenge to religious charter schools in a Catholic context. Furthermore, three of the six superintendents hypothesized that as a result of the lack of religious identity at religious charter schools, these schools would be better suited for serving non-Catholic students. Since four of the six superintendents also posited that a main purpose of Catholic education is to serve Catholics, these two incongruous perceptions created another potential challenge regarding the religiosity of religious charter schools in a Catholic context.

All six of the superintendents shared the opinion that religious charter schools would face various types of opposition. These superintendents felt that multiple concerns would be raised about religious charter schools endorsing religion in violation of state and federal legislation. These types of legal challenges were the superintendents’ major concern regarding the type of opposition that religious charter schools would face. Four of the six superintendents also noted the potential for strong opposition from public teachers unions to religious charter schools. The often contentious relationship between public teachers unions
and charter schools was referenced as a catalyst for elevated acrimony regarding the idea of a religious charter school.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Religious Charter School Terminology**

In the literature reviewed, several different terms are cited related to the topic investigated in this study – religious charter schools. The most commonly used terms are “faith-based” charter schools and “religious” charter schools (Bailey & Cooper, 2009; Cooper & Randall, 2008; Russo & Cattaro, 2009; Weinberg, 2007, 2008, 2009). These two terms and others are often used interchangeably. This study investigated the common understanding of the term “religious” charter school because it is most prevalent in the literature reviewed. All of the various terms used in the literature reviewed point to one unifying question, “Can a charter school be faith-based or religious?” The de facto expert on the topic of religious charter schools, Lawrence Weinberg, confesses that it is very difficult to even talk about religious charter schools because the interpretation of a charter school being based on faith can be extremely broad and it does not even require that a school is necessarily religious (Weinberg, 2008, 2009). Furthermore, it has been questioned how religious charter schools could be considered “faith-based” at all without explicitly teaching religion and faith practices (Russo & Cattaro, 2009).

It is not surprising that the broad and ambiguous understanding of the term religious charter school exhibited in the literature proved problematic for all of the Catholic school superintendents in this study. Catholic schools are rooted in a deep and long-standing
religious tradition. They were established to serve immigrant Catholic populations by enabling them to preserve, practice, and spread their Catholic faith (Buetow, 1970; Walch, 2003). Furthermore, the U.S. Catholic Bishops have committed themselves and the entire Catholic community to the goal that “Catholic schools will continue to provide gospel-based education of the highest quality” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, p. 2). Given this historical Catholic context, using the term religious charter school to describe a potential alternative governance model of schooling in association with the Catholic Church is incongruous. This becomes especially apparent when considering the need to separate or compartmentalize the religious or faith-based aspects of a religious charter school because of legal restrictions. As such, the use of the term religious charter school in a Catholic context proved problematic. It is unlikely that the term will provide much useful or constructive meaning within the Catholic community based upon the literature reviewed and the findings of this study.

**Religious Charter School Concept**

The problematic nature of the religious charter school term reflects a similar issue associated with the general concept of a religious charter school. Preferred terminology aside, conceptualizing a common understanding of a religious charter school in practice is also a moving target in the literature reviewed. A familiar situation that is prevalent in popular media articles is the reality of urban Catholic elementary schools closing and charter schools subsequently opening in their place (Hernandez, 2009b; Robelen, 2009; Rodriguez-Soto, 2009). This is sometimes referred to as Catholic school “conversions” or Catholic schools “converting” to charter schools (Smarick, 2009; Vitello, 2009). The problem is that
there is no body of scholarly research that evaluates how these schools function in practice after the so called “conversions.” However, there are a few important facts about Catholic school “conversions” in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. and Miami Catholic schools reported in the limited literature reviewed that are relevant to the findings of this study.

One fact about the Washington, D.C. Catholic school “conversions” is that the vast majority of students (approximately 70%) in the former Catholic schools were not Catholic, and therefore the new public charter schools had limited Catholic populations (Smarick, 2009). Second, it was reported that “secular values have replaced the religious curriculum” at the new charter schools and religious elements have been “purged” (Stephens, 2009). Third, once the Catholic schools in Washington, D.C. and Miami became charter schools they were no longer Catholic schools operating under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese – they were simply “secular public charter schools” (Brinson, 2010; Smarick, 2009; Stephens, 2009). This is an important point of clarity when discussing potential models of religious charter schools.

The limited literature on the topic confirms the finding in this study that when a Catholic school closes its doors and re-opens as a charter school, it re-opens as a secular, public charter school and is no longer Catholic in any way. Five of the six superintendents argued that when a Catholic school closes and a charter school opens in its place, it is no longer a Catholic school and it becomes a public charter school. The literature also supports the finding that Catholic school “conversions” are not acceptable models of religious charter schools. It can therefore be concluded that one aspect of the common understanding of religious charter schools in a Catholic context is that Catholic school “conversions” do not
qualify as an acceptable model of religious charters school. This is evidenced by an agreement between the limited literature on the topic and the perceptions of five of the six Catholic school superintendents.

The most lucid and definitive statement made in the literature about the general concept of religious charter schools is made by Weinberg in his most recent publication. Weinberg (2009) argues in his article about religious charter schools that charter schools allow “parents to create public schools that accommodate their religious beliefs,” but “the Constitution, however, prevents parents from creating charter schools that endorse their religious beliefs” (p. 300). This statement underscores the reality that there must be a marked difference in how a religious charter school would undertake the business of religiosity in comparison to a private, religiously affiliated school. The primary complicating factor when considering any model of a religious charter school is determining exactly where the line is regarding religious separatism. When conducting a constitutional analysis of the Establishment clause, the flexibility towards the separation between church and state as it relates to charter schools is unclear and still untested in the federal courts (Cooper & Randall, 2008; D’Adamo, 2008; Harvard Law Review Association, 2009; Hillman, 2008). This makes conceptualizing a religious charter school very difficult.

In the open-ended interviews, the Catholic school superintendents were provided with three potential models of religious charter schools drawn from the literature to reflect upon. It has been made clear that Catholic schools closing and charter schools re-opening in their place were not perceived as an appropriate model of a religious charter school. However, the two other potential models of religious charter schools investigated in this study received
different reactions. The one consistent reaction of all six superintendents to the potential model of a new charter school opening and being based upon particular values often associated with religion was that clear separation regarding religious programming and various operational considerations would be needed. However, the superintendents fell short of articulating exactly how this model would work in practice in a Catholic context. Their ability or willingness to discuss specifics related to this model may have been complicated by the fact that endorsement of religion is central to Catholicism and as the literature suggests, knowing specifically where the line of separatism would be has yet to be determined by the courts. While there may be potential with developing a more precise conceptualization of this model of religious charter schools, based upon the literature reviewed and the findings of this study, it can be inferred that developing a new religious charter school is not a preference or a top priority in a Catholic context.

**Wraparound programs and the Miami experience.**

The third model discussed was referred to as the “wraparound” program or when a charter school is associated with before and/or after school religious education programming. The six superintendents’ perception of clear separation regarding religious programming and operational considerations enabled all six of them to embrace the wraparound program with the most openness. Even though five of the six superintendents still raised concerns about the religiosity of this model, their willingness to explore the opportunity is meaningful, especially in light of the most recent report on the Archdiocese of Miami charter school experience. Keeping in mind the concerns noted about the methodology and reliability of the report, Brinson (2010) notes early lessons from the Miami experience:
• Pastors and parishioners in low-income communities had to face the reality that financially failing schools risked shuttering their parishes entirely (p.16).

• The Archbishop’s willingness to permit parish priests to gather information and feedback on charter schools created an opportunity for parish-driven solutions to long-standing financial challenges (p. 16).

• With support from Archdiocesan officials, the parishes negotiated fair facilities agreements with charter schools that provide a source of income for parishes to pay off debts and address any canonical concerns posed by public schools on church property (p. 3).

• The loss of a Catholic school requires new thinking and action on the part of pastors and Archdiocesan officials to ensure the Church meets the religious education needs of children through other avenues. Failure to address this need can result in a missed opportunity (p. 3).

There were two main opportunities in the Archdiocese of Miami related to leasing former Catholic school facilities to charter schools. One was securing new funds for the financially struggling urban parishes that could no longer support their parochial schools and the second was to potentially provide a “public school with a private school feel” as an alternative to failing district public schools while meeting the religious education needs of those children through other avenues (Brinson, 2010, p.3). As previously stated, the report notes that the charter schools in the former Catholic school facilities are secular, public charter schools. However, the report does discuss many similarities between the charter
schools selected as tenants and Catholic schools such as school uniforms, safe and disciplined learning environments, and a focus on character development (Brinson, 2010). While these similarities were not articulated as a benefit by the Catholic school superintendents, the perception of similarities between charter schools and Catholics schools are a finding of this study. The difference is that the Miami report frames these similarities in a positive light.

The perspective shared in the Miami report is that if a charter school can provide a similar academic experience as a Catholic school for “free,” then that is an attractive option to investigate for families in urban areas where Catholic schools are closing as opposed to having empty school buildings. A potential answer to the loss of a religious education component comes from “strengthening other venues for religious formation” and based upon the findings of this study this might include the development of wraparound programs (Brinson, 2010, p. 4). Unfortunately, there is no solid data available yet on the proposed plans of “growing” religious education programs for the charter school and parish communities (Brinson, 2010, p. 14). In fact, Brinson (2010) notes that some people are already wondering if opportunities to create stronger religious education programming have already been missed at the parishes that house charter schools in the Archdiocese of Miami.

**Financial Benefits of Religious Charter Schools**

In the literature reviewed, there is one crystal clear benefit to religious charter schools in a Catholic context – increased funding. The evolution of the detrimental financial state of urban, Catholic elementary schools has been documented for decades (Cibulka, et al., 1982; Greely, et al., 1976; O’Keefe, et al., 2004). As a result of financial constraints as well as
other demographic factors, urban Catholic elementary schools have continued to close (McDonald, 2011; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). As is the case in the Miami report, the obvious impetus behind investigating potential relationships with charter schools is the dire financial straits of not only the urban, parochial schools, but also the financial health of the parishes running the schools. In fact, the literature that addresses the potential of religious charter schools in a Catholic context often explicitly and always implicitly acknowledges that the primary benefit to exploring such an option is a significant increase in funding (Brinson, 2010; Hamilton, 2008; Morken & Formicola, 1999; Karp, 2009; Smarick, 2009; Stephens, 2009).

When the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. closed seven urban Catholic schools the new public charters were able to keep all their old staff and most of their students; the parishes that now house the public charter schools get paid rent, which they can use toward after-school and religious education; and charter schools in Washington, D.C. also spend $11,000 per child, much more than Catholic schools can afford to spend (Karp, 2009). In fact, the average tuition and per pupil costs for Catholic elementary schools are $3,383 and $5,486 respectively (McDonald, 2010). In addition, teacher salaries at the schools in Washington, D.C. increased 22% since the conversion (Hernandez, 2009a). It was also noted in the report on the Miami charter school experience that the rental income from the new charter schools literally saved the parishes from financial ruin according to the parish priests (Brinson, 2010).

The notion of exploring religious charter schools in order to increase Catholic schools’ funding evident in the literature reviewed is in concert with this study’s findings.
All six superintendents’ shared the perception that the obvious benefit of religious charter schools would be financial. All six superintendents commented on the attractiveness of charter schools to families because they are “free” or do not charge tuition. Five of the six superintendents argued that the clear benefit to a religious charter school would be the significant increase in per-pupil funding as compared to Catholic schools. In fact, as noted in the literature, some of these superintendents specifically discussed the fact that the per-pupil funding is often two to three times higher than what Catholic schools normally receive from tuition and fundraising. It is not surprising given the financial crisis faced by urban Catholic elementary schools that the motivation behind exploring the potential of religious charter schools is the significant increase in funding.

What was a surprise is the fact that the superintendents did not discuss the potential benefits to the parish communities, independent from the potential benefits to the associated parochial school. As the limited literature is evolving on the topic of religious charter schools, it seems as though an emerging benefit might be the rental income received from reputable, secular public charter schools leasing former Catholic school facilities (Hamilton, 2008; Smarick, 2009; Brinson, 2010). This is a different angle regarding the benefit of religious charter schools in a Catholic context, but it appears to be worthy of further reflection.

One of the reasons provided for the willingness to allow public charter schools to operate in former Catholic school facilities in the Archdiocese of Miami were the various similarities between charter schools and Catholic schools (Brinson, 2010). The option of replacing Catholic schools with secular public charter schools was never touted as the most
attractive option to save failing Catholic schools in the Miami report, but rather it was presented more like a necessary surgical procedure that ultimately would have a more positive affect than the alternative of doing nothing. In contrast to the perceptions of the parish priests in the Miami study, the similarities between charter schools and Catholic schools noted by five of the six of the superintendents were not viewed as beneficial aspect of the relationship between the two types of schools. Rather, five of the six superintendents often described charter schools as competitors to Catholic schools. These differing perspectives certainly influence how various Catholic communities will relate to charter schools in the future.

What was not surprising is that all six of the superintendents still made it known that they believe Catholic schools should receive additional public funding. This does not come as a surprise since the Catholic school community has long sought public funding to support its schools (Edelstein, 2004; Walch, 2003). Five of the six superintendents also raised concerns about serious restrictions and complications associated with receiving public funding, which is another theme in the literature (Edelstein, 2004; Walch, 2003). Specific concerns regarding the private school sector and charter school public funding are also raised in the literature reviewed (Cooper & Randall, 2008; Hillman, 2008; Russo & Cattaro, 2009). As a result, various complications associated with receiving public funding through charter school legislation appears to severely temper the financial allure of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. In fact, four of the six superintendents shared that investigating public funding options outside of seeking funding through the establishment of religious charter schools was a preference in order to avoid certain complications and restrictions.
Religious Charter School Challenges: Legal and Religious

A multitude of potential complications are raised in the literature reviewed about restrictions and requirements associated with charter school public school funding in a Catholic context. These complications range from the demographic make-up of governing boards to different staff certification requirements for public school employees (Cooper & Randall, 2008; Russo & Cattaro, 2009; US Charter Schools, 2010a). However, governing boards and increased accountability regarding academic excellence was not the core concern noted in the literature related to public funding and religious charter schools. The main concerns that surfaced in the literature reviewed all stem from the more restrictive legal requirements regarding religious practice and faith formation at public schools (Bailey & Cooper, 2008; Morken & Formicola, 1999; Robelen, 2008; Russo & Cattaro, 2009). These legal and religious complications set the table for inherent challenges and external opposition to the creation of religious charter schools.

Legal concerns.

Church and state issues are consistently highlighted as the chief concern associated with religious charter schools in the scholarly and popular literature reviewed (Bailey & Cooper, 2008, 2009; Cooper & Randall, 2008; Daniel, 2008; Feldman, 2007; Hillman, 2008; “Lawsuit Says,” 2009; Lemagie, 2009). In fact, there have been two high profile legal contests alleging inappropriate and illegal promotion of religion at certain charter schools often associated with Islam and Judaism (Bailey & Cooper, 2008, 2009; D'Adamo, 2008; Daniel, 2008; Feldman, 2007; “Florida Charter School Halts,” 2007; Gootman, 2009; “Lawsuit Says,” 2009; Lemagie, 2009). While these schools have come under severe
scrutiny, both schools remain in operation today and are seemingly in compliance with federal and state legislation. Nonetheless, the concern illustrated in the literature reviewed and the findings of this study that religious charter schools are likely to face severe legal opposition ultimately influences the reception of these schools in a Catholic context in a negative fashion.

All six of the superintendents shared the opinion that religious charter schools would face various types of opposition. These superintendents felt that multiple concerns would be raised about religious charters schools endorsing religion in violation of state and federal legislation. These types of legal challenges were the superintendents’ major concern regarding the type of opposition that religious charter schools would face. Four of the six superintendents also noted the potential for strong opposition from public teachers unions to religious charter schools. It seems as though the general perception is that adding a religious component to charter schools in a Catholic context would set off too many alarms regarding the separation of church and state, raise heated debates about who has rights to what funding, and seemingly derail any attempts at establishing religious charter schools in a Catholic context. However, what is noteworthy when reflecting upon the potential legal challenges is that the literature is not yet conclusive regarding how the courts will treat the constitutionality of religious charter schools at the federal level.

**Religious concerns.**

The literature that targets the legality of religious charter schools does not posit a definitive position on the topic. Weinberg’s most recent work concedes that because the Establishment Clause line is unclear on the topic of religious charter schools, a discussion of
legally permissible religious practices and activities related to these schools must take place in broad terms (Weinberg, 2009). The few legal scholars that have directly addressed the topic of religious charter schools all note that how the courts will eventually treat this topic as it relates to the separation of church and state is yet to be determined. Even the *Harvard Law Review* asserts that its own analysis of religious charter schools is filled with “maybes” and “might’s;” however, all of the legal reviews agree that the time will come when the courts and legislators will be forced to revisit the issue of publicly financed education as it relates to religious charter schools (D’Adamo, 2008; Harvard Law Review Association, 2009; Hillman, 2008).

In light of the literature reviewed, it was somewhat surprising that more superintendents did not advocate attempts to establish religious charter schools in a Catholic context to see how the legal analysis will ultimately play out in practice. While it is true that certain states have more restrictive anti-establishment legislation regarding than others, battling anti-religion legislation is nothing new for Catholics in America. Rather, the limited enthusiasm to push hard for religious charter schools in a Catholic context seemed to be grounded in the belief that no matter what the courts might determine in the future, religious charter schools will never possess a religious identity akin to a Catholic school. This perception of the negative effects that public school funding would have on the mission and religious identity of religious charter schools in a Catholic context is also a primary concern noted in the literature reviewed (Bailey & Cooper, 2008; Hernandez, 2009a, 2009b; Morken & Formicola, 1999; National Catholic Education Association, 2009; Robelen, 2008; Russo & Cattaro, 2009).
This predicted loss of religious identity at religious charter schools in a Catholic context was an important finding of this study. Five of the six superintendents had reservations about receiving public funding due to church and state complications. They questioned how a religious charter school could hold onto a Catholic mission and remain loyal to certain Church teachings in light of conflicting requirements of state legislation. They felt as though these schools could not endorse faith practices and that the religious identity of a potential religious charter school would be weak or non-existent. This perception is in agreement with the one definitive statement about religious charter schools in the literature reviewed – they cannot endorse a particular religion (Weinberg, 2007, 2008, 2009). In spite of asserting that Catholic schools should receive public funding, there was no urgency, save one superintendent, about aggressively seeking public funding through charter school legislation. In fact, it was made clear by four of the six superintendents that seeking other routes to access public funding was preferred over the charter school option. Based upon the literature reviewed and the findings of his study, the possibility of losing a core purpose of Catholic education – to provide a gospel-based education – appears to be too big of a risk for the Catholic community despite the significant increase in funds associated with charter school legislation (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

Within the Catholic context, it is completely understandable that Catholic school superintendents were not able to fully embrace an alternative governance structure such as religious charter schools given the fact that they cannot endorse the Catholic faith. Given the deep historical tradition of Catholic education it is quite apparent that forgoing such a central component of the purpose of Catholic education cannot be an option no matter how much
revenue such a concession would yield. In fact, there is something incredible refreshing as well as deeply moving about the core values of an institution superseding the lure of financial gain and market demands. It can also be inferred that due to the weakened financial position of many Catholic parishes coupled with an insipid reception of religious charter schools because of religiosity concerns, Catholic communities may not be well positioned nor motivated to fight this particular legal battle. Having all of that said, when reflecting upon the literature reviewed and the findings in this study concerning the potential of the wraparound programs, it seems as though the question of how a religious charter school might be beneficial in a Catholic context should not be discarded prematurely.

**Catholic School Future Viability: How Charter Schools May Help**

The literature reviewed and the findings of this study both conclusively confirm that urban Catholic elementary schools are facing severe closing crisis that puts into question their future sustainability. NCEA statistics for the 2010-2011 academic year reveal that Catholic enrollment is now approximately 2.1 million and 6,980 schools remain open – a 60% decline in enrollment and just over half the number of schools are open compared to the mid-1960s and the numbers have been consistently dropping over the past 10 years (McDonald, 2011). To the detriment of the urban populations these schools serve, there are no signs of the drastic trends reversing. Findings of this study that are related directly to Catholic schools also exhibited concern about the same closing trends as well as the future sustainability of urban, Catholic elementary schools documented in the literature reviewed.

Important findings of this study were related to the superintendents’ perceptions of the current state of urban Catholic elementary schools. One admissions shared by five of the
six superintendents was that Catholic schools located in urban settings are in decline. It was abundantly clear that these superintendents were aware of the closing trends noted in the literature reviewed based upon their personal experiences. The reality of Catholic school closings seemed to prompt another theme articulated by all six superintendents – Catholic schools need to restructure. Identifying innovative governance structures and funding sources were seen as necessary in order to sustain the future viability of urban Catholic elementary schools. The dominant theme discussed most frequently by all six superintendents related to the findings about Catholic schools was that of finances and the fact that Catholic schools are in need of additional funding.

At the same time that urban Catholic elementary schools are experiencing drastic declines, charter schools are experiencing exponential growth (Center for Education Reform; 2010; Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, 2009; USDOE, 2011). In light of these two converse realities, the literature and findings in this study illuminate the possibility that there still may be room for Catholic schools to capitalize on the uniqueness of the convergence of these two situations. Despite the various concerns noted in the literature reviewed and in the findings of this study about establishing religious charter schools in a Catholic context, there are still possible scenarios that may hold promise regarding the relationship between charter schools and Catholic schools.

It has been noted in the literature reviewed that Catholic schools and charter schools share many similar characteristics. The student demographics served by charter schools mirror those currently served by urban Catholic schools – they enroll larger percentages of Black and Hispanic students and lower percentages of White and Asian students than
conventional public schools (McDonald, 2009; USDOE, 2008). Charter school legislation in all states is fundamentally based upon the idea of increased autonomy, local control, and community involvement. Charter schools’ autonomy is reflective of the decentralized governance structure of Catholic parochial schools, which has been attributed to Catholic schools effectiveness (Bryk, et al., 1993; Cibulka, et al., 1982).

A charter school may also operate in pursuit of a specific set of educational objectives determined by the school’s developer and agreed to by the authorized public chartering agency (USDOE, 2004). Charter schools may establish a particular vision and value-set that drives the purpose of the school. Having an inspirational ideology and clarity of mission and purpose are also factors attributed to Catholic school success (Bryk, et al., 1993; Cibulka, et al., 1982). Key aspects of charter schools match similar attributes that are reflective of the best practices of Catholic schools. The findings of this study also note similarities between charter schools and Catholic schools.

Five of the six superintendents shared that charter schools mimic or are similar to Catholic schools. These superintendents spoke specifically about the perception that both types of schools can provide safe and disciplined learning environments, strong academics, and values-based programming. All six superintendents commented on the attractiveness of charter schools in comparison to Catholic schools because they do not charge tuition. Perhaps most important, in this study all six superintendents acknowledged some potential with the “wraparound” model of religious charter schools, or offering religious education before and/or after school to students that attend a charter school. In addition, Brinson (2010) highlighted the additional benefit of the parish receiving much needed income as a
result of leasing former Catholic school facilities to charter schools – wraparound program notwithstanding – in her report on the Archdiocese of Miami charter school experience.

Questions regarding how leasing former Catholic school facilities to charter schools will affect competition between the charter schools and surrounding Catholic schools cannot be answered by this study. In addition, assessing the religiosity of charter schools, even if they are able to base their mission on values similar to those found in the Catholic tradition, was not an aim of this study. However, when it comes to identifying benefits and challenges to such schools, it can be argued based upon the literature reviewed and the findings of this study that the exploration of how charter schools and Catholic schools may be mutually beneficial to one another is not yet complete. If charter schools are complementary to Catholic schools in a multitude of ways – save the explicit religiosity component – then perhaps there are ways for these two sectors to serve one another in a positive fashion.

**Leasing and wraparound programs.**

The most likely scenario that emerged from this study is the leasing of former Catholic school facilities to charter schools, and subsequently developing religious education programs to serve the charter school population and the surrounding parish community. While this relationship would not necessarily be viewed as an alternative governance structure for Catholic schools nor perceived as establishing a religious charter school, it very well may provide for critical needs of the Catholic Church in urban America. It is quite possible that developing positive relationships with charter schools can result in receiving much needed additional income for struggling urban parishes as well as opening new doors for religious education programming and outreach to the urban poor.
Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study was that the sample is limited to Catholic school superintendents. This research design excluded additional constituencies such as school board members, pastors, teachers, parents, students, and local community members’ perceptions. The perspectives of multiple constituencies at various levels of school organization would provide greater depth and breadth to the findings. A study that investigates the perceptions of additional constituencies may be appropriate now that this exploratory, diocesan level study is complete.

A second potential limitation is that the research design does not allow for an analysis of the benefits and challenges of any particular religious charter school that currently exists. A case study design would allow for detailed evaluation of religious charter schools in practice (Yin, 1984). Investigating benefits and challenges of religious charter schools in practice may provide additional insights for researchers and practitioners. In particular, questions regarding the religiosity of religious charter schools in practice and how charter schools that lease former Catholic school facilities affect the local educational marketplace could be explored.

A third limitation of the study is the final sample size. In order to keep consistency with the unit of analysis and to take into account geographic considerations – large, urban centers and states with charter school laws – the questionnaire was distributed to 14 Catholic school superintendents in 14 major cities. The final yield was six respondents or 43%, which is consistent with the average survey response rate in academic studies, but the sample size is small (Baruch, 1999; Baruch, & Holtom, 2008; Guest & Arwen, 2006).
Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Move away from the religious charter school terminology in a Catholic context. It was made abundantly clear that the use of the religious charter school terminology is problematic in a Catholic context. Because of the perception that the term is oxymoronic and misleading when interpreted by Catholic school superintendents, the very use of the term can detract from more meaningful discussions about real opportunities associated with public charter schools in a Catholic context. Based upon the literature reviewed and this finding it can be inferred that other members of the Catholic educational community will hit a conceptual roadblock when this terminology is used. It may be more helpful to redirect discussions towards the similarities between public charter schools and Catholic schools. Developing an informed understanding of what all public charter schools have in common regarding their institutional make-up and governing policies is the first step in setting the table for meaningful discussions about their relationship with Catholic schools and the urban communities that they often serve.

Reflect upon how charter schools are competitors to Catholic schools and potential sources of opportunity. Catholic school practitioners and the entire Catholic community should spend time reflecting upon on how the growth of charter schools is truly affecting their perceptions and actions within their own local context. Some Catholic constituencies may view charter schools as fierce competitors that are taking over historical Catholic school marketplaces. For those incensed by the idea of charter schools taking over former Catholic school communities, perhaps this might serve as a catalyst to mobilize sympathetic constituencies to garner more support for struggling urban Catholic schools. These are
desperate times for many Catholic schools and action is needed to preserve the urban schools that remain. Understanding the dynamics of the local educational marketplace and disseminating this information to the local community is critical in developing meaningful dialogue and appropriate action plans.

There is no evidence in the findings of this study indicating that Catholic educational communities prefer closing their school doors in favor of opening public charter schools. However, in the absence of strong and viable alternatives that will sustain struggling urban Catholic elementary schools, all Catholic school supporters and parish communities that run Catholic schools must reflect deeply on the role that charter schools can play when schools and potentially entire parishes face closure. Choosing not to respond to the Catholic school closing crisis in new and meaningful ways is no choice at all. The findings of this study suggest that practitioners should investigate relationships with local charter schools and reputable charter school management organizations in order to determine how they might be beneficial partners to Catholic schools that face worst case scenarios. This study also illuminates a new perspective that in many senses, Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to capitalize on the continued growth of charter schools and the inherent complementary nature of these schools, potentially allowing them to benefit former, urban Catholic school populations.

*Catholic dioceses should investigate leasing empty facilities to charter schools.* This study suggests that investigating potential relationships between charter schools and Catholic parishes may prove beneficial. Conversations about how to best utilize empty Catholic facilities are surely happening across the country. Specifically, leasing these facilities to
charter schools is already happening in some dioceses, but perhaps not others. State legislation and local politics vary and will affect each diocese’s ability to engage in such relationships, but opening up the conversation about how leasing former Catholic school buildings to charter schools should at least be attempted in every urban diocese with charter school legislation.

The vision suggested by this study is to view empty Catholic school facilities and charter school growth as an opportunity. One can speculate that the Catholic Church is uniquely positioned to capitalize on this situation in order to save the larger Church as a whole, not Catholic education. The conversation is therefore redirected from debating the issue of losing religious identity at a “religious” charter school to seeking beneficial alternatives to having empty school buildings on parish grounds that may save entire parish communities. Furthermore, the findings in this study also raise the question that in the cases where there were many non-Catholics attending the schools that closed, perhaps servicing these populations by leasing to public charter schools would be perceived in an even more positive light.

**Religious education programming in urban areas should be revisited.** The Catholic parochial school has historically served the educational needs of urban communities. With the various demographic and financial shifts that have occurred over the past forty years this reality is changing. The findings of this study suggest that as urban Catholic elementary schools continue to close, parishes should consider revisiting their religious education programs. Just because a parochial school is forced to close, it does not necessarily mean that providing multiple forms of religious education to the local community must cease.
There are still opportunities to develop alternative religious education programs, youth ministry, and formal catechizes such as the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD). In particular, this study suggests that in cases where charter schools lease former Catholic school facilities, the development of new religious education programs that can serve both the student body before and after school hours and the parish community merit serious consideration. These new programs may be a viable alternative to providing a traditional Catholic school education in the most severe circumstances when a parish school must close.

**Implications and Recommendations for Further Research**

*Further research on the topic of religious charter schools is needed.* This study suggests that further research on the topic of religious charter schools in a Catholic context is still needed in order to better conceptualize this emerging niche in the educational marketplace as well as assess varying perspectives on the topic. This study provided insights based upon the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents overseeing large urban diocese. Further research that includes the perceptions of pastors, parents, teachers, parishioners, and other constituencies regarding the benefits and challenges of religious charter schools in a Catholic context would add more depth to understanding the complexities surrounding this topic. In addition, further research the targets a larger sample of participants from all states in America with charter school legislation would provide more breadth and new insights into the similarities and differences of how Catholic school markets perceive religious charter schools in their local communities.

Current research on the topic of religious charter schools is almost exclusively based in theoretical analysis. While models of religious charters are recognized in practice, there
are no scholarly field-based case studies on the religious charter schools noted in the literature. Further research that focuses on particular schools that are classified as religious charter schools in the literature would provide much needed insight into how these schools actually function on a day-to-day basis and how separatism regarding church and state legislation is actually achieved or not achieved. Ground-level research on these schools is needed in order to illustrate what these conceptual schools are like in practice.

*Further research on various aspects of the relationship between charter schools and Catholic schools is needed.* This study raised many questions about the dynamic between charter schools and Catholic schools. Perceptions about similarities and differences between these two educational sectors were noted. Specifically, the question of how charter schools are perceived as mutually beneficial to Catholic schools was raised. In addition, the findings of this study point to a very specific situation that exists today in practice – when charter schools lease space in former Catholic school facilities. Further research that investigates an array of variables associated with these situations may prove beneficial.

Recommendations include conducting analyses as to how Catholic schools and charter schools compete or do not compete for resources in local communities when a charter school opens in the place of a former Catholic school; investigating the benefits and challenges of developing working relationships between charter schools and Catholic schools; surveying urban families’ perceptions regarding their educational desires at traditional public schools, charter schools, and Catholic schools; and assessing the rental income benefits and challenges associated with Catholic parishes leasing facilities to charter schools. In addition, this study suggests that the development of wraparound programs is
worthy of continued exploration. Further research that identifies and analyzes religious education programs in association with charter schools that lease former Catholic school facilities may provide beneficial insight into the feasibility and effectiveness of these programs.

*Continue to research other sources of funding and governance structures for urban, Catholic elementary schools that can be immediately applied to practice.* This study sought to answer questions about the benefits and challenges associated with religious charter schools in a Catholic context. This study also initially speculated that religious charter schools might even serve as an alternative governance structure for ailing Catholic schools. The findings of this study suggest otherwise. Due to legal and religiosity complications, dependence on this new form of schooling to save urban Catholic elementary schools was found to be unlikely. While seeking additional solutions to the Catholic school closing crisis was beyond the scope of this study, the study’s findings did indicate that additional funding for Catholic schools and Catholic school restructuring are desperately needed. Further research that targets the identification of new funding sources, both public and private, that can be accessed in a timely fashion by urban communities may prove beneficial. In addition, further research that analyzes the effectiveness of various current Catholic school governance structures and investigates new governance structure possibilities may also be of service to the Catholic educational community.
Concluding Statement

The conception of this research study was born from a conversation about the topic of religious charter schools and the evolving diversity of urban Catholic schools in America. A question posed at the time was, “How different are urban Catholic schools, really, from a concept of public charter schools that can accommodate particular values?” This study was exploratory and it investigated the topic of religious charter schools in a Catholic context. Specifically, it sought to answer questions regarding the benefits and challenges to such schools as perceived by Catholic school superintendents in urban, dioceses across America.

Among a multitude of lessons learned throughout the process of conducting this study, it was a finding related to the purpose of Catholic schools themselves that made the most lasting impression. It was made clear that the one defining characteristic that sets Catholic schools apart from any public charter school is their historical mission and ability to embrace a gospel-based education. In fact, given the extremely trying times for urban Catholic elementary schools it was quite inspirational to recognize the Catholic school superintendents’ commitment to this central purpose of Catholic education in spite of the lure of significant financial gain through charter school legislation. At the same time, the ever growing pluralistic society that currently defines urban America, coupled with another call of the Catholic Church to serve the poor, raised more questions than answers for the researcher regarding the future direction of urban Catholic schools.

This study has further convinced the researcher that as the Catholic Church develops specific plans for urban Catholic education in America, the Church must move forward not in fear, but with hope. Hope that God will be found in all things and that the Holy Spirit is at
work in all situations. Romanticizing the pinnacle of Catholic education in this country and conducting “business as usual” has proved to be nothing but detrimental to urban Catholic elementary schools. Having the courage to respond to the signs of the times with openness to new life is where the prayer of the Catholic Church and Catholic educators must reside. It is the spirit of renewal that has sustained the Catholic Church for over 2,000 years. It is this same spirit that must be embraced when considering the future of urban Catholic education in the America.
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Appendix A

Questionnaire

1. Are you familiar with the term “religious charter schools?”
   a. If yes, what is your understanding of a religious charter school?
   b. If no, what do you think this term refers to?

2. What is your general perception of how religious charter schools may benefit or challenge urban Catholic elementary schooling in the future?
   a. Benefit:
   b. Challenge:

3. What is your perception of the financial structure of a “religious” charter school compared to an urban Catholic elementary school?
   c. Benefits:
   d. Challenges:

4. What is your perception of the school’s religious identity at a “religious” charter school?
   e. Benefits:
   f. Challenges:

5. What is your perception of the school’s Catholic identity at “religious” charter schools?
   g. Benefits:
   h. Challenges:

6. What is your perception of the legal issues related to a “religious” charter school?
   i. Benefits:
   j. Challenges:

7. What is your perception of the Church’s role in serving the educational needs of urban communities where Catholic elementary schools can no longer keep their doors open?

8. Please add any additional comments regarding the topic of religious charter schools.
Appendix B

Interview Schedule

1. Are there certain questions that you would like to expand upon or discuss in further detail based upon the questionnaire that you completed?

2. Are there certain questions or areas of interest regarding the topic of religious charter schools that you want to address?

3. The term religious charter school seems to be controversial, why? Is the problem with the term or with the concept of the school?

4. What is your perception of the following three different models of charters schools?
   a. The establishment of a new charter school based upon Catholic values
      i. Benefits
      ii. Challenges:
   b. A “Catholic conversion” charter school with no religious instruction offered after school
      i. Benefits:
      ii. Challenges:
   c. A “Catholic conversion” charter school with religious instruction after school
      i. Benefits:
      ii. Challenges:

5. As you now understand “religious” charter schools, what are the benefits and challenges associated with any or all of the following aspects of schooling?
   a. Enrollment Management (Development Efforts)
   b. Facilities Assessment (Physical Plant)
   c. Budget and Finance
   d. Curriculum
   e. Instruction
   f. Technology
   g. Student Life
   h. Catholic Identity
   i. Culture
   j. Academic Excellence

6. What is your opinion of what needs to happen in order to sustain the future of urban Catholic elementary education in the United States?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to add?
### Appendix C

#### Code Categories Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendents’ Perceptions of Religious Charter Schools (RCS)</th>
<th>Superintendents’ Perceptions of Catholic Schools</th>
<th>Superintendents’ Perceptions of Charter Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>T-RCS Terminology</strong></td>
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<td>T-1 RCS term is contradictory</td>
<td>Q-Future Sustainability in Question Q-1 Catholic schools in decline Q-1 Need to restructure</td>
<td>RC-Relationship with Catholic Schools RC-1 Charters mimic or similar RC-2 Catholic stronger academic RC-3 Charters compete RC-4 Charters in Catholic facilities</td>
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<td>T-2 RCS term is misleading</td>
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<td>T-3 Close/Reopen not a RCS</td>
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<td><strong>CT-RCS Concept in Theory</strong></td>
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<td>CT-1 RCS are not Catholic schools</td>
<td>F-Catholic School Finances F-1 Need additional funding F-2 Must be affordable F-3 Little to no public funding F-4 Should receive public funds F-5 Public funding restrictions F-6 Other funding preferable</td>
<td>PP-Public Perception PP-1 Charters perceived like Catholic schools PP-2 Charters attractive because they are free</td>
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<td>CT-2 Charters are public schools</td>
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<td>CT-3 RCS attractive concept</td>
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<td>CT-4 RCS model complicated</td>
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<tr>
<td>CT-5 Separation needed</td>
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<td>CT-6 RCS not researched</td>
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<td><strong>FP-RCS Feasibility in Practice</strong></td>
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<td>FP-1 RCS face opposition</td>
<td>P-Purpose of Catholic Schools P-1 Church’s mission is central P-2 Should serve Catholics P-3 Should serve the poor</td>
<td>CF-Charter School Finances CF-1 Per pupil spending higher</td>
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<td>FP-2 RCS face legal challenges</td>
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<td>FP-3 Unions complicate model</td>
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<td>FP-4 RCS cannot exist</td>
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<tr>
<td>FP-5 RCS can and do exist</td>
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<td>FP-6 Wraparound opportunity</td>
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<td><strong>R-RCS Religiosity</strong></td>
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<td>R-1 RCS cannot endorse faith</td>
<td>C-Choice C-1 Catholics support school choice C-2 Families may not choose Catholic schools</td>
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<td>R-2 Weak or no religious identity</td>
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<td>R-3 RCS for non-Catholics</td>
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Appendix D

Boston College Consent Form

Boston College
Lynch School of Education
Department of Higher Education and Educational Administration

Informed Consent for Participation as a Subject in:
Religious Charter Schools:
Superintendents’ Perceptions in a Catholic Context

Investigator: Craig Horning
Adult Consent Form
Date Created: June 16, 2010

The Boston College IRB approved this protocol on July 1, 2010.

Introduction:
• You are being asked to be in a research study of religious charter schools in a Catholic context.
• You were selected as a possible participant because you are a Catholic school superintendent of a large diocese that is located in a state with public charter school legislation.
• I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study:
• This study is exploratory and investigates the topic of religious charter schools in the context of Catholic education. Specifically, the study focuses on the following research questions:
  o What is the common understanding of a religious charter school as perceived by Catholic school superintendents?
  o What are the perceptions of Catholic school superintendents related to these schools?
    ▪ What are the benefits to such a school in a Catholic context?
    ▪ What are the challenges to such a school in a Catholic context?

Description of the Study Procedures:
• If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to complete an open-ended questionnaire online and subsequently participate in a follow-up interview. The expected duration of your participation is limited to these two procedures. The questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete and the interview may last from 10-30 minutes.
The interview will take place at your workplace, or a place of your choosing either in person or via telephone. This interview will focus on your perceptions of religious charter schools. Although I will rely upon a standardized set of general interview questions, each interview is likely to follow a somewhat unique path as each participant will have various experiences with religious charter schools. With your permission, these interviews will be audiotaped. For any participants who do not wish to be audiotaped, I will rely on field notes only.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in the Study:
- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks. There may be unknown risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study:
- The proposed research offers potential benefit for Catholic school superintendents involved in the research. Upon the completion of this study the first available research-based data will exist on the topic of religious charter schools. Understanding more about religious charter schools may help inform future policy decisions related to charter schools and Catholic schools.

Payments:
- There will be no payment for participation in this study.

Costs:
- There is no cost to you to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality:
- The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I may publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file.
- All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Audiotape recordings will also be kept in a locked file and digital recordings will be coded and password protected. The content of the audio recordings will be used solely for the purposes of this project. The audio recordings will be destroyed by permanent deletion at the completion of the study.
- Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however, please note that the Institutional Review Board and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.
- If injury occurs or confidentiality is breached, you may contact: Director, Office for Human Research Participant Protection, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:
- Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with Boston College or any Catholic diocese.
- You are free to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason.
• There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for stopping your participation.
• You will be provided with any significant new findings that develop during the course of the research that may make you decide that you want to stop participating.

Dismissal from the Study:
• If you do not follow the instructions you are given, you will be dismissed from the study. If the study sponsor decides to stop or cancel the study, you will be dismissed from the study.

Contacts and Questions:
• The researcher conducting this study is Craig Horning. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact Craig at horning@bc.edu or 415-307-3424.
• If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Director, Office for Human Research Participant Protection, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu

Copy of Consent Form:
• You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Statement of Consent:
• For Adult Consent Form or older child (12-17 years) combined Consent/Assent (Full form): I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

Signatures/Dates:
• Please confirm that you received a copy of this form and that you give your consent to participate in this study.

Study Participant (Print Name): ________________________________________

Participant Signature: ___________________________ Date ___________