

A PORTRAIT OF TWO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS IN PURSUIT OF  
EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Son Young Hahm: A Portrait of Two Public Charter Schools in Pursuit of Equity and Excellence  
(Under the direction of Fenwick English)

In North Carolina, charter schools that serve whites and non-economically disadvantaged students have doubled in the last fourteen years, whereas schools that serve economically disadvantaged students have closed at higher rates (Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015). Stories of school leadership that successfully promotes equity and excellence in schools that serve predominantly economically disadvantaged students of color guide school leaders serving similar communities. Drawing from interviews, observations, and document analysis, this portraiture study examines the theoretical groundings, leadership beliefs, and school-wide practices of charter school founders who successfully serve economically disadvantaged students of color in North Carolina. School founders who lead for equity and excellence communicate and invest their leadership teams and stakeholders in the school's mission; selectively hire staff members who align with the school's mission, vision and values; and build their staff members' leadership capacity. Most importantly, they cultivate awareness of their positionality and racial identity; learn the history of racism and its impact on education in their community; and create systems to operationalize their leadership vision into equitable practice. Findings from this study may be of interest to organizations selecting charter school founders or principals; school district leaders, particularly those who supervise principals; or school leadership preparation programs.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for their loving patience, sacrifice, and support.

To my daughter, Cecilia Soojin, I started this journey before you were born, and I was even more determined to finish as you grew up. Remember the story of your great-grandmother who bribed a teacher with stolen eggs to teach her how to read? Educated women are unstoppable. Every time I heard you play doctor and say, “I’m Dr. Cecilia,” I worked harder on my dissertation so I could say I am a Doctor, too.

To my son, Matthew Jung Soo, you were just four months old when I started this doctoral program. There were many nights when your father, Mimi, or Bibi played with you or put you to bed while I attended classes or studied. I never stopped thinking about you. Fighting for educational equity and social justice, makes me a stronger role model for you. Know this: your mom is successful, has earned the highest degree, and loves you fiercely.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose of the Study**

Good schools are associated with whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Whiteness is associated with higher quality schools and higher real estate value (Harris, 1993). A comparative analysis of average home listing price, percentage of white population and student college readiness based on the 2014-15 North Carolina state exams shows a relationship between property value, student achievement, and the racial composition of North Carolina public schools (see Appendix A). In neighborhoods with public schools performing in the top quartile, the average home listing price is \$330,739 and 88% of residents are white, whereas those performing in the bottom quartile have an average home value of \$166,671 and 54.1% of residents are white (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015; Index Mundi, 2013; Trulia, 2016) (Appendix B).

Counties like Northampton, Edgecombe, and Halifax, the three lowest performing districts in North Carolina, have the highest concentration of black/African-Americans students (58, 57% and 53% respectively) (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015). In these counties, a disproportionately high percentage of public school students are enrolled in charter schools (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015) (Appendix C). In 2016, there were 158 charter schools in North Carolina (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015) and among those with 80% or higher students of color in enrollment, 36 out of 40 of those schools have less than 60% of students performing on grade level (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015).

Yet among these schools, only two schools serving predominantly economically disadvantaged<sup>1</sup> students of color had consistently high student achievement results.

The purpose of this study was to examine the theoretical groundings, leadership beliefs, and school-wide practices of two charter school founders who lead these two successful charter schools that serve economically disadvantaged students of color. Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter<sup>2</sup> schools are the only two charter schools in North Carolina where at least 70% of the students qualify for free- or reduced-lunch and 70% or more of the student body consistently perform on or above grade level on state exams. In addition, the founding leaders of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter have led their schools for fifteen and seven years, respectively, far surpassing the average school leader tenure rate of traditional and charter schools of three years in the state of North Carolina (School Leader Network, 2014; Superville, 2014). This study will examine the theoretical groundings and beliefs of these two charter school founders and how they translate their beliefs into practice to lead consistently high performing schools that serve economically disadvantaged students of color.

### Statement of the Problem

Not all charter schools are the same. Because charter schools are founded to serve a variety of purposes, audiences, and needs, they can be instruments for educational equity and excellence, or contributors to resegregation of public schools. Most successful charter schools in North Carolina, as measured by their Student Performance Grade and student achievement growth scores on state assessments, serve white students who do not qualify for free- or reduced-

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<sup>1</sup> Economically disadvantaged is defined as students whose family's income qualify for the National School Lunch Program which is a federally assisted meal programs offering low-cost or free meals in schools.

<sup>2</sup> All names of participants, schools, towns and counties have been changed for anonymity.

lunch (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016). Schools where more than half of the student body qualify for free- or reduced-lunch are among the lowest performing schools in the state (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015). The racial isolation and achievement gap among charter schools in North Carolina are significant issues to examine as charter schools continue to multiply in the state.

*Charter schools are increasingly racially isolated.* In the early stages of the charter school movement, scholars were concerned that charter schools and the school choice movement would lead to greater segregation of students by race and by class (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Levin, 1998; Witte, 2000) thus undoing integration efforts since *Brown v. Board of Education*. Critical Race Theory scholars argue that charter schools were intended for school reform but have been co-opted by white elites to further segregate public schools and to disenfranchise blacks (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The statistics would support both criticisms as charter schools prove to be more racially and socio-economically isolated than traditional public schools (Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009a; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010). In the 1990s, charter schools in North Carolina served more economically disadvantaged students of color than they do today (Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015). Since the removal of the cap on charter schools, a greater number of charter schools serve predominantly white and middle class families (Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015).

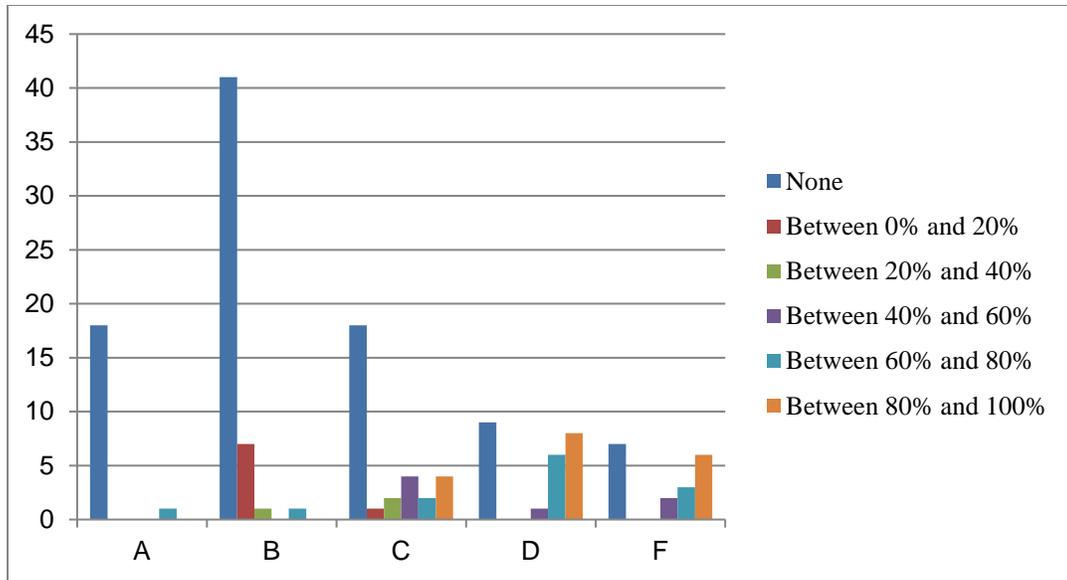
A recent report by the Office of Charter Schools (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016) shows that the racial isolation of white and minority students in charter schools have intensified in the last decade. Between 1998 and 2012, charter schools with predominantly white students nearly doubled from 24% to 47% while charter schools with at least 90% non-white

students have declined by 10% (Ladd et al., 2015). Traditional public schools are less racially isolated than charter schools in North Carolina (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016).

Historically, charter schools have served fewer economically disadvantaged students than traditional public schools (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016). During the 2014-15 school year, 55% of traditional school students qualified for free- or reduced-lunch compared to 36% of charter school students. The percent of students who qualify for free- or reduced-lunch in charter schools have declined by nearly 4% in three years (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016). Nearly 69% of charter schools have fewer than 20% of students who qualify for free- or reduced-lunch.

*Achievement varies widely among charter schools.* Until recently, North Carolina charter schools had lower student achievement outcomes than traditional public schools. Since 2012, charter schools have increasingly produced higher results as they attract more able, white, and less socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Ladd et al., 2015). During the 2014-15 school year, 59% of students in charter schools were grade level proficient in the state assessments compared to 55% of traditional public schools (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2015). Yet there is a significant divide in the outcomes along socioeconomic lines. As the percentage of students of economically disadvantaged students increase, the school-wide academic performance decreases.

Meanwhile, increased pressures for accountability led to a revised law that required schools to have at least 60% of students performing on grade level to remain open (North Carolina General Assembly, 2014). As Figure 1 shows, schools that serve more economically disadvantaged students may close due to low performance compared to ones that serve mostly non-economically disadvantaged students.



*Figure 1.* School performance grade for charter schools in 2014-15 by the percentage of economically disadvantaged students (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015)

### Two Schools Swimming Against the Current

This study examines charter schools that met the selection criteria below:

1. Charter schools in North Carolina with the highest proportion of students who qualify for free or reduced-lunch (70% or more)
2. Charter schools with consistently high student achievement outcomes with 70% or more students performing on grade level (or above) in state reading and math exams for three or more consecutive years

Morris Charter and Lincoln College Preparatory, located in North Carolina, are the only two schools that meet these criteria. These two schools have consistently helped their students academically achieve. Lincoln College Preparatory, which has been in existence for fifteen years has had 100% of its high school graduates gain admission to four-year colleges and universities.

In 2001, Lincoln College Preparatory began as a middle school serving fifth grade students. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 49% of children in this county live in poverty

(highest in the state) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Since 2001, Lincoln College Prep has built three schools on its campus: an elementary, middle and high school, and has establish schools in two different cities in North Carolina.

Lincoln College Preparatory's mission is to "empower all of our students with the skills, knowledge, and character necessary to succeed in the colleges of their choice, strengthen their community, and fight for social justice." In its vision statement, the school acknowledges that its role in education is situated within a larger social, political, and economic context: "We believe in bravery because we confront ignorance, racism, abuse, and corruption. We believe in urgency because our kids are in a race where the front-runners have a giant head start." The high school's motto is "Non scholae sed vitae discimus," which translates to, "We learn not for school, but for life." The mission of the school acknowledges the history of discrimination and segregation that its local citizens experienced in the public education system.

Morris Charter, founded by two former teachers of Lincoln College Preparatory, was founded in 2010. The founders started a middle school with 100 fourth grade students, then opened a high school in 2015, and an elementary school in 2016. Its mission is to, "Empower students with the character traits, academic skills, social experiences, and love of learning necessary for them to shape their own destinies, attend the college of their choice and become world-changing problem solvers." Like Lincoln College Preparatory, Morris Charter provides transportation and cafeteria service so that neither prevents families from enrolling their children, particularly economically disadvantaged families for whom lack of transportation and cafeteria services can be prohibitive. The school's mission does not explicitly address the issues of inequity and social justice, as Lincoln College Prep does. It emphasizes the school's commitment to holding students to high expectations to achieve educational excellence:

Beginning with the belief that all students can learn and the explicit expectation of college success, the model is rooted in an ethic of hard work and extensive time on task. The school day runs from 7:40 am to 4:15 pm and the year includes a mandatory summer school program. Every year, our students benefit from 26 extra school days, or about 182 hours. Over the course of grades four through eight, that translates to 728 hours, or an extra 104 school days overall!

Morris Charter has received many distinguished awards for their students' academic performance on growth and achievement. It has outperformed many traditional and charter schools serving more economically advantaged populations on state exams.

### **Research Questions**

This study is a portraiture study that examines the theoretical groundings, leadership beliefs, and school-wide practices of charter school founders who lead successful charter schools that serve economically disadvantaged students of color in North Carolina. Four research questions focused the study:

RQ1: What are the theoretical groundings and beliefs of charter school founders that successfully serve economically disadvantaged students of color?

RQ2: How do school leaders translate these beliefs into practice?

RQ3: How have the schools evolved over time while staying committed to their mission? What are their strengths and opportunities for development in pursuit of their mission?

RQ4: Taking these two examples together, what might we learn about the theoretical groundings and practices of equitable and excellent charter schools and their leaders?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study can contribute to the body knowledge of what leadership beliefs and practices that create equitable and excellent charter schools. First, North Carolina charter schools are becoming increasingly racially and socio-economically isolated. Schools that serve predominantly white, non-economically disadvantaged students have doubled in the last fourteen

years, whereas schools that serve economically disadvantaged students are closing at higher rates (Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015). Illuminating the stories of school leadership that successfully promotes equity and excellence can serve as a model for charter and traditional schools that serve economically disadvantaged students of color.

Secondly, between 2005 and 2015, 7 out of the 9 charter schools that closed had greater than 85% racial minority students. If current performance trends continue, all but a handful of charter schools that serve economically disadvantaged students will close under the new standards for charter schools, whereas ones that serve non-economically disadvantaged and white students will grow. The outcomes of this study can benefit charter management organizations, school districts and leadership preparation programs selecting or developing school leaders for schools in economically disadvantaged areas that predominantly serve students of color.

Finally, a great deal of literature on charter school networks that serve racial minority students in low socio-economic communities focus on achievement outcomes, school practices, or student attrition (Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011; Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014; Mathematica, 2015; Angrist & Dynarski, 2012). Yet, leadership groundings and beliefs of successful charter schools that lead for equity and excellence is undertheorized. More research on leadership in charter schools that successfully serve economically disadvantaged students of color is necessary. Examining the relationship between the school leaders' beliefs and practices will provide greater insight into how the schools should be designed and replicated for success.

## Research Methodology

Portraiture is a method used to “document the culture of schools, the life stories of individuals, and the relationships that existed among families, communities, and schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xvi). The mission, vision and goals of a charter school are uniquely reflective of the school founder’s values and beliefs. Unlike traditional schools that are established by local educational agencies on behalf of the community, charter schools are founded by individuals or organizations to fulfill a specific educational or community need.

First, unlike other qualitative methods, portraiture allows the researcher’s voice, interactions with actors in the research setting, and the researcher’s reflections to be woven into the study (Hackmann, 2002). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call this the “co-construction of meaning” between the “producer” and the “perceiver” of the study (p.29). Whereas in traditional qualitative research, the subject of the study is to be examined from a distance and the researcher observes without interrupting or influencing the observational landscape, in portraiture, researchers consider themselves as “humans who conduct research *among* others rather than *on* others,” (Wolcott, 2009, p. 19). In addition, whereas in traditional qualitative research the researcher tries to remain neutral and unbiased, portraiture does not create that filter. The researcher’s experiences and identity shape interpretation, and those are made transparent to the reader (Hackmann, 2002). Portraiture provides space for biases, experiences, and voice to interplay with the “producers” (subjects) as colleagues and critical friends.

This is particularly salient given that ten years ago, I was a teacher at Lincoln College Preparatory for one year. I also mentored David Martinez, the founder of Morris Charter school, when he started teaching at Lincoln College Preparatory. Currently, I work in the leadership development division of a national charter management organization that supports over 200

charter schools, including Lincoln College Preparatory. Although I have no administrative authority over the school, Lincoln College Preparatory does send a handful of assistant principals to participate in the leadership development program that I manage. My only vested interest in either Lincoln College Preparatory or Morris Charter is that they successfully fulfill their mission and that they critically examine their practices to become more equitable and excellent schools. The relationships I have with the school founders do not prohibit me from celebrating their strengths nor critiquing opportunities for growth. In fact, our relationships have given me access to ask deeper and richer questions to get to the heart of the story, and their openness to hearing my reflections and critiques could make their schools stronger.

Second, portraiture looks for goodness rather than pathology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In *The Good High School: Portraits in Character and Culture* (1983), Lawrence-Lightfoot's original portraiture study, she notes that many qualitative studies look for failures and the system's imperfections, whereas portraiture examines what is working. The researcher begins by asking, "What is good here?" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9), and uncovers strengths, as well as vulnerabilities and opportunities for growth. Portraiture seeks to investigate, communicate, and synthesize a picture of the whole. "Goodness" therefore is portrayed through multiple dimensions: "Goodness' refers to the mixture of parts that produce a whole. The whole includes people, structures, relationships, ideology, goals, intellectual substance, motivation, and will," (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 23). Constructing a holistic picture of how culture, people, systems, beliefs, and community interact to create a unified whole is essential to understanding the totality of the school.

Finally, portraiture is storytelling. There is extensive literature on the infrastructure, instructional practices, and student outcomes of charter schools that serve economically

disadvantaged racial minority students (Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011; Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014; *Mathematica*, 2015; Angrist & Dynarski, 2012). A paucity of literature represents the voices of the people involved and how their schools translate their mission into action. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis write, “detailed stories are told to illuminate more general phenomena,” (1997, p. 16). Since this study focuses on two schools and their founders, portraiture invites weaving together how the school founders, their principals, and various leadership team members all contribute to translating their school’s mission into practice. Portraiture allows a nuanced description of the schools’ strengths and successes while conveying the gap between the schools’ aspiration and their current practice.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) advocates for the representation of strength and voice of people of color through the rigorous lens of academic scholarship and storytelling. It also provides a framework and a lens for analyzing educational practices and policies such as charter schools and their racialized outcomes (Chapman & Donnor, 2015). Portraiture and Critical Race Theory are compatible (Chapman, 2005) and “methodologically attractive” (Carter, 2003, p.32) because both require the researcher and the participant to co-construct meaning and represent the stories and strengths of people of color. Carter (2003) writes, “[Critical Race Theory and Portraiture] are not static modes of inquiry but instead create a methodologically responsive and dynamic terrain—one that simultaneously accommodates and interrogates multiple conceptions of truth,” (2003, p.32).

The conceptual framework for studying equitable schools must consider the historical discrimination of racial minorities in public education, and highlight examples of goodness and strength (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997; Chapman, 2005). Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines

how race, racism, and power shaped our public institutions today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and serves as the theoretical framework in this study. CRT can be used to interpret and analyze the stories of how charter school founders established schools that strive to provide equitable and excellent educational outcomes for students of color. The following section provides a brief review of CRT tenets that are salient to this study.

### Salient Tenets of Critical Race Theory

*Permanence of Racism.* A central tenet of CRT is that racism is “ordinary, not aberrational...everyday experience of most people of color in this country,” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Because racism is endemic and “enmeshed in the fabric of our social order” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 213), policies or programs that promote a color-blind perspective, which believes in treating everyone in the same way, only address blatant forms of discrimination but not systematic, institutionalized forms which are more endemic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This is particularly salient when examining public education in North Carolina and its historical struggle to provide equitable and excellent public education for students of color. Therefore, an examination from the perspective of race and racism is relevant in a study that examines the origin, theoretical groundings, and practices of charter schools. Color-blind analyses of charter schools can unwittingly perpetuate practices that perpetuate the status quo and oppress students of color.

*Whiteness as Property.* Scholars posit that a racial caste system in the United States places Whiteness at the top (Bell, 2000; Harris, 1995; DeCuir, 2006) and has value like property. In history, Whiteness, referring to “quality pertaining to Euro-American or Caucasian people or traditions,” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p.156) and white people had the ability to own property whereas blacks were considered property (DeCuir, 2006). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue

that access to property and quality of education are explicitly intertwined. Those with access to better property have always had access to better schools.

In addition, schools affiliated with white populations are perceived as stronger, more successful, and more beneficial to a community (Pearsall, 1988). Predominantly white schools have greater access to intellectual property such as higher-quality educational curriculum, computer laboratories with the latest technology, teachers with more graduate degrees, or college-preparatory courses equipped with college-level materials (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Harris (1993) notes that whiteness proffers one the privilege and access to property, reputation, and status; and the ability to include or exclude (Harris, 1993). Ladd, Clotfelter and Holbein's (2015) study of charter schools in North Carolina shows that white parents choose schools with disproportionately higher enrollment of white students and transfer their children out when the school becomes "too black," (p. 11). Schools with high percentages of students of color suffer from the perception of a low-performing school (Pearsall, 1988). This study will identify how two schools access property, reputation, status, access, and rights to change the narrative that high quality public schools can also belong to students of color.

Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital, that is knowledge of upper and middle class white society, in addition to social and economic capital, can be acquired through family or through formal learning. Acquiring this capital allows those from lower classes to attain social mobility (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Yosso (2006) argues that Bourdieu's theory has been used to imply that "People of Color 'lack' the social and cultural capital required for social mobility," (p.168) therefore schools structure themselves to help students of color access the social and cultural capital of Whiteness to level the playing field. Shujaa (1992) contends it is this very

perspective which maintains white dominance and perpetuates the schooling versus the education of students of color.

*Counter-Storytelling.* Delgado and Stefancic (2001) define counter-storytelling as the act of telling a story that, “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority,” (p. 144). CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color and their communities of origin are valid sources of knowledge and central to analyzing phenomena (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Counter-storytelling shows how colorblind policies impact lived-experiences and perpetuate inequity. For example, despite proponents of charter schools espousing the benefits of creating an open educational market, the market is rarely race neutral (Buras, 2015). Scholars note examples of how race-neutral policies intending to create equitable and excellent educational opportunities for students of color primarily benefit whites (Buras, 2015; Henry & Dixson, 2016; Chapman & Donnor, 2015). The study represents stories that counter the deficit-based perception of schools that serve mostly students of color and examines how each school can continue their work in pursuit of equity and excellence.

*Critique of Liberalism.* DeCuir and Dixon (2004) suggest that CRT scholars are critical of three beliefs from liberal legal ideology: colorblindness, neutrality of law, and incremental change. Color-blind policies perpetuate discrimination and institutionalized racism (Ladson-Billings, 1999), such as color-blind charter school policies that do not differentiate for schools that serve predominantly middle-class white students versus those that serve mostly economically disadvantaged students of color. Henry and Dixson (2016) write that liberalism’s notions such as objectivity and meritocracy perpetuate inequity especially in the “face of historical and present-day realities of liberalism’s complacency toward the facilitation of White dominance and supremacy,” (p.231). School leaders for equity and excellence recognize that

race-neutral or color-blind practices promote white supremacy which contribute to racialized outcomes. Therefore, they operate with the belief that equity and equality are not the same thing.

### Integration of Portraiture and Critical Race Theory

As several scholars have noted (Chapman, 2007; Carter M. , 2003; Chapman, 2005; Dixson A. , 2005), portraiture and Critical Race Theory are compatible and complementary in the research of people of color and education in several ways. Both portraiture and Critical Race Theory seek to highlight “goodness” of communities and people of color through storytelling. By demonstrating what is working in schools that serve students of color, the stories of schools that successfully serve communities of color are “beacons of understanding” (Chapman, 2005, p.32) and serve as counter stories of deficit-based representation of people of color in the dominant discourse (Chapman, 2005). In addition, both portraiture and CRT call for multi-layered representation of the people, place, and time by examining context and historical landscape when telling the story of actors in a setting (Chapman, 2005). Finally, CRT contests the post-positivist notion of the researcher as a detached, objective observer examining data points out of context and acknowledgement of history. Portraiture acknowledges the researcher’s leanings, identity and voice (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings, 2000) notes that Critical Race Theory requires the researcher to reveal who she is in the study and act with double-consciousness: “All of my ‘selves’ are invested in this work—the self that is a researcher, the self that is a parent, the self that is a community member, the self that is a Black woman” (p. 272). In a similar way, all of my selves are intertwined in this study: the self that is a Korean woman living in the South, the self that is a researcher, the self that is a parent, the self that develops principals for charter schools, the self that is a friend and mentor, and the self that is a colleague.

## **Assumptions**

This study will make the following assumptions:

1. The orientation of a charter school's founder's theoretical groundings and beliefs influences the school's policies and practices (Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005).
2. Charter schools with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students were established with an intention to serve that population. Charter schools in North Carolina are not required to provide transportation or cafeteria service, and can draw students from any part of the state (meaning, they do not have to be in the communities they intend to serve) (N.C. Charter School Law, 1996). Therefore, charter schools can be inaccessible to economically disadvantaged families because of where they choose to locate their school, by not offering transportation services to and from school, or by not providing cafeteria services to students—all of which can deter low-income families from accessing the school. Charter schools with disproportionately large economically disadvantaged populations are usually located in under-resourced communities, offer free school transportation, and/or offer cafeteria meals so that students participation in the National School Lunch Program. Charter schools in North Carolina with high economically disadvantaged populations should establish systems so that transportation, meals, nor location is a barrier for students to attend.
3. None of the participants—teachers, founders, staff members—were offered incentives to capture candid responses and observations.
4. Interviewees have been employees at the school for at least three years and understand the philosophical underpinnings of the design of the school.

## **Delimitations of the Study**

The study was limited by the following factors:

1. This study focuses on two charter schools with complete student enrollment.
2. The study is limited to schools with at least 70% or more economically disadvantaged students. Due to the transportation and cafeteria service exemptions for charter schools (see Assumptions), there are many schools with high student achievement that are disproportionately white and not economically disadvantaged relative to their local traditional public schools.
3. The study is limited to charter schools where the student grade level proficiency composite is greater than 70% in 2013-14 and 2014-15. In 2012-13 North Carolina replaced the ABCs of Public Education with the READY Accountability Model. These new assessments were aligned to college and career ready content standards. 2012-13 was the baseline for the new assessments' data and the accountability indicators' data. During 2014-15, Morris Charter and Lincoln College Preparatory were the only charter schools enrolled with at least 70% economically disadvantaged students and with 80% or more students that performed at or above grade level.
4. The study is limited to two charter schools with founders who have been working at the school since its inception. Principal longevity has been associated with lower teacher attrition and higher student achievement (Baker, 2007; Fuller, Orr, & Young, 2008; Fuller & Young, 2009; Fuller, Young, & Baker, 2007). Each year, 29% of charter school principals leave their positions (School Leader Network, 2014) with this rate being higher for those working in high poverty communities (Baker et al, 2010; Beteille et al, 2007; Gates et al, 2006; Papa, 2007; Partlow & Ridenour, 2008).

## Definition of Terms

1. Charter School—A public school approved by the State and run independently as its own Local Education Agency as a nonprofit organization. The school must comply with the applicable laws set forth by the State Board, including accountability measures.
2. Economically Disadvantaged Students—Eligibility for the free and reduced-lunch (FRL) program is determined by family income, since other markers of poverty (e.g. parent’s level of education, educational aspiration) may be more difficult to obtain through the Protection of Pupil Rights Act. The U.S. Department of Education and the Title I program uses FRL eligibility as a proxy for socioeconomic status (Hoffman, 2012). For example, for a family of four, an annual income less than \$31,525 qualifies for free and \$44,863 for reduced lunch (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015). The term “economically disadvantaged” is distinguished from the poverty threshold as defined by the U.S. Census which has a narrower definition [see “How the Census Bureau Measures Poverty” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016)].
3. Equity—Equitable schools actively acknowledge historical oppression and discrimination, and they make structural decisions and policies to rectify the inequitable access to power, resources, and opportunity for economically disadvantaged racial minority students. It is defined as follows:

Equity is seen as the state, quality, or ideal of social justice and fairness....A perspective of equity also acknowledges the unequal treatment of those who have been historically discriminated against based on their ability, parents' income, race, gender, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, sexuality, or home language, and supports the closure of gaps in academic achievement. (UNC School of Education, 2015).

4. Excellence—“Excellence entails a commitment to fully developing candidates, not only academically but also in moral and political senses,” (UNC School of Education, 2015). An excellent school not only achieves academically, but holds all children to high expectations

and designs school policies and procedures to ensure that students have access to full pursuit of life choices.

5. Founder—Also referred to as the school founder for the purposes of this study. The individual(s) who developed the mission of the charter school, completed the application approval process, created the school, and led the school in its founding years.
6. Goodness—Rather than terms like “success” or “effectiveness” which can be static or one-dimensional, “goodness” refers to, “the school’s ‘ethos’ .... It refers to the mixture of parts that produce a whole. The whole includes people, structures, relationships, ideology, goals, intellectual substance, motivation, and will,” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 23).
7. Portraiture—A social science inquiry method first designed and published by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) which is “distinctive in its blending of art and science, capturing the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life.” Portraiture places importance on capturing the aesthetic whole, including representing and balancing the context surrounding the story—historic, personal or even internal to the subject of the study (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In portraiture there are multiple meaning-makers, the producer (subject of the study), and the perceiver (the researcher). Through dialogue they co-construct meaning and negotiate their interpretation of what is being studied (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
8. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy—the three major domains of practice identified by Ladson-Billings (1994) that successful teacher of African-American students: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Ladson-Billings defines academic success as “the intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences;” Cultural competence is the teacher’s ability to “help

students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture,” and sociopolitical consciousness is “the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.75).

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Charter schools are a significant part of the national conversation about education reform. A review of literature suggests that much has been studied about their historical development, impact on policy, governance, student outcomes, and role in education reform initiatives. Yet a scarcity of research outside of dissertations elucidates the connection between charter school leadership and their impact on the schools' culture, systems, and instructional practices, especially among schools that serve predominantly racial minority students in economically disadvantaged communities. The goal of this literature review is three-fold: 1) to provide context on charter schools from a historical, national, and local perspective; 2) examine hallmarks of effective practices of charter schools that serve students of color, and 3) to utilize extant literature to create a framework for examining the school leader beliefs and practices that are essential for creating equitable and excellent charter schools.

### **Organization of Literature Review**

This chapter will begin with a broad, historical, and national perspective on charter schools. The first section examines the genesis of charter schools in the United States and how the movement has evolved over the last twenty years. This includes the arguments for and against charter schools, and the roles they have played in national education reform initiatives.

The schools selected for this research study took inspiration for the school's design and practice from the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools. Therefore, the second

section will review of the literature KIPP's student achievement outcomes, strengths and critiques of their schools.

Then shifting from the national perspective, the third section will focus on the history of charter schools in North Carolina and their position in the state's struggle with equity and integration especially in the last fifty years. This section will also examine literature that shows the changing landscape of charter schools in North Carolina and their performance over time.

The fourth section will discuss literature on charter school leadership and effective practices of charter schools in economically disadvantaged communities. This includes reviewing extant literature on the impact of school leaders on student achievement outcomes, charter school leadership practices, and characteristics of effective charter schools in economically disadvantaged communities.

The final section will discuss Critical Race Theory, the conceptual framework and its salient tenets used to analyze the findings of this study.

### **Charter Schools: A Historical and National Perspective**

Charter schools are public schools funded by local and state agencies and have considerably more autonomy from local and state regulations especially in student recruitment, curriculum, budget, and staffing (Nathan, 1997; U.S. Dept. of Education, 1997; Huffman, 1998). The concept of a charter school was first proposed by Ray Budde (Saulny, 2005), a former principal and education professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, as a model for reorganizing the structure of schools to increase teacher voice, autonomy, and agency in schooling practices (Budde, 1988).

In 1988, Albert Shanker, then President of the American Federation of Teachers, promoted the idea of charter schools as a new vision for schools that supports teacher autonomy

and professionalism (Shanker, 1988). Shanker proposed charter schools as a way for teachers to create a school within a school, to innovate, and to reform the traditional school system (Shanker, 1988; Ravitch, 2012). It drew further momentum when a group of business, community, and labor leaders, called the Citizens League, laid the groundwork for charter schools to make the traditional schools responsive and accountable to the public for change (Kolderie, 2010). The first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991 as a joint effort by the governor, teachers union, and community groups to initiate reform (Reichgott Junge, 2014; Kolderie, 2010).

After the first charter law was enacted in Minnesota, the movement spread rapidly across the United States. By 1996, 25 states enacted varying forms of charter laws (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1997). Currently, charter school legislation has been passed in 42 states and the District of Columbia and there are over 6000 charter schools across the country (Institute of Education Science, 2015).

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Table 1

*First States to Pass Charter School Laws 1991 – 1996 (Consoletti, 2012)*

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| 1991      | 1992       | 1993          | 1994    | 1995         | 1996        |
|-----------|------------|---------------|---------|--------------|-------------|
| Minnesota | California | Colorado      | Arizona | Alaska       | Connecticut |
|           |            | Georgia       | Hawaii  | Arkansas     | District of |
|           |            | Massachusetts | Kansas  | Delaware     | Columbia    |
|           |            | Michigan      |         | New          | Florida     |
|           |            | New Mexico    |         | Hampshire    | Illinois    |
|           |            | Wisconsin     |         | Louisiana    | New Jersey  |
|           |            |               |         | Rhode Island | North       |
|           |            |               |         | Wyoming      | Carolina    |
|           |            |               |         |              | South       |
|           |            |               |         |              | Carolina    |
|           |            |               |         |              | Texas       |

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### No Child Left Behind and the Next Wave of Charter Schools

Charter schools received a favorable push for growth during President George W. Bush's administration through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Stillings, 2005). According to NCLB, parents could opt into charter schools if their children attended schools that failed to demonstrate adequate yearly progress. In addition, it gave traditional public schools the option to convert into charter schools if they failed to meet student achievement outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). President Bush explicitly stated his support of charter schools, declaring he wanted to open charter schools in every state (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). While proponents of charter schools argued that requiring charter schools to demonstrate student performance and meet adequate yearly progress on state exams detracted their ability to practice autonomy and innovation (Hassel, 1999), others noted that this increased their accountability towards demonstrating equitable service especially for students of color (Stillings, 2005).

### Race to the Top and the Impact on Charter School Movement

Whereas President George W. Bush's administration promoted charter schools as vehicles for social mobility (Labaree, 1997) and liberty (Guthrie, Springer, Rolle, & Houck, 2006)<sup>3</sup> the Obama administration framed charters as vehicles for social justice and democratic equality. In advocating for the expansion of charter schools, Arne Duncan framed them as a necessary channel for school reform (Duncan, 2009b).

In a remark to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) in 2009, Secretary Duncan focused on using charter schools as a movement to turn-around the bottom 5% of public schools in the United States. He called the charter movement as, "one of the most profound changes in American education, bringing new options to underserved communities and

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<sup>3</sup> "The purpose of charter schools is to provide an alternative to parents and students who have been poorly served by their previous schools," (Paige, 2004)

introducing competition and innovation into the education system,” (Duncan, 2009). In his speech to the NAPCS a year later, Duncan underscored the Obama administration’s position that charter schools are vehicles for democratic equality for the poor, not social mobility for the wealthy (Duncan, U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

President Obama’s administration supported the expansion of charter schools through the Race to the Top (RTTT) Fund. The stated purpose of RTTT was to stimulate and reward states that were implementing innovative school reform that produced gains in student achievement and close the achievement gap. The four core reform areas were to: 1) create rigorous standards that prepare students for college and the workforce; 2) recruit, compensate, and retain effective teachers and administrators; 3) build data systems to track student achievement; 4) devise a plan to transform lowest performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

In addition to reforming existing traditional schools, charter schools were viewed as another way to bring innovation into public schools (Duncan, 2009). By highlighting charter schools that intentionally targeted and supported under-performing, urban, students of color like Uncommon Schools, Achievement First, and KIPP, the Obama administration accomplished three things: 1) they showed that students with high enrollment of economically disadvantaged students of color can achieve at high levels; 2) they provided a counter-narrative to the belief that charter schools perpetuate the status quo; and 3) they made a symbolic endorsement of charter schools that focused on social equity (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).

The lure of \$4.35 billion in RTTT competitive grants was an effective inducement that shifted values and created unlikely policy communities with bipartisan support (Weiss, 2015). Many state legislatures revised state laws to meet RTTT criteria and held special sessions to meet the deadline for Phase I. Some states invested up to \$1 million to submit multiple

applications; partisan groups compromised on educational policies to fulfill the application requirements (Wyatt, 2010). Nearly 40 out of 500 points in the RTTT award application was allocated towards policies that created favorable conditions for expanding charter schools. Race to the Top encouraged many states to revise five main components of charter school laws: 1) increase or remove caps on charters, 2) select authorizers to hold schools accountable, 3) equitably fund charter schools, 4) provide them with access to facilities, and 5) encourage LEAs to operate innovative schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Some pundits argue that Race to the Top strong-armed states to adopt federal education policies (Weiss, 2015; Weiss, 2016). Others argue that RTTT improved educational standards and assessments, teacher evaluation methods, and school choice (Weiss, 2015).

### Types of Charter Schools

Although nearly 70% of charter schools run as independent entities, 15% of charter schools are run by charter management organizations (CMO) and 12.5% are run by education management organizations (EMO). CMOs provide a range of services to support economy of scale, including professional development, vendor contracts, publicity, data analysis, advocacy, or hiring; they operate as not-for-profit organizations (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011). For example, the KIPP Foundation, the largest CMO in the nation currently serves over 200 schools and 80,000 students in under-resourced urban and rural communities (KIPP, 2016). EMOs, which are for-profit organizations, earn income through venture capital, tax funds, and/or fee for services from the centralized services that they provide. Imagine Schools, one of the largest EMOs serves 67 schools and 36,000 students in 11 states around the country (Imagine Schools, 2014). Reports shows that Michigan and Arizona have the most number of charter schools managed by for-profit EMOs (Miron, 2011).

## Student Achievement Outcomes in Charter Schools

The literature shows mixed results on the impact of charter schools on student outcomes (Brickmore & Dowell, 2015; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010; Miron, 2011; Zimmer R. G., 2009). The research on academic effectiveness of charter schools remains contested due to methodological differences on the size of the sample (Frankenberg, 2011) or the groups used to compare against charter school results (Henig J. , 2008; MacIver & Farley-Ripple, 2007; Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014; McDonald, Ross, Abney, & Zoblotzky, 2008). Most studies about charter schools are limited to one state, city, or district since achievement test data vary by locality (Frankenberg, 2011).

Studies that focused on charter schools and achievement outcomes by city or state show mixed results (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2005; Witte, Weimer, Shober, & Schlomer, 2007; Abdulkadiroğlu, Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, & Pathak, 2011; Angrist & Dynarski, 2012). For example, in a highly regarded a multi-year study of the impact of “oversubscribed” charter schools in New York City compared the student achievement of “lotteried in” students (those who randomly earned a position at the school via a lottery) versus those who “lotteried out” (those who did not earn a spot through the random lottery) (Hoxby, Murarka, and Kang 2009). Hoxby et al (2009) found student achievement gains for charter school students in grades 4 through 8 that were enough to close the “Scarsdale-Harlem” achievement gap. Similarly, for black students who attend the Harlem Children Zone (HCZ) charter schools, Dobbie and Fryer (2011a) found the HCZ middle school nearly closed the black-white achievement gap in mathematics, and for students who attended the HCZ elementary school; their math and English language arts achievement gap nearly closed. In a study of charter

schools in Boston, Abdulkadiroğlu et al. (2011) found significant positive effects of charter schools on student achievement.

On the other hand, a study of all charter schools in North Carolina between 1997 and 2002 showed negative gains for students who attended charter schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). A study of Texas charter schools between the same period also showed that the average quality of charter schools was not much different than traditional public schools (Hanushek et al., 2005). A study of charter schools in Minnesota showed that there was no relationship between the charter school's student achievement outcomes and their authorizing agency—whether it was a local school board, universities, non-profits, or the state board of education (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2012).

Following the trend of state-level charter school studies, two nation-wide studies of charter schools—a longitudinal study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) (2009) and a study by Mathematica Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Education (2010) also showed variable results on the impact of charter schools. In CREDO's study (2009), the impact of charter schools on individual student achievement was tracked over time and controlled for characteristics at the student level—as opposed to the school-level. Their study spanned students from 15 states and the District of Columbia and showed varied effectiveness of charters by state. Of their schools in the study, just 17% of charter school students posted higher growth than traditional schools, whereas 37% of charter schools posted gains that were significantly lower than traditional schools (CREDO, 2009). Although the difference was small, CREDO (2009) suggested that in states with a wide variety of charter school operators, applicants target more permissive authorizers for oversight. In another study of 632 charter schools in seven states showed different student achievement results based on the

assumption models they used (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, & Witte, 2012). Zimmer et al (2012) suggest that since charter school policies vary greatly from state to state, including the organizations that authorize their creation; the type of authorizer could potentially lead to variations in performance. Mathematica's study of 36 charter middle schools in 15 states showed that they were generally not more successful than traditional public schools in improving math or reading test scores, attendance, grade promotion or student conduct, but it did raise parent and student satisfaction with schools (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010).

In summary, smaller scale studies that focus on a city, for example, show greater positive effects of charter schools, whereas larger scale studies that examine schools across the state or nation show mixed results. Overall, charter schools are not monolithic in nature.

### Critiques of Charter Schools

In the 1990s, two major arguments favored the growth of charter schools. First, it was considered an opportunity to create competition and improve educational reform in public schools (Huffman, 1998; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lubienski, 2003). Early supporters viewed charters to give parents more control over educational decisions and empower them to act as consumers by creating market-like conditions for schools to improve or lose "business" with families (Goldhaber, 1999; Stillings, 2005; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Some argued that charter schools provide choice for low-income families to separate the impact of housing and schooling and for urban families to avoid the impact of "white flight" (Greene, 1998; Hoxby, 1998). Others noted this as an opportunity to leverage private funds to create choice and opportunity for families:

After decades of segregation and desegregation that resulted in persistent trends of underachievement, the educational climate was ripe for charter schools to leverage private resources to fund public options for families and learners from

ethnically diverse backgrounds in search of equity and social justice. (Shealy, Thomas, & Sparks, 2012, p. 16)

Although charter school proponents argue that charter schools can be more innovative because they have greater autonomy (Budde, 1988; Kolderie, 2010), a meta-review of literature on innovation in charter schools shows that there is limited and mixed evidence on charter schools' innovations beyond teacher tenure practices (Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012).

Critiques of charter schools have focused on their lack of accountability to parents, the community, students, and their impact on traditional public school systems at-large (Goldhaber, 1999; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Ravitch, 2012; Miron, 2011; Scott, 2009; Henry & Dixson, 2016). Critics suggest that parents may be happier to choose the schools they desire, but choice does not guarantee delivery of higher quality of educational outcomes (Goldhaber, 1999). In recent years, three major critiques of how charter schools achieve their results and their greater impact on the public educational system have surfaced. The following sections will address the major arguments surrounding charter schools: their role in increasing the segregation of public schools, "creaming" top students for enrollment, and their role in the market-based education reform and the privatization of public schooling.

*Segregating effect of charter schools.* Charter schools can offer parental choice for children attending low-performing schools in economically disadvantaged areas and can create competition for traditional schools to stimulate improvement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2000). Unfortunately, the demographically inequitable enrollment of students, especially the increasing racial isolation of students across the nation in charter schools, has been well documented (Frankenberg E. S.-H., 2010; Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014).

In *The New Institutionalism in Education*, Meyer argues that public schools have lost their unifying mission. “[The American school] no longer knows what to strive for. In the face of great cultural, ethnic, and religious plurality, it does not know what kind of community it is supposed to engender,” (Meyer, 2006, p. 61). Therefore, as public schools fail to deliver in their role as the “American dream machine” (Meyer, 2006, p. 65), they lose their legitimacy as the pathway for securing a place in society (Meyer, 2006). Thus, families that are not a part of the dominant class will look for choice, control, and voice in their children’s schooling. That is, rather than participating in a dialogue to change schools, they will look towards alternate educational institutions that compensate for the inadequacies in the public system.

For families of color in economically disadvantaged areas, charter schools are an alternative to the failing traditional public schools in their neighborhoods (Barnes, 1997; Fuller & Elmore, 1996) and offer an answer to closing the achievement gap (Merseth, 2009). For education reformers, charter schools are seen as the opportunity to reclaim “unfinished civil rights” for communities that are educationally underserved (Renzulli, 2006). For parents who have traditionally been marginalized, charter schools offer the opportunity for more accountability, opportunity, and voice in their children’s education (Anderson, 1988, Shujaa, 1992; Duncan, 2010; Merseth, 2009). At the same time, a study on the impact of charter schools in the state of Michigan shows that charter school programs worsened conditions for students who remained in traditional schools. Movement of students out of traditional schools intensified “the isolation of disadvantaged students in less effective urban schools serving a high concentration of similarly disadvantaged students,” (Ni, 2010, p. 217).

Both white and minority parents want high quality educational experiences for their children (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). Studies show that parents select schools

based on the school's test scores and instructional quality (Armor & Peier, 1998; Klietz et al., 2000) and alignment with their values (Merseeth, 2009). Yet, how they prioritize criteria for selecting schools varies by race and class (Kleitz, 2000; Henig, 1994; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996). College-educated parents are more likely to enroll children in segregated environments than racially integrated environments (Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2008) and economically advantaged parents are more sensitive to the quality of charter schools (therefore more likely to de-enroll their child based on quality) than low-income parents (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2005).

It is well-documented that white, wealthy, and college-educated families will avoid neighborhood schools if those schools have a high percentage of minority students (Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Henig J. , 1994). Bifulco and Ladd's (2007) study in North Carolina showed that parents tended to enroll their children in schools with more students in racial groups like themselves. Their study showed that black parents tended to enroll in racially balanced schools (40% to 60% black students), whereas white parents transferred out of schools that had 28% or more black students, and enrolled their children in schools with an average of 18% black students. In fact, "once a school becomes 'too black,' it becomes almost all black as white parents avoid it," (Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015, p. 11).

Overall, the increasing racial segregation of charter schools, the high enrollment of racial minorities in urban spaces, and the increasing enrollment of white, non-economically disadvantaged students in suburban spaces, have drawn significant criticisms of charter schools.

*Creaming the best students.* Criticisms of charter schools center on their "creaming" the best students and teachers and leaving traditional schools as "dumping grounds" for disadvantaged students who are left behind (Goldhaber, 1999; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014;

Frankenberg E. S.-H., 2010; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007). In an extensive study of charter schools in 40 states, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang (2010) suggest that despite small examples of diverse and equitable charter schools, most charter schools are racially segregated with high concentrations of racial minority students. This has been reiterated by multiple studies (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Ladd et al., 2015; Bonastia, 2013; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). One in four charter schools do not report data on low-income students and English language-learners (ELL) (Frankenberg et al., 2010), and charter schools serve fewer students with disabilities than traditional public schools (Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2007; Hehir, 2010).

Though difficult to document, Noguera (2014) suggests that parents of students with special needs may sometimes be counseled out of charter schools even after being accepted through the lottery. Since charter school policies vary by state, only small-scale studies have been conducted to test this hypothesis, such as Ritter's study of charter schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, (2012) which did not see such an effect. In a report of charter schools in New York City, schools with some of the highest reports of student achievement results had student attrition rates as high as 84% each year (Fertig & Ye, 2016). At Success Academy schools, the largest charter network in New York City with reportedly some of the highest student achievement results, Fertig and Ye (2016) found that the organization had a 57% student attrition rate during the 2013-14 school year. An investigation by The New York Times found that leaders at several schools created "Got to Go" list of students, as in students who needed to be counseled out of the Success Academy schools (Taylor, 2015).

Overall, while some argue that parents have the choice to enroll their children in charter schools with the best fit, critics argue that this is the luxury of charter schools—to serve whom

they want to serve and to send those who do not fit into their program back to traditional schools (E. Brown, 2013).

*Neoliberal education reform.* Neoliberalism is a philosophy that espouses the beneficial effects of the free market, especially when applied to economic and political policies (Fish, 2009). It is based on the belief that privatization and market-based systems can create competition, stimulate innovation, and improve the quality of services delivered, especially those from public institutions such as education (Sondel, 2016). Scholars argue that the Obama administration accelerated the privatization efforts by President Bush by launching a neoliberal approach to education reform such as Race to the Top which awarded additional funding to schools to stimulate innovation which included the expansion of charter schools (Scott, 2011; Giroux, 2009; Ravitch, 2012). The belief undergirding the movement is that bureaucracies, such as traditional school districts, have little motivation to change, therefore by opening the marketplace to charter schools and removing government regulation, charter schools can innovate and produce higher quality outcomes (Scott, 2011; Chapman & Donnor, 2015). Since 60% of charter schools are in urban areas compared to 25% of traditional public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), critics argue that market-based reforms have an inequitable and disproportionately higher impact on students of color than white, non-economically disadvantaged students (Lipman & Haines, 2007). For example, in New York City, black and Latino students make up 92% of charter school students (56% black, 36% Latino) (New York City Charter Center, 2015).

*Instruments of privatization in education reform.* More recently, scholars argue that charter schools have become instruments of market-based education reform movements to privatize education where businesses and billionaires play a heavy hand in shaping public policy

(Ravitch, 2010; Ravitch, 2012; Ravitch, 2013; Dixon, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015; Pitre & Allen, 2015).

Charter schools have also been named as a beneficiary of “venture philanthropy” (Blodget, 2008; Scott, 2009) of billionaire funders who influence educational leaders and policy makers who support large-scale expansion of successful charter school models (Lake, 2007) and move towards privatizing of public schools (Ravitch, 2010; Pitre & Allen, 2015). KIPP, for example, has received funding from major venture philanthropists such as The Broad Education Foundation, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. It was founded with initial investment by the Donald and Doris Fisher Fund (Scott, 2009).

Most notably, in New Orleans where nearly 92% of public schools are charters, Dixon, Buras, and Jeffers (2015) noted that education entrepreneurs have been backed by venture philanthropists to take over traditional public schools. Buras (2015) argues that education reform activities in post-Katrina New Orleans have been taken over by predominantly white education entrepreneurs who believed that providing families with choice to select schools outside of the traditional public schools that have been “long harmed by a state monopoly on education,” (p.37). In the same process, scholars point out that charter school reform movements have shifted the racial composition of teachers and leaders; many black teachers and leaders were replaced with white, inexperienced teachers (Buras, 2015; Dixon et al., 2015).

## **Summary**

Despite arguments supporting and detracting the impact of charter schools, they are growing rapidly with favorable press reviews (Matthews, 2009; Isaacson, 2007; Tough, 2008; Buras, 2015; Kaminski, 2011), substantial funding from philanthropists, and policy

endorsements from Presidents (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Reichgott Junge, 2014). The number of schools has steadily risen between 6-9% each year between 2004 and 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Between 2002 and 2012, the number of students enrolled in charter schools has grown by nearly 240% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). In cities like Lincoln, D.C. where 44% of students attend charter schools (DC Public Charter School Board, 2015) and in New Orleans where 92% of public schools are charter (Louisiana Department of Education, 2014), there is a need for qualitative and quantitative scholarship that examines the impact of charter schools on students, public school systems, and the community at-large.

### **Knowledge is Power Program**

The Knowledge is Power Program, KIPP, was founded in 1994 in Houston by two alumni of Teach For America, a not-for-profit organization that recruits college graduates to teach for two years in high poverty communities. In 1994, Michael Feinberg and David Levin, started the first KIPP Academy in Houston where they completed their commitment to Teach For America as fifth grade teachers. A year later, David Levin started a second KIPP Academy in the South Bronx. These two schools were among the highest performing schools in their communities and were featured on *60 Minutes* which attracted the attention of Donald and Doris Fisher, the founders of The Gap Company (KIPP, 2016; Matthews, 2009). In 2000, the KIPP Foundation was established to train new school leaders and open schools around the country.

The mission of the KIPP network of schools is to focus on serving students in “educationally underserved communities” (KIPP, 2016). Nationally, 88% of students enrolled in KIPP receive free and reduced lunch and 95% students are black or Latino. It is currently the largest network of charter school network in the nation. The mission of the KIPP Foundation is

“to create a respected, influential, and national network of public schools that are successful in helping students from educationally underserved communities develop the knowledge, skills, character and habits needed to succeed in college and the competitive world beyond,” (KIPP, 2015). The KIPP Foundation does not manage or operate KIPP schools. As a CMO, it provides resources for recruiting, training, and providing professional development to its leaders and staff members, as well as resources for college counseling, curriculum development, and monitoring the quality of KIPP schools (KIPP, 2016). KIPP schools are locally governed and operated by regional offices. Each of the 30 KIPP regions has a central office, a local board and a local executive director. KIPP schools abide by the laws of their local authorizer—a school board, university, or state education board—and are held accountable to state and local standards. Since 1995, KIPP has grown over 200 schools around the country serving over 80,000 students (Figure 2).

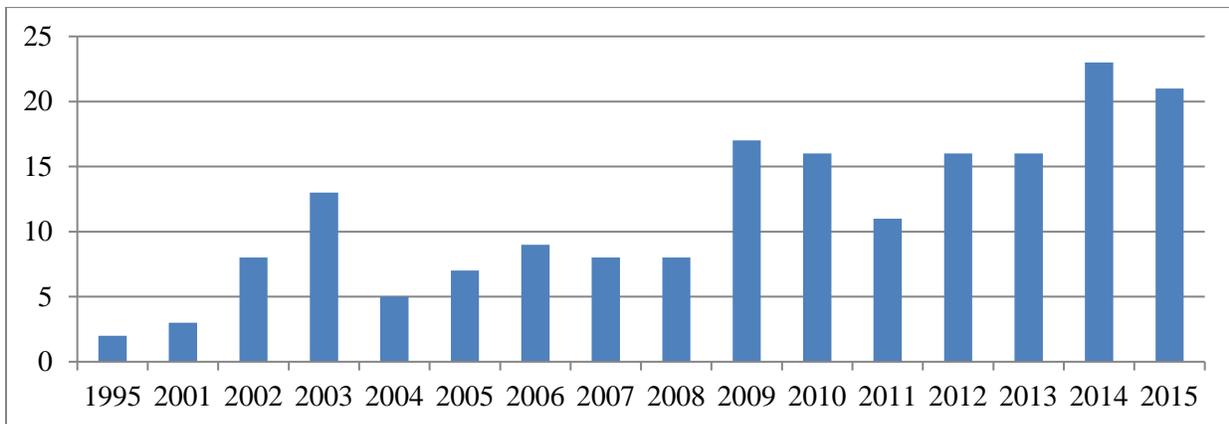


Figure 2. Number of KIPP schools opened each year, 1995-2015

Although KIPP is the largest network of charter schools, it serves a relatively small proportion of students in public schools throughout the nation. In the latest report by National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 2.2 million students were enrolled in charter schools

during 2012-13, 40,000 of which attended KIPP schools which is 1.7% and less than 0.1% of all students in public schools in the United States.

### Review of Relevant Literature on KIPP

Given that the two subjects for this study are modeled after KIPP schools, relevant literature on KIPP school models were reviewed. In selecting the literature to review for this study, I focused on studies that met the following delimitations:

- Research that was conducted in the last ten years (2006 – 2016)
- Studies that compare KIPP and non-KIPP students' prior achievement levels to measure the effect of attending KIPP (Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014).

The reason for the first criteria is that KIPP is a relatively young organization and it has experienced more rapid growth in the last ten years. Henig's (2008) review of early empirical studies of KIPP schools showed that many early studies drew data from one school.

The reason for the second criteria is that although strong experimental design studies have strong internal validity, studies that focus on one or two KIPP schools have limited external validity (Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014; Henig J. , 2008). Therefore, I focused on studies that used methods such as propensity score matching that compared KIPP students to matched group of traditional public school students in neighboring districts with similar characteristics (Angrist & Dynarski, 2012; Tuttle, et al., 2015; Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014; Woodworth, David, Guha, Wang, & Lopez-Torkos, 2008).

*Student achievement.* Studies that examined student achievement outcomes of KIPP schools have generally shown positive results for students in mathematics and reading (Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011; Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014; Angrist & Dynarski, 2012; Tuttle, et al., 2015) (See Table 2). Some point to serious methodological flaws

in early studies (MacIver & Farley-Ripple, 2007; McDonald, Ross, Abney, & Zoblotsky, 2008) that found high student achievement results of KIPP schools (Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014) citing their use of broad comparison groups and not accounting for KIPP and non-KIPP students' prior achievement levels in measuring the effects of KIPP.

Critics of KIPP have noted that the most reliable, comprehensive, and rigorous studies of KIPP's achievement have been conducted by Mathematica Policy Research (Miron et al., 2011). The most recent study showed that KIPP elementary schools have positive and statistically significant impact on three of four measures of reading and mathematics based on tests administered three years after students entered the school (Tuttle, et al., 2015). KIPP middle schools demonstrate significant impact on student achievement in math, reading, science and social studies (Tuttle, Gill, Gleason, Knechtel, Nichols-Barrer, & Resch, 2013). Whereas KIPP high schools have a positive impact for students who are new to the network but do not produce statistically significant results for students who continue from middle school (Tuttle, et al., 2015). The studies did not focus on the schools' leadership or school-wide practices that led to these results.

*Student selection, attrition, and replacement and impact on achievement.* Critics attribute three factors for how KIPP attains its student achievement results. First, some scholars of attributed KIPP's achievement results to selecting more capable students with more resourced parents who take the step to enroll their children in charter (Miron et al., 2011; Kahlenberg R. , 2011). Secondly, scholars attributed KIPP's success to its high rate of student attrition, that is students who started the school in year one and leave (Miron et al., 2011; Kahlenberg R. , 2011). If the characteristics of the students who leave are weaker (Woodworth, David, Guha, Wang, &

Lopez-Torkos, 2008) then the lack of replacement of those students results in smaller cohorts with higher achieving students may skew the results (Kahlenberg, 2011).

Early studies of KIPP schools focused on schools in their first or second year of operation (Henig, 2008) and were limited to examining several schools. In an analysis of seven empirical published studies on KIPP schools between 2002 and 2007, Henig (2008) notes that KIPP schools attract mostly economically disadvantaged non-white students who performed poorly before they entered KIPP and there was no evidence of selection bias of KIPP schools. That said, Henig (2008) notes that students who tend to leave KIPP schools performed lower than those who stayed. Few studies, at the time, had sufficient data to make the claim that attrition accounts for KIPP's high performance. That said, Henig (2008) argues that these earlier studies did not utilize randomized field trials (RFTs), the "gold standard" (p.4) for testing internal validity of results, in order to explain the outcomes of the treatment group (KIPP students) versus a control group that did not attend KIPP schools.

A study of 41 KIPP middle schools showed that KIPP schools served 20% more minority students (96% minority overall) than neighboring district schools (72% minority) (Tuttle et.al, 2013). In addition, 84% of KIPP students qualified for free and reduced lunch compared to 64% on average in neighboring school districts. That said, KIPP schools served fewer limited English proficient (LEP) students (6% KIPP versus 12% of local school districts) and special education (SPED) students (9% KIPP versus 12% local school districts) (Tuttle, et al., 2013). The same study which used randomized control trial study examining patterns among lotteried students, showed that KIPP schools varied widely in their student attrition rates, but on average were not systematically greater or lower than their local school districts (Tuttle, et al., 2013). Academic achievement-wise, KIPP middle schools scored 0.02 standard deviations lower than students

from the same feeder schools in mathematics and 0.01 standard deviations lower in reading when they started school. In terms of replacement, Tuttle et al (2013) found that KIPP schools replacement rates are comparable to local school districts' rates, except that KIPP schools admitted far more students in grades five and six than local school districts, and admitted far less students in grade eight.

Table 2

*Review of Relevant Empirical Research on KIPP Schools*

| Authors/<br>Date  | Level/<br>Study<br>Design   | Sample/<br>Comparison Group   | Measure(s)   | Results   | Net<br>Effect | Key Factors that Impact<br>Achievement  |
|---|---|---|--|---|---------------|---|
| SRI<br>International<br>(2008)                                  | Regional<br>matched<br>comparison<br>group studied<br>over 3-year<br>period | 3 KIPP Schools in<br>San Francisco Bay<br>Area<br><br>matched set of<br>students at<br>traditional public<br>school | Reading<br>Math<br>From<br>California<br>Standards<br>Test<br><br>Stanford<br>Achievem<br>ent Test | Positive effect on math<br>(0.16 to 0.68 standard<br>deviations in reading, and<br>0.19 to 0.88 standard<br>deviations in math)<br>above-average progress<br>compared with national<br>norms outperform local<br>traditional school districts | Positive      | Student enrollment declines<br>after the sixth grade; 60% of<br>students who entered in fifth<br>grade left before the end of<br>eighth grade. Two KIPP<br>schools had large attrition<br>rates: 22% and 50%<br>Students who left KIPP<br>before completing eighth<br>grade had lower test scores<br>on entering KIPP and<br>demonstrate smaller fifth-<br>grade effects than those who<br>stay |
| Angrist,<br>Dynarski,<br>Kane, Pathak,<br>and Walters<br>(2010) | Local<br><br>QED<br>Student level<br>comparison<br><br>Randomized<br>trial  | One school – KIPP<br>Lynn, MA<br><br>Matched students<br>compared with<br>students in Lynn<br>Public Schools        | Math<br>ELA<br>State<br>assessment   | KIPP Lynn generated<br>substantial score gains for<br>lottery winners, with<br>effects on the order of<br>0.35 $\sigma$ for math and 0.12 $\sigma$<br>for ELA   | Positive      | KIPP Lynn raises<br>achievement<br><i>more</i> for weaker students<br><br>Lottery winners were about<br>as likely as losers to change<br>schools in grades 6–8  |



## **Charter Schools in North Carolina**

### Struggle with Segregation in Choice Schools

In southern states, school choice has meant opportunity for minority families to seek better schools outside of their low-performing neighborhood schools and a vehicle for white families to opt out of integrated schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Myers, 2004). When the Supreme Court demanded integration of public schools in 1968, schools in the Southern states responded with an insurgence of segregated private academies to give white families the “choice” to attend non-integrated schools. Otherwise called “freedom academies,” these private schools grew from 300,000 to 500,000 schools between 1968 and 1970 when schools in the South were ordered to integrate (Myers, 2004).

In North Carolina, most of these schools grew in the Eastern North Carolina counties of Edgecombe, Halifax, and Nash (Myers, 2004) where demographically whites were minorities in their communities. In 1964, Halifax County Schools created a “freedom of choice” plan to require families in the all-black Chaloner School, to request a transfer to white schools through the board of education if they wanted to enroll in integrated schools, rather than requiring all students to attend integrated schools. Halifax County created three school districts within its boundaries - Halifax County Public Schools and Weldon City Schools (nearly 100% non-white) and Roanoke Rapids Graded School District (70% white) (Dorosin, et al, 2011).

On the western part of the state, concerns about segregation in public schools led to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971) where the school system implemented a busing system to integrate its schools. The policy was in effect until 2000 which the courts determined that Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools had reached “unitary” status and released them from judicial oversight (Dorosin, Haddix, Jones, &

Trice, 2011). Since then, Charlotte-Mecklenberg schools created a “neighborhood school” policy which reversed its busing system to integrate schools. A recent study of Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools by Williams and Houck (2013) showed that the level of segregation in schools has doubled in nine years since schools stopped its integration busing plan.

### A Rise of Charter Schools

When North Carolina Republicans first introduced a bill for charter schools in the mid-1990s to promote parental choice in public schooling, Democrats and advocates for the poor and minorities strongly opposed for fear of creating publicly funded white “freedom academies” like the ones that emerged in the 1970s (Ladd et al., 2015). Republicans offered an alternative: school vouchers to allow parents to pay for private schools of their choice. For Democrats, charter schools were a less detrimental option than vouchers (Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015; Schulz, 2014) which resulted in a bipartisan supported bill called the Charter School Act (CSA) sponsored by Senator Wib Gulley (D-Durham) and Representative Steve Wood (R-Guilford) that created charter schools in North Carolina in 1996 (Schulz, 2014).

The original goals of the Charter School Act stated that charter schools were to:

1. Improve student learning;
2. Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for student who are identified as at risk of academic failure or academically gifted;
3. Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods;
4. Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunities to be responsible for the learning at the school site;
5. Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system; and
6. Hold the schools established under this legislation accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results, and provide the schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems. (Charter School Act § 115C-218, 1996; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016).

The original law stated that no more than 100 charter schools could operate in the State in a given year. In its first year, 34 schools opened in 1997 and 21 of those original schools currently operate in the 2015-16 school year (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016).

In North Carolina, charter schools are open to all students regardless of residential location, yet schools are not required to provide transportation to all students. The law requires that enrollment of students should “reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the general population residing within the local school administrative unit” (Charter School Act § 115C-218, 1996).

#### A Window for Revising Charter School Law in North Carolina

The cap on charter schools stood at 100 schools in North Carolina, and various lobbying groups advocated for removing the cap for many years (Schulz, 2014). Race to the Top, however, created a policy window for Republicans, charter advocates, and Democrats to revise this clause. Although Democrats were usually not in favor of expanding charter schools, the lobbying groups that pushed Senate Bill 8 were led by conservative organizations (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Ladd et al., 2015). Organizations like the NC Family Policy Council, the John Locke Foundation, and the NC Alliance for Public Charter Schools, emphasized values such as choice and opportunity thus framing education in terms of a private good or commodity (Labaree, 1997) that individuals should be able to control. On the other hand, Democratic-leaning organizations such as NC Association of Educators, the NC School Boards Association, and Legislative Black Caucus were cautious about the continued segregating effects of charter schools and becoming segregated private schools (Geary, 2011).

Bonner (2011) argues that conservative backers wanted the Senate bill to include provisions for an independent charter school authorizer, rather than the State Board of Education

in addition to asking for funding for facilities from the county and revenue from the education lottery. On the other hand, liberals wanted to require charter schools to provide transportation and free and reduced lunch services to ensure equitable access for diverse student populations. In the end, neither groups attained their desired elements (Bonner, 2011). The bill passed 45-0 in the Senate and 108-5 in the House, with just five Democrats opposing the bill.

The amended law allowed the State Board of Education to remove the cap on 100 schools and allowed existing schools to increase enrollment by 20% each year without approval from the State Board (General Assembly of North Carolina, Session Law 2011-164, Senate Bill 8, 2011). In 2010, about 38,000 students were enrolled in 100 charter schools. By 2015, there were 158 charter schools in the state serving nearly 78,000 students in the state (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016).

### The Changing Landscape of Charter Schools in North Carolina

By law, charter schools can draw students from multiple school districts and are not limited by school zones. They are required however to ensure that the racial and ethnic composition of the schools reasonably reflect the population residing within the local school administrative unit (Charter School Act § 115C-218, 1996). Charter schools may target specific populations of students to fulfill its mission that was approved by the State Board of Education to do.

In a recent report to the General Assembly (2016), the NC Department of Public Instruction stated that, “There is no mechanism by which schools can guarantee racial and ethnic balance, however, nor is there an official consequence for not achieving it” (p.7). In the early years, black students were overrepresented in charter schools yet after the cap was removed, the trend reversed with greater proportion of charter schools serving white students (Ladd et al.,

2015; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016). In a study of the changing racial and socio-economic composition of student enrollment since the removal of the cap on charter schools, Ladd et al., (2015) noted two key trends: the increase of white majority charter schools and the increase of non-economically disadvantaged students enrolling in charter schools.

*Increase of white majority charter schools.* Ladd et al (2015) noted that the enrollment of whites in charter schools increased from 58.6% to 62.2% while their enrollment in traditional schools declined from 64.1% to 53.0%. Between 1998 and 2014, the share of predominantly white charter schools had nearly doubled from 24.2% to 47.1%. Meanwhile, schools with predominantly non-white students (80% or greater) have declined by nearly 10%. Schools with minority students have closed in greater numbers while charters with high proportions of white students have increased. Specifically, 11 out of 12 schools that closed served disproportionately more students of color whereas 13 out of 19 schools that opened between 2005 and 2012 had disproportionately higher percentage of white students than their local educational agency (Ladd et al., 2015).

*Increase of non-economically disadvantaged student enrollment.* Since the removal of the cap on charter schools, more than half of charter schools in North Carolina had fewer than 40% of economically disadvantaged students (Figure 3) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In contrast, fewer than 17% of traditional schools have less than 40% of economically disadvantaged students. Most traditional schools have more than 50% of economically disadvantaged students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The most recent report by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2016) showed that 55% of students in traditional schools were economically disadvantaged compared to 37% of charter schools.

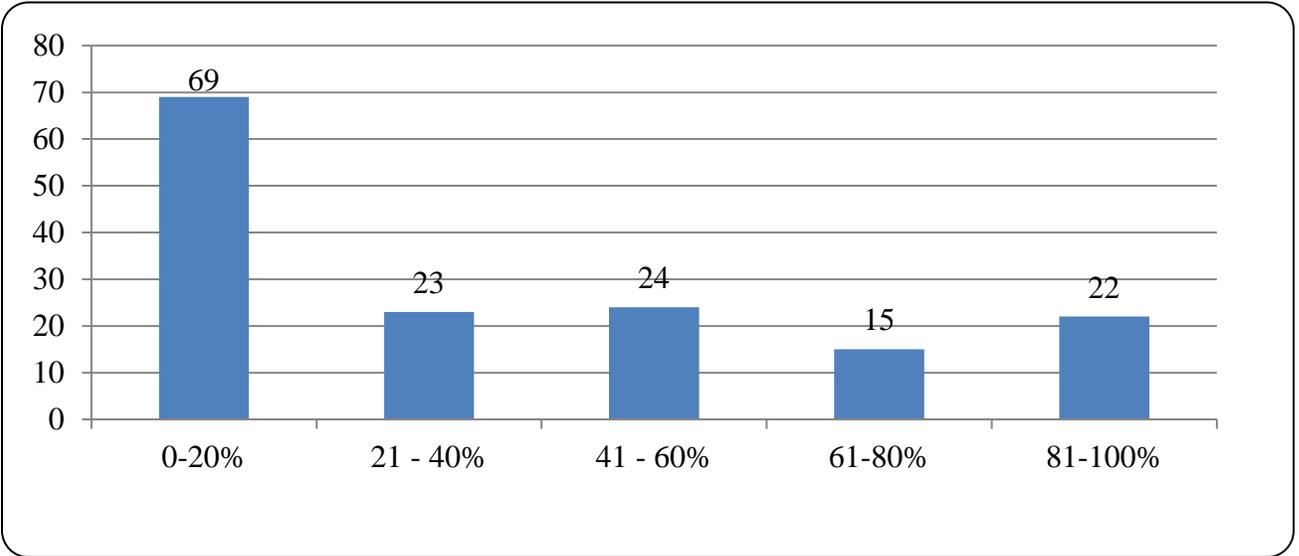


Figure 3. Distribution of North Carolina charter schools by percentage of economically disadvantaged students served 2014-15 (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015)

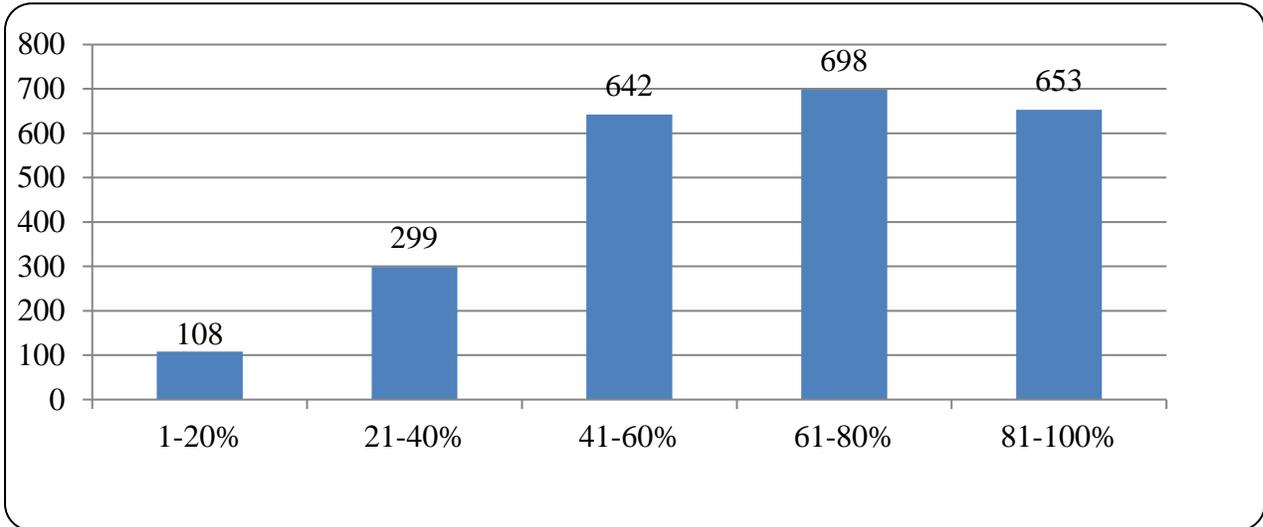


Figure 4. Distribution of North Carolina traditional public schools by percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch in 2014-15 (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016)

## Charter School Practices that Promote Equitable Access for Enrollment

In North Carolina, each charter school is required to develop a plan so that transportation is not a barrier for students who live in the district. In addition, the state policy requires that the student body population reflects the racial and ethnic composition of the neighboring area. The law does not quantify what a reasonable composition should look like, nor specify a process for annually evaluating its enrollment numbers. Although the State Board of Education requires every charter school to develop a transportation plan, charter schools are not required to provide transportation to students (Charter School Act § 115C-218, 1996). Charter schools may develop a contract with local county district to transport students, but local districts can deny that request. As a cost-savings measure, most charter schools choose not to provide transportation services, and redistribute those funds to cover the cost of facilities and general operations.

States where charter schools are enrolled mostly by white and non-economically disadvantaged students also have charter rules where charter schools are not required to provide transportation to students. Nevada, Utah, South Carolina, Virginia, Alaska, Arizona, and North Carolina, charter schools are mostly enrolled by white and non-economically disadvantaged students (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2009). Incidentally, these states, including Alaska, Maryland, and Wyoming, do not provide or require charter schools to provide transportation to all students (Table 3).

Table 3

*Summary Information of Charter School Enrollment in Ten States without Transportation Requirements, (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2009).*

| State          | Percent of Non-Economically Disadvantaged Students |                 | Percent of White Students |                 | Percent of Black Students |                 | Percent of Latino Students |                 |
|----------------|--|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
|                | TPS  | Charter Schools | TPS                       | Charter Schools | TPS                       | Charter Schools | TPS                        | Charter Schools |
| North Carolina | 56.1   | 69.0            | 53.9                      | 61.6            | 31.1                      | 31.1            | 11.1                       | 4.2             |
| South Carolina | 44.5   | 91.2            | 53.3                      | 62.8            | 36.6                      | 28.5            | 5.8                        | 2.5             |
| Virginia       | 63.5   | 86.6            | 56.0                      | 79.3            | 25.4                      | 11.7            | 9.4                        | 4.5             |
| Utah           | 63.6   | 84.6            | 78.4                      | 82.8            | 1.5                       | 1.7             | 14.7                       | 9.6             |
| Nevada         | 55.6   | 92.0            | 41.3                      | 54.3            | 11.1                      | 18.3            | 37.8                       | 18.7            |
| Alaska         | 62.6   | 87.8            | 52.6                      | 66.6            | 3.8                       | 2.6             | 5.9                        | 5.3             |
| Arizona        | 43.9   | 66.9            | 43.4                      | 49.3            | 5.7                       | 7.8             | 42.3                       | 34.3            |
| Arkansas       | n/a  | n/a             | n/a                       | n/a             | n/a                       | n/a             | n/a                        | n/a             |
| Maryland*      | 59.0   | 31.7            | 45.9                      | 12.4            | 37.3                      | 80.6            | 10.1                       | 5.5             |
| Wyoming**      | 64.8   | 49.4            | 81.6                      | 51.0            | 1.1                       | 2.7             | 12.1                       | 7.3             |

\* In Maryland, charter schools located in Baltimore receive transportation services through Baltimore City Public Schools. Most black students (79%) enrolled in charter schools from the state of Maryland are in Baltimore.

\*\* In Wyoming, Native Americans constitute 36.4% of students in charter schools.

#### Academic Performance of North Carolina Charter Schools

Among the 47 charter schools in operation during the 2014-15 school year where greater than 50% of its students are economically disadvantaged, only eight schools had a performance composite of 60% or higher (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016). Among these eight schools, Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter are significantly above the 60% threshold with 73% and 100% of students economically disadvantaged, respectively (Table 4).

Table 4

*Performance Composite of Charter School Students by Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Status in 2014-15 (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015)*

| School Name                 | Performance Composite | Economically Disadvantaged Students | Year Founded |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| School A                    | 12.5                  | 100%                                | 2014         |
| School B                    | 17.8                  | 97%                                 | 2013         |
| School C                    | 17.9                  | 92%                                 | 2013         |
| School D                    | 17.9                  | 81%                                 | 2013         |
| School E                    | 18.5                  | 82%                                 | 1998         |
| School F                    | 19.1                  | 83%                                 | 2001         |
| School G                    | 25.5                  | 89%                                 | 1997         |
| School H                    | 25.7                  | 100%                                | 2001         |
| School I                    | 26.4                  | 75%                                 | 2013         |
| School J                    | 26.6                  | 96%                                 | 1998         |
| School K                    | 26.6                  | 98%                                 | 1999         |
| School L                    | 26.8                  | 96%                                 | 2014         |
| School M                    | 28.3                  | 100%                                | 1997         |
| School N                    | 30.8                  | 80%                                 | 2000         |
| School O                    | 31.4                  | 73%                                 | 1997         |
| School P                    | 33.3                  | 89%                                 | 2014         |
| School Q                    | 34.0                  | 79%                                 | 1999         |
| School R                    | 35.7                  | 81%                                 | 1997         |
| School S                    | 36.0                  | 88%                                 | 1998         |
| School T                    | 36.8                  | 70%                                 | 1997         |
| School U                    | 38.6                  | 86%                                 | 2013         |
| School V                    | 40.1                  | 78%                                 | 1999         |
| School W                    | 40.7                  | 75%                                 | 2000         |
| School X                    | 43.4                  | 81%                                 | 2001         |
| School Y                    | 47.3                  | 94%                                 | 1997         |
| School Z                    | 50.7                  | 87%                                 | 2014         |
| School AA                   | 50.8                  | 93%                                 | 1997         |
| School BB                   | 55.2                  | 83%                                 | 1997         |
| School CC                   | 58.5                  | 97%                                 | 2000         |
| School DD                   | 60.6                  | 88%                                 | 1999         |
| Lincoln College Preparatory | 74.1                  | 73%                                 | 2001         |
| Morris Charter              | 84.9                  | 100%                                | 2010         |

Other charter schools with greater than 70% economically disadvantaged students performed well-below the 60% threshold that placed them in danger of their charter being terminated.

In 2013, a new policy was put in place to close poorly performing charter schools. If a school has a student achievement performance composite below 60% in two out of three years, a school in its first five years of existence must demonstrate growth under a strategic improvement plan. Schools that have existed beyond five years can be immediately terminated (Section 115C-238.29g - 29G. Causes for nonrenewal or termination; disputes., 2013).

During the 2014-15 academic year, the average passing rate on state exams for all public schools was 56.6% (Hui, 2015) and charter schools was 59.6% (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2015). Most under-performing charter schools have greater than 60% students of color, and they are likely to close unless their academic performance dramatically improves (Hui, 2015). Between 2005 and 2015, seven out of the nine charter schools that closed had greater than 85% students of color (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015).

Growth of charter schools has far outpaced the closure of ineffective schools (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016). Mismanagement and finances were the most frequently cited causes for closure (Center for Education Reform, 2011; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016). This mirrors the national trend where finances (41.7%) and mismanagement (24%) are the top two reasons for charter school closings, whereas only 18.6% of charter schools were closed for low academic performance (Renzulli & Paino, 2013).

In a study by Paino, Renzulli, Boylan, & Bradley (2013) of closures of North Carolina charter suggests a connection between finances and academics. Most schools that close for financial or mismanagement reasons are already academically failing. Schools that are

academically ineffective are also in financial disarray. Yet it is only when mismanagement of funds or irregularities in practices is discovered, that schools are closed. “Academic accountability standards are only loosely coupled with practice, and accountability is an institutional myth hidden beneath a story of schools that were ‘held accountable,’” (Paino et al, 2013, p. 527). In North Carolina, the state advisory board investigates charter schools with low academic performance. If the investigation uncovers financial and management issues then finances, not academics, becomes the formal reason for closure.

High charter school enrollment can indicate the parents’ satisfaction with the school meeting their children’s educational needs (Lacireno-Paquet, 2002). Similarly, when schools underperform, dissatisfied parents remove their children. Since charter schools are dependent on enrollment to supply their funding, low student enrollment can lead to financial crises.

### Summary

The literature suggests that charter schools in North Carolina are becoming less economically and racially diverse and the increase in student achievement performance is due more to the composition of the school rather than any improvements in its practices (Ladd et al., 2015; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016).

### **Towards a Theory of Charter School Leadership for Equity and Excellence**

Most studies on charter schools focus on school structures, systems, culture, and achievement outcomes and less the school’s instructional core practice (Merseth, 2009; Bickmore & Dowell, 2015). In this final section, I will review of existing literature on charter school leadership and the impact of principals on student achievement. Secondly, I will discuss the literature on practices of effective charter schools. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an

examination of the literature on charter schools that examines their practices through the lens of Critical Race Theory.

### Charter School Leadership

Despite the rise in charter schools, research on charter schools have focused on governance, structure, and financial models, their impact on policy and student outcomes (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007; Lubiesnki & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002). Leadership in charter schools is undertheorized and under-researched, particularly how leaders conceptualize their school (Campbell & Gross, 2008; Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007; Dressler, 2001) and how their beliefs translates into instructional practice that improves student achievement (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007; Gross, 2011; Merseth, 2009; Brickmore & Dowell, 2014). Gross (2011) argues that most research has focused on outcomes but a paucity of literature has examined how charter schools exercise their autonomy to adjust their practices to impact student achievement.

In a recent study of traditional school principals, Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) showed that an effective principal can raise student achievement by two to seven months of learning, whereas an ineffective principal can reduce student achievement by the same amount. A study by Supovitz, Sirindes, and May (2010) suggests that principals impact student achievement by influencing the instructional content and pedagogical practice of classrooms (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). Principals guide the development of the schools' instructional vision and leverage effective teachers to actualize the vision (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2000; Marks & Louis, 1999; Urick & Bowers, 2014). Principals also indirectly impact student achievement by influencing the goals, organizational systems and culture of their schools (Hallinger & Heck, 1998, p.171). This in turn creates the

context for a type of professional culture and learning which is related with increasing teacher retention (Printy, 2008; Ingersoll, 1999). There is less research on how principal leadership is enacted in charter schools (Brickmore & Dowell, 2015).

It has been found, however, that charter school leaders have less teaching experience and are less likely to have advanced degrees in education administration (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007). Each year, nearly twenty-five thousand (25%) principals in the United States leave their schools; this rate is higher for schools located in high poverty communities with minority students (Baker et al, 2010; Beteille et al, 2007; Gates et al, 2006; Papa, 2007; Partlow & Ridenour, 2008) and even higher for charter schools at 29% (School Leader Network, 2014). Charter schools, compared to traditional public schools, have more frequent principal turnover and shorter tenure. Charter school principals who leave are more likely to leave the profession whereas traditional school principals change schools (Miller, 2013; Ni et al., 2014). Some attribute this to charter school principals not having access to structural supports that traditional school principal do through central office (Campbell & Gross, 2008; Brickmore & Dowell, 2011).

A study of over 400 charter school principals by the National Charter School Research Project (Lake, 2007) noted four major challenges of leadership in charter schools. First is the challenge of creating and communicating the mission and vision and defining a clear purpose to draw students, parents and teachers to the school. Principals define situations and their meanings; they can communicate their values through symbolic action (Riehl, 2000); they can embed meanings in how things are done and how the school is organized. Principals shape instruction through the establishment of a school climate and the frequent communication of a common mission and vision (Firestone & Wilson, 1985; Hallinger & Heck, 2001). Schein (2001) loosely

defines culture as the embodiment of an organization's common or shared language, norms, values, philosophy, climate, habits, communication systems, and assumptions. Bolman and Deal (2003) define culture as the "glue that holds an organization together and unites people around shared values and beliefs," (p. 243). Schein (2001) writes that culture is developed through shared learning and shared experiences among group members. Culture fulfills people's need for a sense of stability, consistency, and meaning. Schein writes that "One of the most decisive functions of leadership is the creation, the management, and sometimes even the destruction of culture" (p. 370). A leader's effectiveness then is his or her ability to create culture based on the mission, vision and values of the organization.

Second is developing staff members and maintaining a climate of trust that inspires them to continue their commitment to the school despite potentially longer working hours, lower pay, and the uncertainty of working as at-will, short-term contract employees (without the protection of tenure status that many traditional public schools offer) (Lake, 2007). Principals impact student achievement through the way they manage teacher quality. Less-effective teachers are more likely to leave schools run by highly effective principals (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). On the other hand, effective principals hire and retain effective teachers (Baker et al, 2010; Baker and Cooper, 2005; Brewer, 1993). Given that charter school principals have less experience in teaching and less leadership preparation, this creates potential for higher teacher turnover and less stability in charter schools.

Third, distributing leadership to empower and leverage the staff members to operate many facets of the school is important to the leaders' sustainability and success of the school. In traditional schools, central office staff manage many operational tasks (e.g. human resources, vendor contracts, curriculum review) which charter schools may not have. Finally, charter school

leaders operate with less financial certainty than traditional public schools because their source funding depends on daily student enrollment ( Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007).

### Effective Practices of Charter Schools in Economically Disadvantaged Communities

In an examination of 39 charter schools in New York City, Dobbie and Fryer (2011b) found that traditional inputs such as class size, increased per-pupil expenditure, teacher certification status, and teacher training programs did not correlate with school effectiveness. In a review of literature on effective practices of charter schools that serve economically disadvantaged communities, several common methods were noted (Table 5). First, effective charter schools' principals have the freedom to make site-based decisions to choose curriculum, flexibly use their budget, and hire teachers (Carter, 2000; Merseth, 2009; Banks, Bodkin, & Heissel, 2011). This allows them to hire and retain high quality teachers who are mission-aligned with the school (Carter, 2000; Banks, Bodkin, & Heissel, 2011) and are held accountable to achieving student outcomes (Filby, 2006). Teachers are frequently observed, coached, and provided with feedback to improve their instruction (Peyser, 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b). These teachers are then able to communicate a message of high expectations and for students (Carter, 2000; Merseth, 2009; Banks, Bodkin, & Heissel, 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b).

Secondly, effective charter schools set clear, measurable goals for student achievement and college attainment and rigorously use data to make instructional decisions and monitor student progress (Carter, 2000; Banks et al., 2011; Merseth, 2009; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b). They also extend instructional time (Carter, 2000; Merseth, 2009; Banks et al., 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b) and sometimes use that time to remediate basic literacy and numeracy skills (Merseth, 2009; Peyser, 2011). Merseth's (2009) study of five effective charter schools in Boston and Banks et al.'s (2011) study of five effective high-poverty charter schools in North Carolina

suggest that the small size of charter schools allowed for greater parent involvement, and gave leaders flexibility and “nimbleness” (Merseth, 2009, p. 143) to quickly make changes to respond to students’ needs.

On the other hand, Merseth (2009) noted that teachers and administrators spoke little about instructional practice. Similarly, Bickmore and Sultenic (2014) suggested that charter school principals had limited experience and instructional expertise; they focused on accountability structures and relied heavily on commercially packaged curriculum.

Table 5

*Summary of Literature on Practices of Effective Charter Schools*

| Authors/Year    | Schools Studied  | Effective Practices  |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Carter (2000)   | 21 charter schools<br>High achieving (above 65 <sup>th</sup> percentile on national achievement assessments)<br>High-poverty (at least 70% free and reduced lunch) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal control over the building, staffing, and curricula</li> <li>• High expectations for students, faculty and leaders</li> <li>• Extended learning time</li> <li>• Parental involvement</li> <li>• Focus on hiring teachers with the right fit removing ineffective teachers</li> </ul>   |
| Reeves, 2003    | 90/90/90 schools<br>90% or more FRL<br>90% or more ethnic minorities<br>90% or more met district standards for reading   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic achievement focus</li> <li>• Focus on teaching with depth, not breadth, especially in math, writing, and reading</li> <li>• Weekly teacher-designed student assessments</li> <li>• Use of written responses on performance assessments</li> <li>• Use of common assessments to foster teacher improvement through collaboration</li> </ul>   |
| Filby, 2006     | 8 charter secondary schools<br>Wide variety of racial, socio-economic, and per pupil spending; urban, suburban, and rural areas                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong mission-driven cultures; focus on college preparation</li> <li>• Teaching for student mastery</li> <li>• Provide wrap-around student support</li> <li>• Value on professional learning</li> <li>• Strong governance that holds staff accountable for results</li> </ul>  |
| Merseeth (2009) | 5 charter schools in Boston-area<br>4 out of 5 serving majority racial minority populations<br>Free and reduced lunch ranging from 42 to 71%                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear mission and school designed to reach school's mission</li> <li>• Structures and systems in place to support student learning</li> <li>• Teachers and staff members chosen to fit into the school's mission, goals, and culture</li> <li>• Families willing to carry out their responsibilities to support children</li> <li>• Clear classroom procedures to maximize instructional time</li> </ul>                                  |
| Peysner (2011)  | 20 charter schools nation-wide opened by CMOs  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit expectations for academic achievement and behavior</li> <li>• Higher spending on teachers (less spending on infrastructure, materials)</li> <li>• Lower teacher to pupil ratio (about 1:14).</li> <li>• Focus on college preparation; intense focus on basic literacy and numeracy</li> <li>• Heavy reliance on direct instruction and differentiated grouping</li> <li>• School leadership utilizes coaching systems</li> </ul> |

## **Theoretical Framework**

### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) developed from the critical legal studies movement in the 1970s, led by Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman. It has spread to other disciplines, such as education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) in the past two decades. According to Delgado and Stefancic, “the critical race theory movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power,” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 2-3). Unlike traditional civil rights movement which hinges upon incremental progress, Critical Race Theorists argue that the liberal approaches to change has resulted in fewer gains in past several decades than during the Civil Rights Era (Ladson-Billings, 1999). A brief review of five tenets of CRT will be given. Then a review of literature on connection between CRT and school leadership will be discussed in the following sections.

### Tenets of Critical Race Theory

One of the central tenets of CRT is that racism is “ordinary, not aberrational...the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country,” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Because racism is endemic and “enmeshed in the fabric of our social order” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009, p. 213), policies or programs that promote a color-blinded perspective, which believes in treating everyone in the same way, only address blatant forms of discrimination but not the systematic, institutionalized forms which are more endemic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Secondly, because each race has its own origins and history, we must allow for intersectionality and variance within each person’s experience (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT also states that racism has contributed to the advantage of some groups and disadvantage of other groups. Racial “realists” or economic determinists suggest that racism is a

mechanism used to claim and allocate materials, privilege and status. Bell (1980) argues that policy advances for minorities occur when there is an economic impetus and material benefit for elite whites; Delgado & Stefancic write, “Little happens out of altruism alone,” (2001, p. 18). Changes in physical circumstances in the form of governmental policies, economic tides, and global shifts will force power brokers to modify racist practices.

Expanding upon Harris’s (1993) theory of whiteness as property, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) propose that American society is largely based upon property rights. In addition, they argue that whiteness has material value and a series of rights, one of which is the right to exclude Blackness. Before the Civil Rights era, they argue that Whiteness had the power to exclude blacks from schooling. In the twentieth century, scholars have highlighted how desegregation of public schools due to the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision led to the demotion, firing, displacement of black principals (Brown, 2004; Tillman, 2004b; Tillman, 2004a), in turn, their right to property of jobs, status, and political power in the community.

Finally, the CRT tenet of voice and counter-stories is recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color as a valid source of knowledge. This is important for counteracting the dominant discourse that excludes the lived experiences of minorities.

CRT scholars believe and utilize personal narratives and other stories as valid forms of ‘evidence’ and thereby challenge a ‘numbers only’ approach to documenting inequity or discrimination, which tends to certify discrimination from a quantitative rather than a qualitative perspective (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 35)

Entrenched in structural-functionalism, school leaders “like teachers...not only experience but also reproduce, sometimes unwittingly, conditions of hierarchy and oppression, in particular by fostering compliant thinking instead of critical reflection,” (Riehl, 2000, p.59). School leaders

have traditionally viewed themselves as administrators who legitimize the existing order rather than as agents of change who transform their organizations, independent of the school district.

Shujaa (1993) differentiates schooling and education by defining the former as a process that perpetuates the existing power structures in society. In the United States, for example, Shujaa argues that schooling allows White Anglo-Saxons to maintain their dominant position in society because it privileges those who are proficient with dominant cultural values, concepts, and skills. Schooling also subordinates racial minorities who live according to their cultural ethos. Education, on the other hand, is a process that allows black students to exceed existing achievement expectations and develop the knowledge and skills to create a new social order (Shujaa, 1993). Education that empowers racial minority students teaches them to esteem their own cultural values, rather than become skilled impressionists of the dominant culture.

Ladson-Billings (1995) proposes that culturally relevant pedagogy should be embedded into the school's infrastructure (e.g. policies, routines) and practice (e.g. pedagogy, discipline, and communication). Culturally relevant pedagogy occurs when African-American students are taught to 1) achieve academically; 2) demonstrate cultural competence; and 3) develop a sociopolitical consciousness to challenge the existing social order. Academic achievement is not only measured by student performance on standardized tests, but on higher order thinking skills on a variety of assessments. Secondly, cultural competence is the students' ability to maintain their fluency with their cultural values, language, and interaction styles, and develop a sense of pride in their identity, while achieving academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Finally, students demonstrate sociopolitical consciousness when they can identify social inequities and critique the existing sociopolitical power structures that perpetuate these injustices (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through purposeful analysis and construction of the school's operating norms,

principals can develop schools that structurally and theoretically promote the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methods for this study of charter school leaders' beliefs and their practices. The following sections explain the major research questions, the use of portraiture as the method for this study, how the sites were selected, and the process used for collecting and analyzing data for this study.

### Major Research Questions

The study focused on examining the theoretical groundings, beliefs, and values of the school founders, and how they translated their beliefs into practice.

Research question one (RQ1): What are the theoretical groundings and beliefs of charter school founders that successfully serve economically disadvantaged students of color?

Identifying the theoretical groundings, beliefs, and values that the school founders and leaders hold is important to understanding why schools operate the way they do. In "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy first examines the theory that undergirds the educators' practice (why we do what we do).

Research question two (RQ2): How do school leaders translate these beliefs into practice?

The purpose of this question is to examine the relationship between the school leaders' stated mission, values, and beliefs (RQ1) with their practice. Interviewing the school founders, school leaders, and teachers, showed how leaders' decisions and practices aligned with the school's mission.

Research question three (RQ3): How have the schools evolved over time while staying committed to their mission? What are their strengths and opportunities for development in pursuit of their mission?

This question sought to understand what practitioners learned through their lived experience of founding, leading, and sustaining equitable and excellent schools, and what they perceived as opportunities for improvement. In addition, this question sought to understand how they situated their schools in the current national and state-wide landscape of charter schools, and practices critical for charter schools that aspire to serve economically disadvantaged racial minority students.

Research question four (RQ4): Taking these two examples together, what might we learn about the theoretical groundings and practices of equitable and excellent charter schools and their leaders?

The purpose of this question was to compare the findings between the two subjects, analyze the results through the lens of Critical Race Theory, and draw lessons that should be considered for future research, organizations seeking to select and develop charter school principals and leadership preparation programs. Recognizing that race-neutral and meritocratic educational policies lead to racialized outcomes, leading schools for equity and excellence requires a distinct strategy rather than a color-blind approach to school design and leadership.

### **Portraiture**

This inquiry begins by examining a phenomenon—two successful charter schools that serve economically disadvantaged students of color in Eastern North Carolina—by asking, “What’s working?,” “What can we learn from what’s happening here?,” rather than looking for confirmation of existing theories and beliefs about what makes a good charter school.

Portraiture lends itself to constructing a holistic picture of the life experiences and beliefs of the people, the historical context surrounding the school, and explore the space between the school's aspiration and their status.

This section discusses the five features of portraiture (context, voice, relationships, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole) and the way data is collected, analyzed, synthesized, and represented in a portraiture study (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

### Context

In the process of collecting data and representing the study, I explained the context of the schools (how it was founded, where it is located, and facts about the community) to situate the reader in the landscape of the story. Context comprises of the physical, geographic, historical, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of the setting (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), context is used in five ways in portraiture. First, describing the context involves creating a descriptive picture of the physical setting. Secondly, the researcher incorporates her own role within that context. Portraiture tells the story about the subject as much as it does about the researcher (Chapman, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The researcher makes her bias, assumptions and expectations visible so that the reader can judge the situation for his/herself. The researcher describes the history of the subject— for example, I explained how the schools began and evolved over time; and how their interior culture matured through experience. Finally, I was careful to note the constants at the school—the mission and vision that stood the test of time—and noted the changes in responses to the education policy changes (e.g. shift to the Common Core State Standards) or the community's perception of the school.

## Voice

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) notes that in portraiture, “the voice of the researcher is everywhere,” (p. 85) and is pushing forth, pulling back, and echoing throughout the study while questioning, examining, reflecting, and sometimes disconfirming presuppositions she brings to the study. There are six ways that voices of the researcher and actors are documented and represented in portraiture. First, the researcher may note observations as a witness. She may also represent her voice in the interpretation of data. She may voice her preoccupation with an idea in her mind and surface her leanings or ruminations in the representation of data. Her voice may be represented in an autobiographical revelation as a connection to what she observes. Another way is to show how she is listening to and listening for a story of the actors, place, or subject. Finally, the researcher may include her voice in dialogue with the actors as they make meaning together. The six uses of voice represent a spectrum of interaction and involvement between the portraitist and the actors — ranging from the least invasive as a witness to the most dynamic as a voice in dialogue with the actors. A portraiture study utilizes different layers of voice in order to inform, shape, clarify, and make meaning; the voice of the researcher is present and involved, and carefully balanced to represent the subject in the portrait, not herself (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

While interviewing the school founders and leaders, I began with open-ended questions as a witness to their origin story. With some of the leaders, we had shared history and experiences, and our conversations would talk about the present, then fall back to the past, which then shaped how they thought about the present. Many instances, my questions led leaders to reflect upon their own practice, some as if asked to reflect for the first time on the connections between their own life journey and why they do what they do now. In that way, we made

meaning together, connecting their beliefs about leadership to their experiences as teachers, or even their childhood experiences. Many times, leaders processed their ideas aloud which also helped me gain insight into their values, experiences, and decision-making processes.

### Relationships

In portraiture, relationship building is a vital part of the meaning making and development of the study. The relationship between myself and the participants were dynamic and reciprocal; they deepen over multiple encounters; and our conversations deepen over time (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). From the outset, I wanted to build a foundation of trust by making it clear to the school founders why I selected their schools (because of their strengths), made my process transparent (showing them interview questions, presenting the informed consent forms that protected their confidentiality), and showing them I was seeking strengths and opportunities for continued growth, not to solely critique without context. Having a respectful relationship included showing respect and consideration for their time and availability, and offering reciprocity for their effort. As Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest, there are multiple ways to reciprocate with actors and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggest that reciprocity can be embedded in the act of research. For example, they note that actors may benefit from the reflective process of being interviewed by the researcher, having a listening ear, or having a sounding board for ideas.

In this study, I offered to conduct observations of classroom teachers, participate in learning walks with leadership team members, and provide constructive feedback to leadership team members to develop their own professional practice. Given my professional experience in developing assistant principals, I joined professional development sessions with principals from

Lincoln College Preparatory and offered to lead workshops on creating development plans for assistant principals.

### Emergent Themes

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) note the importance of the researcher entering the field with guiding questions, anticipated themes, and schemas based on her own experiences, knowledge, and background. Rather than entering to prove a theory, the portraitist enters the field with guiding questions and a framework but fully recognizes the potential for her ideas to be confirmed, modified, or transformed. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) note that the researcher must also adapt based on the current realities of the field.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) also recommend that the researcher surface and record her own intellectual framework before entering the field to anticipate and mitigate her own leanings to distort observation and interpretation of data. Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest writing thematic memos to accumulate notes that could become the foundation of themes used later for data analysis.

Before conducting the field work, I developed a list of potential themes and Critical Race Theory constructs that I anticipated to emerge from the study. Yet, I was careful to reference them only *after* I returned from observations so I would not enter schools specifically looking for themes every time I visited.

While reading transcriptions of interviews, I looked for “repetitive refrains” or phrases or ideas that resonated with multiple people across multiple times (p.193). When I returned for classroom walkthroughs or attended events at the school, I looked for themes, phrases, or artifacts frequently used by the leaders that represented the values of the setting. I took pictures

of posters, bulletin boards, events to remind myself of potential connections between what the leaders said and what I saw in practice.

Third, themes emerged observations of the schools rituals, special events, and significant times of the year (e.g. first day of school). Fourth, themes emerged when multiple sources of data triangulated and found points of convergence. Finally, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggest that were themes that some leaders emphasized more than others given the particular grade level they worked with, their time in leadership, their experience and understanding of the community, or their own leadership development.

### Aesthetic Whole

In a portraiture study, the construction of the final work was a blend of art and science (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). The scientific part included analyzing, coding, and sorting voluminous interview transcripts, artifacts, and observational data to find patterns and emergent themes. The artistic part involved taking those themes and weaving them to tell a cohesive story that fairly represented the strengths, goodness, and opportunities for the school.

In representing each school, I began with describing the school founder's story of starting the school and did not smooth over dissonant details. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the researcher's bias can lend her to construct a story that is more harmonious than it is; over-estimate or over-emphasize data from informants, or favor the perspective of certain people over the other because of prior relationships, personal triggers, communication styles, or assumptions I had about the individuals. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) notes this as the act of being generous and critical in the analysis and representation of a strengths-based research study.

### **Research Site and Participants**

The following subject criteria were used to select the participants for the study:

1. Charter schools in North Carolina with the highest proportion of economically disadvantaged students (80% or more) in enrollment;
2. Charter schools with consistently high student achievement outcomes with 70% or more students performing on grade level in state reading and math exams for three or more years;

Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter schools are the only charter schools in North Carolina that met these two criteria. Both schools had been recognized and reputed for their academic success. These schools had strong reputations in the charter school and traditional school communities. For eight consecutive years, Lincoln College Preparatory schools had 100% of their graduating classes gain admission to four-year colleges and universities while serving 70% or more economically disadvantaged racial minority students. Morris Charter is one of the top-performing charter schools, compared to all charter schools, in the state.

Creswell (2007) states that purposive sampling can “inform an understanding of the central phenomenon of the study” (p.125). Patton (1990) notes that the strength of purposive sampling is finding information-rich cases that can provide substantial material for understanding a phenomenon. Creswell (2013) notes that narrative research studies may focus on one or two individuals. Since the intent of this study is not to generalize but to illuminate the success of two specific schools, purposive sampling was chosen for this study (Creswell, 2013).

To recruit participants, I emailed the founders of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter to ask for their participation. Emails were sent out separately to each school founder containing a description of the study, a copy of the informed consent form, and interview questions. Participants were asked to indicate their interest by responding to the email and providing a time for the first meeting.

## **Data Collection**

Approval from the Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to conducting field work for this study. One formal interview with the school founders was conducted for this study. The interview questions (see Appendix E) sought to understand the leaders' background, what informed their school mission, vision and design, and their journey since the founding years to the present to create equitable and excellent schools. Appendix E shows the alignment between the interview questions and the major research questions for this study.

Triangulation, the process of using multiple sources of data to confirm a single idea, ensures the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Therefore, in addition to interviewing the founders, interviewed all the principals, and asked the founder to identify two or three key instructional coaches or teachers who had been at the school long enough to understand the school's mission, vision and practices to interview (see Appendix F for interview questions). In addition, documents such as student and family handbooks, websites, news articles, professional development meeting materials, and schedules were collected and reviewed.

The interviews were recorded in a password protected mobile device, transcribed into text through a private transcription service that protects the confidentiality of the interviews. All names were changed to protect the persons' identities and the school. Appendix F shows the alignment between the interview questions and the major research questions. Following each interview, I recorded reflections through voice memos while driving home. To confirm accuracy of the interviewed, I provided each member with the transcription to verify the content.

## **Data Analysis**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest seven typical phases of data analysis: 1) organizing the data, 2) immersion in the data, 3) generating categories and themes, 4) coding the data, 5) offering interpretations through analytic memos, 6) searching for alternative understandings, and 7) writing a report or representing the inquiry. Creswell (2013) notes that qualitative researchers typically have three steps in data analysis: coding the data, combining codes into larger themes, and representing data in tables or figures. In this section, I explain my process for organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data for this study.

### Organizing the Data and Coding

Each interview was recorded and transcribed, and documented in a data log as recommended by Marshall and Rossman (2011). The notes were filed in a password protected computer.

Creswell (2013) suggests that themes are aggregates of several codes; codes can come from a pre-existing list, develop during the study, or gleaned from the actors. I started the research with anticipated codes and themes for the purposes of organization and focus; but edited them and created new ones as they emerged from interviewed (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest that predetermined categories for coding facilitate data retrieval and analysis. Table 6 below shows the categories and potential codes that I anticipated. Then Table 7 and 8 show the actual categories and codes that developed for each research question.

Table 6

*Alignment of Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, and Potential Codes*

| Research Questions  | Theoretical Framework  | Potential Codes  |
|---|--|--|
| RQ1: What are the theoretical groundings and beliefs of charter school founders that successfully serve economically disadvantaged students of color?                         | Permanence of Racism<br>Whiteness as Property<br>Counter-storytelling<br>Critique of Liberalism & Colorblindness | Culture<br>High expectations<br>Mission-Alignment<br>Equity<br>Excellence  |
| RQ2: How do school leaders translate these beliefs into practice?   | Whiteness as Property<br>Counter-storytelling<br>Critique of Liberalism & Colorblindness                         | Quality Teachers<br>Mission-Alignment<br>No Excuses<br>Accountability<br>Goal-Setting<br>College Access<br>Clear Expectations<br>Parental Involvement<br>Data-Driven Instruction |
| RQ3: How have the schools evolved over time while staying committed to their mission? What are their strengths and opportunities for development in pursuit of their mission? | Permanence of Racism<br>Whiteness as Property<br>Counter-storytelling<br>Critique of Liberalism & Colorblindness | Equity<br>Transportation<br>Accountability<br>Resources  |
| RQ4: Taking these two examples together, what might we learn about the theoretical groundings and practices of equitable and excellent charter schools and their leaders?     | Permanence of Racism<br>Critique of Liberalism & Colorblindness  | Instructional Leadership<br>Curriculum<br>Replication<br>Segregation   |

Table 7

*Emergent Themes for Research Question 1, by School*

|                             | Major Themes in Leadership Beliefs   | Critical Race Theory Constructs and Tenets   |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Lincoln College Preparatory | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lincoln College Preparatory schools exist to fight for social justice and racial equity</li> <li>2. Leaders need to make decisions that are anti-racist versus non-racist</li> <li>3. Schools need to operate with fanatically high expectations and a deep belief in growth mindset for adults and children.</li> </ol>   | Permanence of Racism<br>Whiteness as Property<br>Critique of Liberalism & Color-blindness<br>Counter-storytelling<br>Social Change<br>Expansive View of Equality |
| Morris Charter              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Belief in the people and the potential of the community</li> <li>2. A belief that equity is about access and having choices. When students have academic and character skills to go to and through the college of their choice, they will have more choices in life.</li> <li>3. An orientation towards constantly raising the bar of excellence, defying expectations society has of students of color, and “punching the ceiling” on what people think students can achieve</li> </ol> | Permanence of Racism<br>Whiteness as Property<br>Restrictive View of Equality<br>Colorblind Ideology   |

Table 8

*Emergent Themes for Research Question 2, by School*

|                                   | School-wide practice  | Critical Race Theory<br>Constructs and Tenets   |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Lincoln<br>College<br>Preparatory | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication: Unapologetically communicating the mission to stakeholders,               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. “Equity is embedded into everything we do”</li> <li>b. Especially to White families who resist</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Hiring: selecting leaders and teachers who are mission-aligned and developing them with a growth mindset               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. stating up front what they are signing up for</li> <li>b. selecting principals who are mission aligned</li> <li>c. gauging people's cultural proficiency skills</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Curriculum: integrating social justice and equity into every aspect of the work</li> <li>4. Teaching self-advocacy &amp; empowering students: “We’re trying to teach kids to advocate for themselves and fight against systems and realize that we are a system.”</li> <li>5. Cultural Relevance: developing relationships with families for partnership and understanding.</li> </ol> | Permanence of Racism<br>Whiteness as Property<br>Critique of Liberalism &<br>Color-blindness<br>Counter-storytelling<br>Social Change<br>Expansive View of Equality |
| Morris<br>Charter                 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication: Investing stakeholders in the mission and vision               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The leadership team</li> <li>b. Parents</li> <li>c. Students</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Hiring: selecting leaders and teachers who are mission-aligned</li> <li>3. Leadership Team: Developing and empowering guardians of the culture</li> <li>4. Defining and upholding school-wide culture</li> <li>5. Developing teachers through coaching and rapid implementation</li> </ol>   | Whiteness as Property<br>Restrictive View of Equality<br>Colorblind ideology  |

Authenticity as the Standard

Whereas traditional qualitative research seeks reliability and validity, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue that portraiture uses authenticity as its standard. Rather than seeking to show the generalizability from specifics, portraiture “seeks to document and

illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place” (p.14). The goal is for the story to resonate with three audiences: the actor, the reader, and the portraitist. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) write: “The portraitist seeks a portrayal that is believable, that makes sense, that causes that ‘click of recognition’” (p.247).

To achieve authenticity, I wove multiple layers of data — stories, interviews, observations, and documents. In addition interviewing school founders, I included portrayals of the school founders from members of their leadership team, so that descriptions of the founders represented multiple perspectives, not just my interpretation. It is possible that the school founders will read these portraits and think, “these portraits did not capture me as I saw myself,” but instead think, “they seemed to capture my essence—qualities of character and history some of which I was unaware of, some of which I resisted mightily, some of which felt deeply familiar” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4).

### **Ethical Considerations**

To protect the confidentiality of all participants, pseudonyms were used, and information that would identify them or their schools were removed or changed. I collected informed consent forms from all interviewees, and filed field notes in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data was stored in a password protected computer. Voice recordings were kept on password protected devices. I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board to study human subjects. As mentioned above, each participant signed an informed consent form which stated that participation was voluntary and the subject could withdraw at any time for any reason (Appendix H).

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

### **Organization of Results**

A qualitative study using the portraiture method was used to examine the theoretical groundings, leadership beliefs, and school-wide practices of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter schools. This chapter is a portrait of two school founders and how they led their leadership teams to translate their leadership beliefs and theoretical groundings into practice. The chapter begins with a portrait of Lincoln College Preparatory and its founder, Allison Bartlett. Then a portrait of Morris Charter and its co-founders David and Alicia Martinez who lead Morris Charter follows. Each section will describe the themes that emerged from three major research questions for each school.

In organizing this chapter, I distilled emergent themes from interview(s) with the school founders (see Appendix E for questions) then selected resonant themes from interviews with members of the leadership team – principals of the elementary, middle and high schools—and other staff members that the principals identified as having strong understanding of the school’s mission, vision and practice. Although the school sites were selected based on the middle schools’ successful student achievement data over multiple years, I interviewed all the principals in the K-12 organization to understand how the school founders’ beliefs translated into practice across a school system. A list of interviewees is in Appendix L. In addition, I included dissonant themes not explicitly mentioned by the school founders if they were mentioned and echoed

across multiple interviews with other leaders. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the results.

### **Lincoln College Preparatory**

Allison Bartlett, Executive Director of Lincoln College Preparatory schools, is a self-proclaimed “military brat” who moved around for many years until her parents settled in North Carolina. After her parents divorced, Ms. Bartlett looked for the “most diverse” state university she could find. As a first-generation college graduate, Allison joined Teach For America (TFA) which placed her as a middle school reading teacher in Lincoln, a rural farming town with a population just over 1,000 people, where she taught for four years. In the middle of her fourth year, she and William Young, a friend and colleague at her placement school who was also in Teach For America, received a phone call from a national charter management organization looking to expand. The organization found them through Teach For America, and asked them to re-locate to a large urban school district to open one of the CMO’s first expansion school. They briefly entertained the lure of living in a major city with a larger salary. After several rounds of negotiations, Ms. Bartlett and Mr. Young refused the offer because it felt “inauthentic and not grassroots.” Ms. Bartlett thought, “I don’t know anything about [that city]. People shouldn’t trust me with their kids.” Believing that starting a school with the right founding leaders was more important than the location, the CMO allowed them to start a school in Lincoln. Mr. Young founded and served as the first principal of Lincoln College Preparatory, a 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school, and Ms. Bartlett served as a reading and writing teacher.

Placing their students in a rigorous high school became a significant concern as the area high schools did not have a strong track record of successfully graduating students, let alone matriculating them into four-year colleges. Ms. Bartlett spent a year planning and preparing to

open the high school so their founding class of students could have a seamless transition to college. Seven years after the high school opened, they started an elementary school believing that they could get much farther with students if they started earlier.

Ms. Bartlett refers to the school campus as the “peanut field,” because it used to be a 27-acre soybean and peanut farm. It now houses three school buildings with over 1,200 students, a transportation garage for school buses, athletic fields, and even a small medical building for providing primary care for students and families. The modern school campus contrasts its rural community which holds slightly less people in the entire town than the campus does within a school day.

#### Leaders Beliefs at Lincoln College Preparatory

*Research Question 1: According to founding leaders of equitable and excellent charter schools, what are the critical theoretical groundings of schools that serve students of color?*

In interviewing the founder, Allison Bartlett, and the principals on the K-12 campus, four major themes emerged as the theoretical groundings of Lincoln College Preparatory schools.

1. Lincoln College Preparatory schools exist to fight for social justice and racial equity.
2. Leaders need to make decisions that are anti-racist versus non-racist.
3. Schools need to operate with fanatically high expectations and a deep belief in growth mindset for adults and children.
4. Connection to the community is essential for building trusting relationships with students and families.

*Founded for social justice and racial equity.* When Allison Bartlett, the founding Executive Director of Lincoln College Preparatory, speaks like a social activist leader or even Pat Summitt, the legendary college women’s basketball coach. Ms. Bartlett speaks with passion

and without apology; she has no patience for people or families who challenge the school's intentional mission ("We're not going to debate whether all lives matter or black lives matter? It's black lives matter."). To Ms. Bartlett, education is a means to an end, a vehicle for driving social justice and racial equity for people of color, particularly blacks in the South, who have been historically oppressed and marginalized in politics, education, and the economy. In explaining the mission of Lincoln College Preparatory, she says:

Let me explain to you our mission: the fight for social justice to serve groups of people who were historically underserved. This is the reason why this school was created. We never apologized. It's like how we explain Black Lives Matter. I think all kids should get a great education. But that's not why we created this school. We are targeting a specific group of people who have been historically underserved. A light needs to be shined so people can't ignore it.

To explain how her school differs from other "No Excuses" or college preparatory charter schools, Ms. Bartlett states that her vision for students goes beyond college. I ask her what her opening message is to staff members on their first day of professional development to kick off the new school year.

I say, "Welcome to our campus. We live in a place where 300 years ago [there were] slaves. We live in a place where 150 years ago there were share croppers. People didn't have the right to be educated. They had their limbs cut off to do this work we're about to do." Then I say to students, "Here are a bunch of stats on how the world sees you right now. We're going to prove them wrong." To me that message creates a different level of urgency on why we are here: to fix things that are systematically wrong and education is the tool to do that.

Ms. Bartlett situates the value of education within the historical context of the oppressive practices that prevented education for African Americans in the South. She bristles when I mention popular tag lines of other college preparatory charter schools whose primary aim is to help students from low-income families go to and through college.

College and career ready. What does that mean? It's not about college and career ready, it's about developing your passions, finding out what's wrong so that you're armed to fix them. And if you can do that you will be college and career ready. [Being] college and

career ready doesn't mean you've developed a passion and you're fired up to do anything.

The principals of the high school, middle and elementary schools all echo a similar belief that their schools exist to fight for social justice. In the middle school's Family Handbook, the school's values are as follows:

We believe in bravery because we confront ignorance, racism, abuse, and corruption. We believe in urgency because our kids are in a race where the front-runners have a giant head start. We don't believe that time is money; we believe time is a precious opportunity to change lives and cannot be wasted any more than water can be spilled in a desert (Parent and Family Handbook, 2017, p.5)

They use the word "fight" intentionally. Ina Mehta, the high school principal says, "Fight is a word we use a lot. I don't think it's as soft as 'be the change' or 'make the world a better place'. Those are all great, but to me, it's fight. Fight is a more important concept, and a more important word and ideology."

Ms. Cathy Donovan (elementary principal), Ms. Erin Evanlin and Mr. Gary Houston (middle school co-principals), and Ms. Ina Mehta and Mr. Nathan Oaks (high school assistant principal) mention social justice as the primary driver of the schools' mission. Ms. Mehta notes: "The thing that we [principals] have most in common is the unyielding focus on the social justice aspect of our mission." Ms. Evanlin, co-principal and founding teacher of the middle school says:

[Social Justice] is what the school was founded on, that is our mission. When Allison and William created the school that was what they made the mission. It wasn't just about going to college. It was to fight to live in a world where people are treated justly despite their race, gender, social and economic status. It was something that they wrote into the charter and has become a part of who we are.

Ms. Donovan, the elementary principal, echoes the belief that education is a tool that can be used for social justice. She notes the permanence of racism and the myth of meritocracy (Henry & Dixson, 2016) and how education can still be leveraged:

It's not an American dream, it's an American myth. I do believe that education is not a magic wand that makes the dream true, but it's the closest thing that I can think of as a ladder or a bridge especially in communities like ours.

The end goal is to empower and strengthen the students from the community, and overturn generations of racial injustice. Ms. Bartlett actively recruits alumni of Lincoln College Preparatory to return to their community as teachers, coaches, and regional office staff members. Erin Evanlin is proud that one of her former students is now a teacher at the school:

We are proving that we can do what people always says that couldn't happen in rural areas or within African-American population. The power of having alumni, and seeing what they are doing with their lives, and how many of them have now come back to teach, or to be involved in education reform, that's amazing. My former student is on my 7th grade hall as a teacher. That now has a huge impact. We must have done something right with them for them to want to come back, and give back and be a part of the movement.

*Being anti-racist versus non-racist.* Ms. Bartlett emphasizes to her principals the importance of making decisions with an anti-racist lens, meaning, proactively examining decisions through a lens of fighting oppressive and racist practices.

Your policies and practice need to be align with whatever words you're saying. Particularly in our state, things that are big like transportation and free and reduced lunch, to curriculum decisions on what you teach and how you teach it.

Larger policies like providing bus transportation to every student, in a state where charter schools must accept students from any part of the state, or providing cafeteria food services, requires tremendous financial investment.

For decisions with less financial implications, like curricular choices, Ms. Bartlett believes applying the equity lens happens at a macro-level (course design and text choices) and micro-level. Ms. Bartlett shares, "The habit I want them to have is think: 'is this aligned to our mission and what systems of oppression does this song support?' If we play this song, what stereotypes is this song perpetuating that is contrary to the very existence of our school?" Ms.

Bartlett sees academics as the vehicle for teaching equity content; and equity being the litmus test for selecting pedagogical moves: “[Equity] is the lens through which you operate, not an addition.” Meaning, that in decision-making, equity takes precedence: it is not a layer that is added after an instructional choice has been made.

*High expectations and growth mindset.* Among the principals, there is an uncompromising belief in holding high expectations for all students. Meaning that when students say, “All students can learn,” they remain steadfast in communicating the belief to teachers that all students can meet expectations and learn with effective effort, various strategies and time. This growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) is a foundational belief for leaders to model for teachers and students. Ms. Mehta says, “There's no substitute for the mindset of when we say we believe in all, we actually mean all. That's the most dangerous slippery slope that I've seen happen in other schools that I've visited.” Mr. Houston shares that growth mindset is important for teachers to “own the success and the failure of their students” and for teachers to “constantly push to improve their craft,” and not think that “they’ve already arrive.”

Ms. Donovan acknowledges that holding a growth mindset is easier for adults to have for younger children:

I think people have more of a growth mindset about a five-year-old than they do a 15-year-old even though I believe they both have the same capacity to grow and change. When they're physically little it's easier for us to believe, in my opinion. And the idea of giving up on a five-year-old, “I've tried everything,” sounds ridiculous. They're so young!

Holding high expectations also means setting yearly academic goals for 100% of students to meet their goals, and believing that every student, with effective effort, time and better strategies, can reach the basic goals of the school. Ms. Mehta recognizes how unrealistic this can sound when teachers are working with students who enter high school with tremendous gaps:

This sounds a little crazy. And this is something I really only share with my leadership team, and I don't tell the staff this: I'm very transparent about most things, but I think it's really important, for me, to be a relentless idealist. Even if I sound crazy sometimes. Because if I let the bar slip, then everybody else is allowed to. So, I'd rather people complain that I'm asking them for unrealistic things, because I don't actually think they are unrealistic.

I know that can be frustrating, so does that mean you can get someone from a first-grade reading level to a tenth-grade reading level this year? Maybe not. But what you can do is say with time, and effective effort, we need to see huge growth over several years. It might take a student five or six year to do high school. Sometimes you have to be honest about that part, but as a leader, I can never relent by saying, "Yeah, maybe college is not for that one kid. Let's just make an exception this one time." I cannot let that ever enter my mind or my rhetoric, because I think the second I do, I've lowered the bar for that kid, and I don't get to decide that. I also think I've allowed other people to start mentally lowering their bar.

*Connection to the community.* Just as Ms. Bartlett refused to start a school in a community that she was not familiar with, the principals all convey a strong belief that their connection with the families and the communities makes their school effective.

The connection to families can be a motivator for staying in the principalship role year after year. Ms. Mehta who has been with the school for nearly ten years (four as an instructional coach and six years as the principal): "Once you get attached to families, and kids, and you want to see them through, and you want to teach their younger brothers and then you want to teach their cousins, and now we have our [alumni's] children in kindergarten." The high school assistant principal, Mr. Nathan Oaks, who originally came from the Midwest feels his connection with the families and communities compels him to continue working in Lincoln: "As I've been connected to our community longer and longer, it's harder to argue that I would do anything else in the world. This is the place that I should be. This is the most important work to do."

In recent years, the principals have intentionally focused on hiring alumni of their high school and local teachers from the community, and developing leaders who are also from the community. Ms. Bartlett is also working towards developing local educators to lead the schools.

Ms. Donovan developed her assistant principal, a local resident to become her successor; Ms. Bartlett recruited a parent of her students to work as an assistant principal, then helped her become the founding principal of a middle school in the neighboring county; one of Ms. Bartlett's former students during her TFA days was recruited as a teacher and is now an assistant principal. There are over 14 alumni from Lincoln College Preparatory who are in teaching and staff roles on campus. Although most of the staff members at all three schools are out-of-town, Ms. Bartlett hopes that alumni lead the school.

### Leadership Practices at Lincoln College Preparatory

*Research Question 2: How do school leaders translate these beliefs, values, and principles into their schools' practice?*

Five themes emerged from conversations with the school founder and the principals on how they operationalize leadership beliefs and theoretical groundings into practice at their schools.

1. Communication: Unapologetically communicate the mission to stakeholders,
2. Hiring: Select leaders and teachers who are mission-aligned and develop their growth mindset
3. Curriculum: Integrate social justice and equity into every aspect of the work
4. Family connections: developing relationships with families for partnership and understanding.
5. Teach self-advocacy & empower students: "We're trying to teach kids to advocate for themselves and fight against systems and realize that we are a system."

*Communication.* The first step to actualizing a leadership belief is to communicate the core message all the time. Ms. Bartlett repeats the mission of Lincoln College Preparatory

multiple times in a conversation and shares how she communicates it with a variety of stakeholders.

*With leaders and teachers.* Ms. Bartlett recalls a conversation she had with executive directors of other charter school organizations who sought advice on how to handle communication with their staff members when reports of police brutality engulfed the news. In the summer of 2016, the staff members of the other charter school organizations were upset their executive directors had not sent an email acknowledging the impact that the police shootings of Philando Castille and Alton Sterling had on their communities. In addition, the staff members demanded more professional development sessions focusing on equity and race, and the executive directors were conflicted about how to apply their focus given the low student achievement results on state tests. They felt beholden to prioritize increasing student state test score results to maintain their organization's status therefore could not allocate their focus or professional development time to working on equity. From their perspective, discourse about race, equity and social justice were distinct from discourse about pedagogy and curriculum in the teaching students of color.

Ms. Bartlett believes social justice, race, and curriculum are intertwined, particularly when educating African American students in the South. "We talk about race every day. In light of what's happening we need to talk about our mission...This is happening all the time. This [situation] made the news...[equity] should be embedded into everything we do."

Each year, the first professional development day for staff members focuses on race and equity. Ms. Bartlett leads the session and reiterates the mission of the school. The elementary, middle and high school principals also reiterate this core message to explain why their schools

exist and how that belief guides their decision-making on many elements of the school, such as professional development, coaching teachers, curriculum, and conversations with families.

*With parents.* Given the paucity of public schools in the surrounding towns with comparable student achievement results. Lincoln College Preparatory schools are considered the “good” schools or “safe” schools and attract black and white middle class families. Currently, more than a quarter of the students do not qualify for free or reduced lunch. This is higher than Ms. Bartlett had intended, yet charter laws require any student who enters and is selected from the lottery to be accepted into the school.

Ms. Bartlett believes that when principals do not overcommunicate the mission of the school, misalignment between parents’ expectations and the school’s instructional decisions creates conflict. Ms. Bartlett coaches the principals to communicate the mission of the school to all parents from the very beginning:

I think all kids should get a great education. I think affluent white kids should get a great education, but that’s not why we created this school. We’re not saying all those other people’s education doesn’t matter, we are targeting a specific group of people who have been historically underserved. When I say black lives matter, I’m not saying mine own doesn’t. We’re in your face about that.

We have parents every year who say, “Why are you reading the Mathew Shepard story?” Usually these are the same people who are complaining about race. [I say], “We don’t have alternative text. By going here, you are agreeing to your kids reading this. We are going to talk about gay rights. I know there are people who choose not to come because in fifth grade kids read *Nighthohn*<sup>4</sup>.

We can educate all those folks to understand why but who has extra time to do all of that? It’s about being very focused about why our school exists and not being apologetic about that.

Ms. Evanlin reiterates how important it was for her to internalize the mission of the school to communicate and uphold it when it is challenged by stakeholders:

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<sup>4</sup> *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen is a young adult historical fiction of a young girl learning how to read and write from a man name Nightjohn who risks torture and punishment to teach other slaves how to read.

I think about experiences that I have had over time dealing with parents who disagree with our mission, and it's like, first of all, you have to really truly believe it yourself, because to be able to walk the walk and talk the talk, because if not you're going to get caught in a situation where you're like, "I don't really know what I am talking about." You have to believe it yourself, but then don't back down.

Over the last fifteen years, Ms. Evanlin developed a reputation as an ally for the black community. Ms. Evanlin feels white parents are surprised to meet a white principal who defends their school's focus on social justice:

I think that the white parents just see me as another person, but I think they don't think that they are going to see that passion for social justice from me necessarily. I think they think that I am going to give into them, but I don't, because I am not going to back down. I think they see me as just a principal, like nothing any different until they want to push back on something that has to do with race and I think they automatically think because I am the same as them, I am going to take their side.

Drawing in and attracting economically disadvantaged families of color to Lincoln College Preparatory requires intentional outreach efforts. Ms. Donovan organizes recruiting trips to connect low-income families with the school:

We need to go knock on doors and find families and say, "We need you in this lottery. Let me dispel these myths about our school." We've got to continue to do that. For a while our schools fell off doing that. The primary school has got a good excuse, "We've got a fresh recruiting wave. Let's hit the streets, and let's hit certain streets and not some of those streets."

The intention is not to repel middle class families but to compensate for low-income families who have less time, transportation, and connection to apply their children to a charter school lottery.

*Hiring.* Selecting leaders and teachers who are mission-aligned and developing them with a growth mindset is a priority. Ms. Bartlett's explicit statement of her belief attracts principals and teachers who are aligned with the mission of the school. Ms. Mehta notes that she was drawn to leave a comfortable job on the West Coast and re-locate to work at Lincoln College Preparatory because of Ms. Bartlett's unapologetic and explicit statement on the mission

of the schools. Now as a principal, Ms. Mehta looks for candidates who express beliefs that are aligned to the school's mission and vision. "I think the commitment to that type of thinking in mission is harder to develop than instructional pedagogies." Given the realities of recruiting and hiring teachers in a rural community, however, she recognizes this is more of an ideal than possibility:

You know, it gets complicated. In high school, we go for content knowledge, and if you don't know how to teach, we know how to help you teach. It's harder to grow on the values. I don't think it's impossible, but I think it's hard. "I want to work on civil rights," is something that I clearly look for in candidates. Do we end up hiring 100% people only with that reasoning to come to teaching? No. But I think it helps to be looking for it.

Ms. Bartlett would rather hire someone with less teaching experience whose beliefs are aligned with the vision and mission of the school, than someone whose beliefs are misaligned yet have more teaching experience. To her, growth mindset means believing that "All people can learn. We move along this spectrum continuously."

Similarly, many members of the leadership team feel their self-awareness, understanding of issues of racial inequity, and in turn, their ability to clearly articulate a statement of their beliefs on equity has grown over time. The principals express their appreciation for Ms. Bartlett intentionally developing them in this way. Ms. Mehta expresses the value of being mission-aligned with her supervisor: "I think I've been really lucky to work for someone whom I so passionately agree with on the mission, and who has taught me a lot, and who has been a really good mentor and role model." Mr. Oaks whose understanding of utilizing education as a tool for social justice evolved through the work, expresses similar gratitude for his development:

When I got here, it was a combination of Ms. Bartlett and Ms. Mehta. Ms. Bartlett showed me and taught me really a lot about the inequity and its connection to our area and the educational outcomes of our area and how that's connected to the inequity and then connecting that to bigger problems in the country of racial profiling, talking about the prison pipeline system, and any other inequity. Realizing that all these pieces are connected was something I just got passionate about.

Through years of coaching by Ms. Bartlett, professional development, and self-reflection, the leaders' critical consciousness and understanding of racism, social justice, and culturally relevant pedagogy are evolving.

*Curriculum: "It's an 'and', not an add-on."* Ms. Bartlett conveys the belief that social justice and equity go together with pedagogy and curriculum. *Nightjohn* is the first novel that every Lincoln College Preparatory student reads in the fifth grade (this is the grade level when students many new students enter the school system). Teachers use the text as an anchor to give meaning and purpose to their education. For black students, whose ancestors trace their roots back to slavery, students learn that literacy is a tool for liberation.

Even now as an executive director, Ms. Bartlett believes she is a teacher at heart. She is eager to model for teachers how they can apply an equity lens into pedagogy and curriculum. She gives adjusting feedback to teachers on class assignments (e.g. "Every name [in this math assignment] is a European based name. Change the names.") or works with department chairs on curriculum (e.g. All ninth graders take a year-long course called "Social Justice"). Nathan Oaks explains that much of his education on social justice happened through professional development sessions that Ms. Bartlett led for the staff:

There are intentional times when we sit and say we are all going to read a text and we are all going to discuss it. Two years ago, it was Teaching to Transgress by bell hooks, and two years before that we did Pedagogy of the Oppressed [by Paulo Freire]. Each year we're challenged to think of ways to continue the social justice conversation and bring new perspectives in. It's very intentional.

This type of consistent adult learning has helped Mr. Oaks develop a habit of integrating equity lens into his discourse with teachers. He emphasizes that pushing for academic rigor and maintaining high expectations are not incompatible practices when teaching students of color. Rather, colorblind discourse about instruction perpetuates inequitable outcomes. Mr. Oaks

models this for instructional coaches and team leaders when observing classes or disaggregating data:

You cannot talk about culture and instruction separately, that doesn't make any sense. It doesn't matter how good your unit plan is if your culture in your room is one of individualism and selfishness, you are not helping people fully realize themselves. You're also not leveraging the strengths of the people in the room to help everybody do it better. It's inefficient, it's not equitable.

We have to talk always in “ands.” It’s always the quality of your objective, and it is how you're maintaining the expectations in your class. It is always, “Let's look at the quality of our SAT scores, and who is earning the highest, and who is earning the lowest, and is that falling into any particular subgroups that we are trying to actually eliminate differences between?” We must look in your classroom and say, “Not only are you getting a hundred percent of your kids each day to participate,” but “Who are we hearing the most from? And, who do you push more? Are there subgroups that are coming up more? Are you calling on boys more than girls? Are you calling on white kids more than black kids or Latino kids? Are you asking only ‘why’ questions to white males?”

Since the middle school has turned over several principals since its founding, Ms. Bartlett is considering how to better codify equity practices into the schools. She believes curriculum is the best way to systematically integrate equity work so that students’ experiences are not reliant on individual teachers or leaders.

At the high school, all ninth-grade students take a required course called “Social Justice”. The class is “designed to help our students know what systems of oppression are, how they've come to be, and most importantly, what they can do change that.” Ms. Mehta shares the course description which reads as follows:

In this course we will examine the concepts of democracy and justice; worldwide inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and the societal and legal constructions of power that have created them. In order to develop an understanding of our place in the world and our roles as democratic citizens, we will explore the historical AND current motivations for the use of democratic institutions and principles in order to achieve equality for the oppressed, under-represented, under-privileged, and unrecognized populations worldwide.

To develop a more complete sense of history’s social component, particular emphasis will be placed on the exploration of social issues, problems, and changes worldwide.

Together we will determine who we are, where come from, how we differ, our common interests and the common bonds we share that give us *power* to create *change* as citizens of the world.

The historical knowledge gleaned from the study of social injustices and civil rights movements of the past and the investigatory tools acquired doing hands-on public work will prepare student to be critical readers, writers, and thinkers as they continue their study of social sciences throughout high school and in college. More importantly, this course will give students the tools they need to make conscientious choices about their roles and responsibilities as members of society. (“Social Justice” course description in Appendix M)

Ms. Mehta acknowledges that many history courses teach a unit on Civil Rights, but they do not teach students how the Civil Rights leaders exercised their agency to be change agents and how students can apply that concept for their current day problems. To Ms. Mehta, culturally relevant pedagogy is an activist curriculum: “You can't get that much more relevant than how do we make our community stronger. How do we fight and change these inequities we all see and we're all angry about?”

Mr. Oaks shares that teaching and learning happen in tandem for teachers and students: “The idea that we explicitly teach and talk about issues of social justice with our kids is a process of learning.” It requires teachers to be learners, as well:

Social justice is a collective conversation that people have with each other to come to a better understanding of the situation. I am informed by my kids' experiences, because I clearly don't have access to their experiences unless I choose to hear their voice and their story.

Mr. Oaks describes teaching as the interplay between teacher offering a space for students to exercise critical thinking, and the teacher learning from the students' perspective. “That's why it's collaborative.” Citing Paolo Freire, he describes teaching and learning as a conversation between people. “You can't think of it even as teachers and students. That's an inappropriate dichotomy. If you start thinking about the world like that it leads to other dichotomies.”

*Family connections.* For Ms. Donovan, teaching for social justice and equity begins with designing the physical structure and programmatic infrastructure to incorporate relationship building with families into how the school operates. The entrance of the primary school is colorful and warm. The front desk receptionist seems to know many family members as they walk through the door. There is a receiving room for parents and children adjacent to the foyer. The room has floor to ceiling glass windows, soft seats, tables and chairs for children, books, and toys neatly arranged for children to play with while they wait for their parents to participate in parent-teacher conferences or wait for their siblings. Ms. Donovan says, "The design of the school and giving people space to know individuals and know families really well is an intentional choice." This begins with parents and students creating a statement about their collective hopes and goals for the student in parent-teacher conferences and home visits and posting it in the students' classrooms:

Every day the first thing a kindergartner sees in the cubby is a picture of their family smiling and hugging them as they're preparing them to send them here. I hope that that bridge starts something symbolic. It's meant to be both symbolic and actual that also in that home visit we're beginning a relationship that is meant to nurture that.

***Learning about families and their story.*** Members of the elementary school leadership team and the principals make home visits an integral part of the back-to-school procedure. Ms. Donovan believes this is essential for building relationships and understanding the hopes and goals parents have for their children.

One of the most important things that we can do is sitting in people's homes for an hour, an hour and a half at a time, and learning them as individuals. Each family has its own story.

One of the questions that we ask is, "Why is it important to you that your child goes to college? I hear a variety of messages. I hear, "Well, I didn't have that opportunity. I want them to do better." I hear, "Well, I didn't have that opportunity at that time. I'm going back now and it's so hard," or, "I started and I couldn't finish." Then also we serve families for whom, "Well, I went and his uncle went and he's going to go." A little bit of

everything. That's super humbling that people are willing to share that, but also really inspiring. It's either, "Well, we've built a good life and we want him to have the same," or, "I want him to do better." A lot more often than the former is that latter. "I want him to do better. I don't want him to have to work three jobs. I don't want him to have to work shift work."

Hearing the varied stories also serves as a counter-narrative about parents of students of color in low-income communities, and for teachers who cross multiple lines of difference with students' families—race, class, education—this develops their own cultural proficiency to work with families in the community and build trusting relationships.

*How parents show care.* During home visits, Ms. Donovan wants to learn how each family expresses love and care to their children, and recognizes that it may look different for different families.

I ask parents, 'What are some ways that you show care in your family?' We know that our families love their kids. I learned in home visits some of our families show their kids that they care by sitting down and eating dinner with them every night. Some of our families show that they care by working two jobs, which means they never eat dinner together, but that mom always has something in the freezer."

*Partnership with families for students' growth.* Ms. Donovan expresses several times the value of knowing and leveraging family members as partners and resources for students' social, emotional and academic growth, especially among young children.

Rodney is the youngest in his family and gets really upset. Because he has three older sisters at home they can help him cope when he gets real, real mad at home. He's got three or four people who can take turns helping him get calm. If he's upset with mom, then oldest sister talks to him. If he's upset with oldest sister, then middle sister.

At the high school level, partnership with families becomes more practical, for example discussing parents' fears and concerns about sending their children to college. Mr. Oak shares, "Some families have legitimate fears, [so we say] 'Why don't you talk to this family, because this family has gone through this now and already experienced it. Why don't you learn from their experience?'" Leveraging the experiential knowledge of experienced families to help families

who are sending their first child to college is a way that the school can bridge families to existing strengths in the community. When staff members express a belief that Lincoln College Preparatory *added* value to the community, he quickly challenges it: “No, this community has a huge amount of value and strength, and we came to work alongside them to help them achieve their vision for their families and kids.”

*Teaching self-advocacy skills and empowering students.* An indicator that Lincoln College Preparatory is fulfilling its mission is the students’ ability to self-advocate and challenge systems and practices they believe are antithetical to racial equity and social justice. At the middle and high schools, this begins with teachers incorporating current event articles about their community into the curriculum, then pairing that with real-world activities. For example, in the high school students, students are reading articles about the history of racism, gerrymandering, and segregated school systems in their area, and attending court hearings, participating in protest rallies, and meeting with local NAACP chapter leaders. The principals talk about dual-purpose teaching—achieving multiple purposes through a teaching and learning opportunity—literacy with an equity focus; history with activism.

Giving students the opportunity to practice self-advocacy and utilize their education for self-empowerment begins inside the school. Ms. Bartlett recognizes that educating and empowering students increases teachers’ and leaders’ self-awareness about their own practice, as well:

We’re trying to teach kids to advocate for themselves and push the limits and fight against systems and realize that we [the teachers and leaders] are a system. We are teaching kids to push back on every system we create. [For educators] being open to continuous improvement, feedback, [and having] the willingness to listen and change is hard.

Giving students the academic skills and knowledge to challenge systems requires reflective practice and a willingness to give up power. Ms. Bartlett gives an example:

You might say school policy is you can't have headgear. Then African American teachers or students wear headdress. But the policy states you can't have headgear. Then a kid is finding research and saying [to you], "Let me show you how that [policy] is form of oppression. Let me show you how in professional situations people can wear this now. Headdress was removed during colonialization."

You have to be prepared to have that conversation and listen, and not just say "[Students] have to do that because the policy says," because that's not the kind of kids we're trying to create. You have to listen to kids. It's not about policy.

Similarly, Ms. Mehta notes the double-consciousness that teachers and leaders need to have about their own practice so they do not re-create an oppressive system within the school:

If you're trying to empower revolutionaries, you can't expect them to not question. Right? You have to be comfortable with that. They're supposed to ask you "why?" The answer can never be, "Because I told you so." Because then we're recreating the system that we claim we're fighting against.

### Leadership Evolution, Strengths, and Opportunities

*Research Question 3: How have the schools evolved over time while staying committed to their mission? What are their strengths and opportunities for development in pursuit of their mission?*

The results for this research question focuses on interviews, walkthroughs, classroom observations and documents for Lincoln College Preparatory middle school, the focal school for this research. The first part will discuss how the founder and the middle school principals describe the evolution of the middle school over time. The second part focuses on the strengths and opportunities for development for the Lincoln College Preparatory middle school in pursuit of their mission.

*Evolution of the middle school.* Although the core mission of the school—to fight for social justice and education of historically oppressed racial minorities—has been the same, Ms. Bartlett believes the opportunity moving forward is systematically codifying instructional

practices and curriculum for every cohort of students to have a high quality educational experience and understanding of the school's mission. For the middle school, Ms. Bartlett notes, "We've had couple leadership changes at the middle school. This is our ninth group of seniors," and how much the "get it" depends on the school leaders and teachers they have had. "Who was your school leader, who were your teachers to see how much do you "get it"?"

After William Young (the co-founder) left Lincoln College Preparatory to start another charter school in the Northeast, the school was led by a novice leader for three years who was not a founding teacher and had not internalized the mission of the school. During the transitional years between Ms. Young's and Ms. Erin Evanlin's leadership, the school focused on meeting state test scores and changed its reputation as the neighborhood's "safe school." Ms. Evanlin notes:

It was all about trying to make test scores. When I came into [the principal] role, parents said, 'Our kids are coming to Lincoln College Preparatory because it's the safe school in the area. They are not going to be picked on; there's no shootings,' and my mind was blown. How did that become what our school was known as?

During Ms. Evanlin's first year as a successor principal, a significant number of staff members did not return.

It was a progression; it's not like things can change overnight. We slowly started infusing and bringing back the social justice piece and making sure from the minute we do the home visits, that parents understand that this is a college preparatory school. We say, "Your child is going to do a lot of the home work, your child is going to be safe, but we're also going to talk about social justice issues."

On any given day, Ms. Evanlin receives emails or phone calls from parents or community members, mostly white, who question and challenge her insistence on advocating for the Black Lives Matter movement or social justice.

*Strengths in pursuit of the mission.*

1) Maintaining transportation and student cafeteria services. Despite per-pupil funding decreasing in the state, Lincoln College Preparatory has continuously provided free bus transportation for all students. Buses sometimes drive over an hour to pick up children in adjacent counties. Since the state does not provide additional funding for transportation, most charter schools do not offer free bus services. The schools also serve breakfast, lunch, morning and afternoon snacks to all students given that majority of their students participate in the Free and Reduced-Lunch program. Ms. Bartlett feels these two programs are critical for low-income families to have access to her schools.

2) Intentionally recruiting students from low-income racial minority communities. Since charter schools must admit any student who enters and is selected from the lottery, the demographics of the school is largely determined by who has the time, access, and ability to apply. Despite the school's strong reputation and waiting lists, the school leaders still actively send out flyers, recruit in low-income neighborhoods, and enlist community leaders to raise awareness about the school among low-income black and Latino families.

3) Communicating its mission to stakeholders despite resistance. All the principals communicate the school's mission to fight for social justice and racial equity. The principals, unprompted, will explicitly say their schools exist to fight the history of racialized oppression. They actively engage with parents who challenge and question this purpose, and feel empowered to stand up to, and not back down in the face of controversy. Starting the first professional development session for the year with a study on social justice, represents the leadership team's values.

4) Alignment of leaders and teachers on the mission. In interviewing the middle school principals and teacher leaders, the following beliefs and practices are echoed at every level:

- a. An adult culture of giving, receiving, and applying constructive feedback for growth: “The willingness to receive constructive criticism and grow from it and not necessarily take it as personal. I think a lot of times people want to take it personal and get very defensive but they are there to help you. To just knowing that they're there and they'll ask what you need, how can we help is very nice.”
- b. Willingness to work above and beyond the printed school hours: “Everyone around you is also working a lot so you don't necessarily think you're working too much.”
- c. Building relationships with students and families: “Building relationships with kids is hugely stressed. So, you'll find yourself at the movies with students or taking kids home.”

*Opportunities.*

1) Incorporating equity content into curriculum. Ms. Bartlett noted systematically incorporating social justice and equity content into every curriculum as a key opportunity for the schools. In two rounds of walkthroughs of the middle school, the most visible artifacts that reinforced the school’s mission were posters of black leaders, quotes from Civil Rights activists, and t-shirts with #BlackLivesMatter messages worn by a few teachers. One language arts teacher consistently incorporated reading material that focused on community issues to teach reading skills. Aside from these examples, most teachers did not demonstrate nor cite in conversations, how they were incorporating culturally relevant content or social justice perspectives into their lessons with consistency or alignment with other subjects or grade levels.

2) Pedagogy and attention moves. A consistent aspect of Lincoln College Preparatory middle school classes is the type of attention moves (Saphier, 2008, p.24) teachers employ to

direct students' movement, actions, speech, and overall behavior. Saphier categorizes moves teachers strategically engage to “capture, maintain, or recapture or refocus student attention,” (p.23) into five categories—desisting, alerting, enlisting, acknowledging and winning. Desisting moves (e.g. punishment, exclusion, orders, reprimands) are the most authoritarian moves and winning moves (e.g. encouragement, praise, humor, dramatizing) attract students to learning. In two separate walkthroughs of classrooms, one at the start of the school year, and one mid-year, I observed mostly “desisting” moves. Teachers frequently ordered the students to be silent by asking them to get to “zero” as in zero volume. Many teachers gave minute-by-minute directions with timers counting down on the overhead projector or projection screen. Teachers gave students specific information about where to place materials on a desk; where to stand; how to stand; where to place their pencils; what to signal if they need a tissue or a pencil. Teachers frequently ordered students to “show me CATS” an acronym that stands for “close your mouth, ask and answer questions, track the speaker, sit and stay still.” While sixth grade students were waiting outside of a classroom, they were separated into two straight lines—one for boys and the other for girls.

Lincoln College Preparatory also has adopted other “No Excuses” like charter schools like the use of “paychecks” in which students earn “dollars” for meeting or exceeding expectations, or lose “dollars” for not meeting them (e.g. missing homework, lateness to school, talking out of turn, not following the behavior rules of the classroom). Students who average a certain amount on their weekly paycheck can earn field trips, prizes, or privileges; students who hit a low paycheck score can be isolated or sit on “bench” which socially isolates students by not allowing them to talk or interact with peers in classrooms, transitions, or lunch room, yet still attend classes.

## **Morris Charter Schools**

David Martinez, the Executive Director and co-founding principal of Morris Charter, is unrolling a blueprint of the future high school and elementary school buildings that will be built on the current campus. We are meeting in his brightly lit office on the second floor of a 45,000-square foot modern school building sitting atop 30.9 acres of land donated to the school by a local real estate company. Just a year ago, Morris Charter met in an 8,000-square foot modular building across the street from an addiction recovery center and an assisted living home.

The new Morris Charter campus is arguably the most modern complex in town. Cubic in design, it has soaring ceilings and large glass windows that floods open spaces with natural light. The school hired a Yale graduate to manage the on-site cafeteria which partners with local organic farmers to create fresh, nutritious meals from scratch. There are few schools in the state that look like this; let alone ones where 100% of students qualify for free or reduced-lunch and 95% of students are black or Latino. “We decided to create this school because we decided to take a current paradigm that was out there, a current level of expectation and completely defy it in a lot of ways,” David says. Why shouldn’t black and Latino students have the *best* school building in town?

Behind his desk, I see a picture of his young family at the beach. He and his wife Alicia, co-founder and Dean of Curriculum and Instruction of Morris Charter, have two boys, an infant who is downstairs at the in-school daycare and a preschooler. While growing a family, David and Alicia are growing a high school and an elementary school, too. It is rare for a charter school to open two schools at the same time; money and talent are scarce resources in one of the poorest counties in the state. Again, defying expectations.

What led David to co-found and lead the highest performing charter school in the state?

David smirks before answering this question:

This is going to sound mushy. First, probably meeting my wife, because that's what we started dreaming about together. Our very fun, very 30,000 feet in the air, big picture conversations about what we would do if we were in charge, basically. We didn't want to be those people who just griped about what was going on but we wanted to say what we would do.

Alicia taught five years in the local public schools. She was proud of the progress students made in her class. Then seeing her former students regress after progressing was “disheartening.”

When you would see your kids a couple years later, three years later, and all the stuff that you did with them and the values, it's just you only have them a year so you can do so much. We loved [our town] but we weren't making the change we wanted to so we needed to think bigger. We knew we wanted to open up a school. We had no idea how.

Their first step was to learn how to run and lead a charter school by working as teachers at Lincoln College Preparatory. David and Alicia spent four and three years, respectively, teaching and being mentored by Allison Bartlett and William Young. They considered opening another “branch” of Lincoln College Preparatory and ultimately, they struck out on their own. The time between the decision to open a school and applying for the charter was quick, David describes:

It was during Christmas break in New York City and the [charter school] application was due second week of February, so we hadn't done anything. No research, anything like that.

The first question we asked which spilled into the two, three, four-hour conversation was, "Can we do this?" Of course, that segued into, "How do we do this?" That led to more questions and more conversations, and bigger to-do lists and it just keep going and going and going, and then we just went all in for six weeks, and created what I thought was a pretty good application and assembled a board of directors and were ready to apply. It's almost like that the next line should be, "The rest is history," right? But that's what it feels like.

Alicia is forthright about what they learned at Lincoln College Preparatory and what they replicated at Morris Charter:

The vast majority of our beliefs and values, everything based on character, character first, values first, came from Lincoln College Preparatory.... if I think back, our discipline policy, our ideas, our values, our group meeting times. A lot of that is taken from Lincoln College Preparatory.

Following Lincoln College Preparatory's model for managing students' behavior, establishing the culture, and teaching worked for a while until the Common Core State Standards went into effect.

[In the founding year], first set of test scores were at 77% students passing and then we started touching 87% and then Common Core came and just like with the rest of the state, it kicked our butt and we went down to 51% students passing. That's when we said, 'All right, there's something that's not working so now we have to go and study the schools where it is working.' Our curriculum team got together after that first round of state test scores that kicked our butt and we revamped the entire curriculum. Took our curriculum and just threw it in the garbage, pretty much.

They decided not to "put new shoelaces on old shoes." Instead, Alicia overhauled their school's academic strategies, leadership training model, and curriculum. They spent a summer re-writing curriculum with their department chairs and instructional coaches. They invested deeply in developing their leadership team in instructional coaching practices. They spent time at Uncommon Schools, a charter school network in the Northeast, adopting their instructional coaching practices and pedagogy. That is when Morris Charter started accelerating, even exceeding the results that Lincoln College Preparatory on state assessments. Currently, Morris Charter is one of the top 2.8% of schools to earn the highest rating by the state.

#### Leadership Beliefs at Morris Charter

*Research Question 1: According to founding leaders of equitable and excellent charter schools, what are the theoretical groundings of schools that serve students of color?*

Three major themes emerged as the theoretical groundings of Morris Charter schools from interviews with the co-founders, David and Alicia Martinez, and the leadership team of the middle and high schools.

1. A belief in the people and the potential of the community
2. A belief that equity is about access and having choices. When students have academic and character skills to go to and through the college of their choice, they will have more choices in life.
3. An orientation towards constantly raising the bar of excellence, defying expectations society has of students of color, and “punching the ceiling” on what people think students can achieve

*Belief in the potential of the community.* David is quick to admit that social justice and racial equality were not the primary reasons why he joined Teach For America; rather, he came to appreciate and understand the connection between education and social justice as a teacher. David’s family has their heritage in Puerto Rico but he was born and raised in upstate New York. His father owns a technology company and his mother is a principal of a private school. David attended private schools before going to college. He joined Teach For America to travel to a different part of the United States. On his first day at Teach For America’s summer training institute, however, David recognized himself in the Latino students enrolled in the summer school program in Houston:

First day an institute, I started seeing some of myself in kids. The kid who was pride-driven, prone to anger, and simply just wasn't globally aware of understanding or wasn't looking at the big picture of things, and started seeing myself in kids.

This theme—learning to understand the connection between education and social justice through the work—is consistent among the leaders at Morris Charter. The principals and

instructional coaches explain they joined the team because they wanted to work with David and Alicia who are both charismatic, energetic, and developed a reputation for success.

David talks about his first years as a teacher in the local traditional schools with enthusiasm. He believes the township of Morris and its surrounding community has tremendous untapped potential. "I came here in 2002, lived in the community and just attached myself to so many different pieces. One thing I like to talk about a lot is the recreation center here." David nostalgically describes his early days coaching and teaching in Morris.

I'd go to the recreation center on Friday nights, not have a game, nothing, and just to see my students playing, my other kids come and sit with me watching the game. That small-town feel makes feel like you don't know a fraction of the community and it makes you feel like you know the community.

Living in a small-town is appealing to David because of the interconnectedness of people's lives. "It feels like you're so immersed in those relationships which informs your very existence." In addition, he can tangibly see the impact he is making on the community, unlike larger cities where it might feel like his efforts are a drop in the bucket.

Everything we do impacts each other. There's so much overlap to things here. The person who approves our land, the county side, is also the person our teacher is renting from, who has a grandchild attending the school. Miss Johnston [a veteran teacher from the community] used to start her class saying, "Someway I know your family. I bet you if I sit with each of you," and she goes, "I will in the next couple weeks, I will know somebody in your family." Unless the kid just moved there, 99 out of 100 times, she was right.

In addition to feeling connected to the community and knowing the significance of the impact they can make, David also deeply conveys a belief in the town's potential.

You just start realizing that the community itself is scratching the surface in terms of what their potential is, and from a small standpoint of a classroom you start seeing pieces of it, right? Like, you start getting better as a teacher and realizing, "Man, these kids can do things that other people can do." I mean, because you didn't know that.

*Defy expectations and “punch the ceiling”*. David’s belief in the community is coupled with his belief in his students’ potential. In the early years of the school, Morris Charter focused on helping students meet proficiency standards. Now as one the highest performing schools in the state, they are reaching for something higher. David and Alicia refer to this as “punching the ceiling,” as in, defying pre-conceived notions of how high minority students from low-income communities can achieve. Through his own experience teaching David felt that, “every time I’ve thought even close to hitting the ceiling, I found out I’m light years away from it.” He reiterates that he refuses to place a cap on what he thinks students from his community can achieve: “We challenge ourselves every year to be punch through the ceiling, so to speak, in terms of what kids can do and I still think we’re not anywhere close to that place.”

For Alicia, “punching the ceiling” is synonymous with never settling for less, and constantly raising the bar of excellence. It means when the team reaches one goal, setting the next one a bit higher. It is undergirded with a sense of urgency and commitment helping all subgroups of become more competitive and more successful through college.

We do not have time to waste, we have to make sure that our curriculum is of the highest level and that our teachers are executing at the highest level. We are never complacent. We were an A plus school last year, what we told our staff, "That's great. Now it's time to punch through the ceiling." Now we have to get better. Now we have to look at this subgroup of emerging students who may not have grown as well.

We are never content with where we are and I think that statement, that mindset really just drives our school and so in order to make sure we're providing the best education for our students it really does come in this curricular piece where we have to make sure that it's at the highest level, and we're implementing it at the highest level so that in 2019, when [Morris Charter’s founding class] turn in their [college] applications and start applying all over, that they are competitive. If they're not then it's not equitable, right? It's not what we promised.

*Equity is about having choices.* In speaking with the members of the leadership team, they often refer to the “mission” driving their decisions and focus. David defines the mission of Morris Charter as follows:

We broke our mission down to three places, help our kids become better people, help them attend and graduate from the college of their choice, help them be world problem solvers that contribute.

Morris Charter’s vision of equity is ensuring children have choices in life. Many leaders emphasize the value of choice, including Jennifer Lazio, the instructional dean: “Choice [is] really important. A life of choices. Creating students that will then go on to change what they don't like about the world.” Evan Forte, the middle school principal, describes equity as ensuring that children are, “equipped to go to and through college...and they have the ability to make a choice for themselves.” Their theory of action is that one’s life choices are vastly improved with a college degree. To that end, Evan believes that developing students’ character and academic skills improves their chances at enrolling in a college of their choice:

What does it take to be successful in college? Two big ones that come to mind is we've got to teach our kids to be great people first. Being a great person involves the social skills that you need down the road to navigate a college campus, but also the work ethic that you're going to need to navigate a college campus. When I think of character, I think teaching them to be great people socially, but also having developed really, really strong habits in kids that will carry them.

1) Character education. Jennifer and Evan both use the terms “creating better people” as the centrality of character education. Jennifer says:

The character education element of Morris Charter is really important to me. I never had that in my education and I think that working at places like Lincoln College Preparatory and [Morris Charter] have actually made me a better person as well in what I'm teaching to students about character.

David believes that “you can really teach culture, you can really teach character in a way that helps people become better people, and that sky's the limit for that.” That includes teaching students how to manage their impulses or make better decisions:

They can make mistakes but at the same time, they can learn how to evaluate their decisions, they can learn how their decisions impact the future, they can learn how to be empathetic, especially through their social interactions, they can learn how to access power through their vernacular.

2) Academics. The second part of their mission includes providing a high quality, well-rounded education to academically succeed in college and be prepared to lead in the future. For David, that means extending curriculum beyond state proficiency standards.

It means that the content is alive and well and it means something bigger than the test that you took that week, and so we've got to continuously challenge ourselves in that regard of what is the academic offerings we're having towards kids that allow them to bring out their talents and contribute to our school in a way that's organic to them.

George Hanson, principal of the high school, believes that an equitable education is providing his students a comparable education that children in affluent communities receive:

Everything that we do is centered around our mission, and our mission is really equity in a nutshell. We're going to first give our students character education and help them be better people. It is connected to equity in that we want our students to have every advantage of rich, white, or middle-class, affluent, together family, with a husband and a wife, and no threat of food security, or no threat of health security, or physical security.

Everything that we do, from our events, from our celebrations, to our classes, to our community meetings, everything is centered around the idea of helping people close the gap with their more affluent peers.

Evan echoes a similar comparison about academics although he focuses on helping students become academic “insiders” versus an “outsider”:

We're putting in front of kids and the instruction that we're giving is on par with some of the best schools across the nation in terms of rigor. When they sit in a college classroom on day one, they don't feel like they're an outsider academically.

Alicia synthesizes the beliefs in the power of academics and character in this statement:

I'd want them to say that the curriculum and the academics put them on a level when they were in classes that they could hang; and that they were prepared. I'd want them to say that we talked to them and prepared them for the grit that needed to be instilled in order for them to be successful in college and that they were able to be gritty and find the third way in order to achieve their goals.

The third part of the mission is less echoed among the leadership team, and it feels like the next frontier David is exploring with them: becoming world problem solvers. "I want kids who take initiative, I want kids who are great people, I want kids who want to lead, who want to not go with the status quo but have the intelligence to be able to know how to do it."

### Leadership Practices at Morris Charter

*Research Question 2: How do school leaders translate these beliefs, values, and principles into their schools' practice?*

Five themes emerged from conversations with the co-founders and the leadership team on how they operationalize leadership beliefs and theoretical groundings into practice at Morris Charter.

1. Communication: Investing stakeholders in the mission and vision
2. Hiring: selecting leaders and teachers who are mission-aligned
3. Leadership Team: Developing and empowering guardians of the culture
4. Defining and upholding school-wide culture
5. Developing teachers through coaching and rapid implementation

*Communication: Investing stakeholders in the mission and vision.* Although David and Alicia do not explicitly name communication as one of their core practices, their consistent communication, explication, and investment of all stakeholders in the mission of the school are evident when speaking to anyone.

1) Investing the leadership team in the mission. The principals and instructional coaches share a common language to express the mission of the school, and they convey the mission consistently and passionately. The middle and high principals and instructional coaches name the three parts of the school's mission, and explain how they operationalize at least two of the three parts with specificity. Jennifer Lazio thinks that David and Alicia have "branded" Morris Charter as "mission-driven" schools. The leadership team members explain the mission with actionable detail. Moreover, they recount numerous ways they have invested other colleagues, students, and parents in the school's mission and connect it with students' life goals and personal values.

For example, Iliana Hanson, an instructional coach and wife of the high school principal, George, expresses the connection between the school's mission and the value add the school can bring to students' material realities, in her own way.

The mission of Morris Charter is to give our kids the academic skills and character traits to allow them to become world changing problem-solvers. We want them to be good people, to recognize what good people do in tough situations. To recognize the impact that life altering mistakes can make on their lives. We want them to realize that they have the potential to change whatever it is that they want to in the world. That it happens through education, and we want them to have the academic skills to be able to achieve everything that they want to.

Evan Forte, the middle school principal, explains the mission in a way that has material value to students' future selves.

The mission of our school is that when students graduates from high school that regardless of their race, class, income that they all have the same options as one another and they have the ability to make the choice that they would want to of what their future education looks like. They're equipped to go to and through college. Just that they're equipped to go to and through college and that they have the ability to make a choice for themselves.

George Hanson explains how the mission informed what he looked for when visiting high performing high schools during his principal residency to create the instructional vision for the high school. He looked at schools serving similar demographics as his school but also ones

that operationalized the school's focused on academics, character education, and college graduation. Factors such as exemplary Advanced Placement exam results, graduation and college acceptance rates, strong curriculum, and student culture were considered. In describing how he looked at school culture, George explains he looked at:

Everything from the way that the dress code is upheld, to the way that students ask questions, the way the students respond to questions, the posture of students in a classroom, the voice that students are given in the whole school or whole class modes, student leadership. I poll a few students during every visit that I do. I just ask them questions. "What do you like about this school? What would you change about it? Are you pushed? Do you feel like you're being pushed hard enough, not hard enough?" I just ask a lot of questions, and just generally those are the lenses I look to when I'm looking for student culture.

When I ask Jennifer how David and Alicia invest her and other leadership team members in the mission, she describes several ways they do this. First, they ground decisions in the mission:

Anytime [David] asks you to do something or he's rolling out a new initiative to staff, it's clear how it impacts kids. It's clear what's at stake if it's not done well. I think a little bit of that is charisma and the way that he rolls it out to people to get them invested. There's a certain intensity behind it that makes whatever he's saying feel really important and really urgent to the moment.

Jennifer also describes how David enlists individuals by gaining their commitment to do their best work:

Then he'll empower leaders with these one-liners of, "You got me on this, right?" Or, "Don't let me down." Or, "It's going to be the highest level, right?" Like what you do with kids, in terms of a challenge. You don't want to let him down.

Several leadership team members also share that their personal relationships with David and Alicia make them feel invested in the school's success as if it were their own success. For example, Jennifer shares:

I think for me there's a personal aspect to that too of, we have known each other for a long time. I consider [David] a friend as well. I think that's true of a lot of my relationships at the school. I have personal connections with people. You can't always separate. I care about this person and professionally I want to do my job well.

The leaders describe wanting to work at Morris Charter because of its clarity of focus and mission. Jennifer explains that is what keeps her here, even on the toughest days:

In terms of what keeps me here, I think it is ultimately mission-driven. I think the work we do is not societally recognized as prestigious. There's so many cons for [working in] the world of education. If you don't have that strong tie to the mission, it becomes really, really hard work to do. More difficult work to do.

2) Investing parents in the mission. David is unequivocal and unyielding in communicating high expectations for students to parents. For David, holding high expectations while considering the realities and challenges of his students' lives is not incompatible. In fact, it is a disservice to students to lower expectations now when they will have to meet high expectations to succeed in life. Believing in students means “adhering to a child's need while holding them to the highest expectations”.

Certainly I can't turn a blind eye to the challenges that children may come in with and they have, and just say, "No, this is the bar." At the same time the bar can't come down. What we try to tell families is, "Ma'am if you're saying the challenge is too tough, you're saying life's too tough. Because what we're asking them to do is what is going to prepare them for life, and at some point, somebody's going to ask them to do this and either they struggle now or they're going to struggle in the future. The stuff that we're asking students to do—meeting deadlines and being meticulous and being good to other people and working really hard and organizing themselves and follow through, and good communication skills—this is all real-life stuff, so if you're saying it's too hard now, if you're saying this is too hard for them and school's too hard, at some point they're going to be asked to do these things.”

Conversations with parents about high expectations and meeting the school's bar of excellence vary depending on the grade level when students enter Morris Charter. David explains:

[Morris Charter's expectations] is very different than what [students] are used to. If [students] come in the younger grades, obviously they have less experience and they may even have less of a deficit, because they haven't been in school that long. The older grades have more experience, their habits could be a lot worse and their gaps could be a lot bigger...The concern parents can have is we're just asking kids to do is too much [work]. It's either too difficult or too much.

When parents compare what their children’s previous school expected students to do—whether it is homework or behavior expectations—and express concerns that Morris Charter asks them to do too much, David sees it as an opportunity to shift parents’ “paradigm”.

[Stretching their paradigm] is the best way I can think how to say. We decided to create this school because we decided to take a current paradigm that was out there, a current level of expectation and completely defy it in a lot of ways. I mean, that's the not sole reason for the school but it is an act of defiance in a lot of ways, of the status quo. When you are building the culture for either staff or kids, you have to help them see that paradigm shift, invest in them and embrace that. We tell parents a lot, like "Embrace that it's harder. If it was easy, everybody would do it." Embrace that it's hard because it's making us better.

Evan Forte gives multiple examples of how he builds relationships with parents to bridge school and home, and leverage parents as stakeholders to communicate purposeful action to students. This begins with a meeting at the start of the school year with parents:

We have an enrollment meeting. We try to talk about what the culture of the school is like and what we're trying to do. Our families often times share things that they're trying to do at home with their kids and sometimes they align. Sometimes they don't. We hope that by doing that, by bringing families in, by constantly communicating with them that we can try to align our visions of here and at home.

Evan works with parents to align on the tactical aspects of school at the beginning of the year.

We try to let them know what we need from them in order to help their child be successful at the start of the year. Reading, signing homework, planners, coming to school events, coming to parent conferences. We try to be upfront with that.

What’s more striking is that Evan is deliberate about how he celebrates students’ successes with families, not just the students.

We try to really celebrate families the same way that we would celebrate children, so at our awards ceremonies, the families are going to earn an award too. A child meets his Accelerated Reader goal? Family's going to earn the reward. Child has perfect attendance? Child's going to earn a shirt and the parent's going to earn a shirt. We try to celebrate our families and students at the same time.

In addition, Evan communicates with families when students are struggling from the onset, and continue the conversation if both parties are not fulfilling their end to meet the students' goals.

If we feel like a child's struggling, we have that conversation, too. We say, "Here's what we're noticing. Here's what we're trying. Here's how we think you can really help. What are your thoughts? Yeah, I need to do that, too. Or, no I don't think that that would work." Then if there's the tension of "I don't think that would work" versus "no, we really need your child to read," then we have that difficult conversation with the family, too." There's the front-end piece, there's the celebration, and there's the partnership, but also the accountability piece. They'll hold us accountable if they feel like we're not holding up our end of the bargain with their child.

Evan invites conversations and meetings with parents to problem-solve collaboratively. "Generally, anytime a parent calls with a concern that can't be figured out over the phone, we invite them in to talk with the grade level chair and the teacher involved, and then of course me if needed," he shares. He is also mindful of asking parents about successes. Parents will also tell him, "We want to hear all the great things that are happening at the school." It's important to Evan that relationships with parents are not solely based on negative situations. "We try to make a lot of positive phone calls to the parents, too."

3) Investing students in the mission. Jennifer Lazio believes that students can articulate the first two parts of the school's mission—getting strong academic and character education, and going to the college of their choice:

Kids should be able to tell you their GPA. They should be able to tell you whether that GPA aligns with their schools that they want to go to. They should be able to tell you what course it is that they're trying to take from a B to an A (grade) and speak very intelligently about their academic achievement.

I think they would also speak about the character education piece. How our school operates and how we treat each other sets us apart from more traditional settings.

Jennifer is currently coaching teachers at the high school, and she feels high school students who attended Morris Charter for middle school are especially invested in the mission:

They've had so much of their middle school collective experiences grounded in very set cultural lessons that then we attempt to spiral in the high school. I think they take a lot of pride in it. It's what makes school feel different for them. Especially our students that have been in a more traditional [public school] setting can speak to the contrast [between Morris Charter and their previous school] and how that impacts them both emotionally but also it impacts their learning.

*Hiring.* Selecting leaders and teachers who are mission-aligned is paramount. In building a high-performing team, all the leaders consistently name hiring as an important step in building a strong school culture and delivering strong academic results. They look for candidates who match Morris Charter's "Big Three Virtues": humble, hungry and smart. There are posters of the Big Three Virtues posted in every common space for teachers—work room, meeting rooms, or lounge. They are defined as such:

Humble: Not thinking less of yourself, but thinking about yourself less and being team-centered.

Hungry: Being self-motivated, desiring to go above and beyond, and turning intention into action.

Smart: Having common sense about people and recognizing that your words and actions can have an impact on others.

Various teachers are celebrated and storied for demonstrating these virtues around the school. A picture of the teacher and a brief narrative of how they show these virtues is posted in the teacher workroom. Jennifer explains what humble, hungry and smart mean in her own words:

Humble is your ability to take feedback; to accept responsibility for areas of growth. In interviews, we have people do a lot of practice [teaching] and we give them on-the-spot feedback.

Hunger is the desire to improve. That's where we are unapologetic and transparent about the number of hours that the job requires and the expectations that our current teachers are operating under. To see if they self-select out at that point.

Then smart is a different definition for us. For the high school, yes, we definitely want content experts obviously. But smart is seen more as socially intelligent. Can you read a room? Can you work with people? Are people going to want to be around you? Are you going to contribute to this team and family feel? I think that one's harder to interview for.

Taken further, five themes emerged as leaders explained what they looked for in "humble, hungry and smart" candidates.

- 1) High expectations for students.
- 2) Humility: Openness to feedback.
- 3) Mission-driven work ethic.
- 4) Smart: Ability to turn intentions in actions.
- 5) Alignment with the school's mission.

1) High expectations for students. Building a team—leaders and teachers—who maintain a high bar of excellence for students begins with hiring people who are aligned with the mission of the school. Alicia is unapologetic about hiring or firing staff members whose beliefs about student do not align with the school's mission.

We don't manage people who don't have high expectations or who don't believe that all of our kids will learn, who don't believe that our kids will rise to the highest expectations. We really get rid of that in our interview process. I don't care if you're from Harvard and you went to the best school of education. If I ask you a question about "can all kids learn?" or if I ask you a question about "a kid is failing, what do you do?" and you can't answer those mindset types of questions and you're not mission-oriented it's not the place for you.

2) Humility: openness to feedback. All the leaders describe how much easier it is to improve the school when staff members are open to feedback and willing to change their practice quickly and purposefully. George and Alicia both name humility as the most important quality they look for in job candidates:

Unquestionably, the first [thing I look for] is someone who is open to feedback and shows a good amount of humility. To teach at our school, unless you've been doing it our way, even if you've been in education for a while, it just takes a lot of relearning. If you're new to teaching, it just takes a whole lot of hard work. It gets really frustrating really quick if you're not one of those kinds of people that can just say, "Oh, I did that wrong. Let me try it again," instead of saying, "I didn't do that wrong. You're doing it wrong. That doesn't work," and getting defensive. I would say humility is number one, and just openness to feedback.

Since instructional coaching is core practice at Morris Charter, Jennifer believes it is important to be “upfront with people about what we hire for and look for certain mindsets that might be red flags”.

If I am coaching someone that is resistant to feedback, I find it helpful to continue to ground in the why. "We both know that you want to take your classroom to the next level for kids. You stated that you wanted kids to have these results at the end of the year. This is what we need to do to close some of the gaps."

The leaders all model humility and openness to feedback in their own way. Every time I visit the school, David asks for feedback and invites me to participate in the school’s culture evaluation process. Evan Forte asks me to share feedback about the school when I conduct walkthroughs. After I briefly observe a classroom, George Hanson asks for feedback on what I observed. By modeling openness to feedback to others, they normalize a culture of feedback at the schools.

3) Mission-driven work ethic. In describing the commitment to work at Morris Charter, the leaders believe a “strong” work ethic is not enough. They look for individuals whose strong work ethic is undergirded with the commitment to doing whatever it takes to fulfill their promises to students. George explains that working at Morris Charter is anything but a transactional job, it is mission-driven work:

We are still very transparent with applicants in the application process about the demanding hours and the idea this is not just a job. It's not an 8 to 5. You don't clock in and clock out and call it a day. It's a life-consuming endeavor. It's mission-driven work. Closing the achievement gap is hard, and it takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of effort. If you're onboard with all those things, and I haven't scared you away, then you're on the right track, then I've found someone that's definitely a good mindset fit.

Alicia makes this even more concrete for job candidates and does not apologize for the sacrifices it will take to work at Morris Charter.

We're very frank about what it takes to work at our school. We almost try to scare people. We do. We do. I just interviewed someone who has a few kids and I said, ""Here's what

your life is going to look like. You're going to have to wake up about 4:30 in the morning. You're going to have to be on your post ready to go at seven." I try to bring people through the whole day and the grit that it takes because it takes a very special person. I want it to be very transparent during the interview.

The leaders believe that staff members need to be driven by a personal commitment to fulfilling the mission of the school to be a successful staff member at the school. Alicia explains this connection between work ethic and feeling connected to the purpose of the school:

If you're going to come early, you're going to work your tail off every single second, you're going to stay late, or going to tutor late [into the evening], the only reason you're doing it is because you're mission-oriented and you believe that our kids will achieve. If you don't believe that you're not going to work at our school.

4) Smart: ability to turn intentions in actions. For Alicia, being "smart" is not just about social intelligence, as Jennifer describes above, it includes the ability to turn intention in action.

The other piece that we talk about a lot is hiring smart people. If I had to put them in order, it would be humble, and then hardworking, and then smart, but smart in the sense that you don't have to be a genius, but you have to be able to turn intention into action. If you get a deadline, be able to meet the deadline. You can ask smart questions to be able to come up with solutions, and just be a problem-solver.

For Alicia, teachers demonstrate their leadership potential when they can show they can turn intentions into actions. Developing a cadre of "smart" leaders is critical for growing and maintaining excellent schools.

When you have good people on your bus you feel confident. The hardest part of being in a leadership position is when you give something to someone and you do not know if they're going to turn intention into action. We tell our team, "If I have to follow up with you or if I have to say, 'Did you do this or did you do this to this high level,' then it makes my job a lot harder." Our team, our leadership team, our curricular team, they turn intention into action. That's why they're in that position.

5) Alignment with the school's mission. For Alicia, hiring begins and ends with mission-alignment. She feels it is easy for candidates to say, "Yes, I believe in all kids can learn," therefore getting underneath the surface to understand what drives candidates is essential in a strong interview process.

We did some reflecting this year. We lost a few teachers. The most that we have since the opening of the school. We started categorizing and reflecting and seeing like, what was the commonalities? Everyone wants to say, ""Millennials, they're just not gritty enough." We're like, "Okay, but there's something more." It really narrowed down to what I just said earlier: they were not connected to the mission and they didn't believe in the mission. If you don't believe in the mission then you can't work here because that's everything we do. The hardest job on the planet is what we're expecting our teachers to do. If you know you're changing the trajectory of students' lives, then you do it. If you don't think you are then you can't work here.

*Leadership Team.* Developing and empowering guardians of the culture and instruction.

Given the rapid expansion of Morris Charter over the last six years, David and Alicia have invested heavily in cultivating and developing the leadership team. Alicia believes, "Our leadership team is what keeps this school afloat." As "guardians of the culture," the principals, instructional coaches and grade level chairs are the ones who are upholding the culture, norms, and values of the school, "They're the ones making sure that our culture is strong. They're to ones who are protecting everything. Our leadership team, they're amazing. They keep the school afloat."

Developing the leadership team is an investment strategy in the longevity of the school.

Alicia does not want the quality of the school to rest on personalities, specifically, her and David.

Everything that David and I do is with the mindset of when "David and Alicia" are gone. We're not going to be here forever and so our school has to be able to sustain without us. That's always our mindset, that's our lens.

Leaders are carefully chosen based on their proven success at Morris Charter:

You needed to be a champion teacher and you needed to already be part of the culture of our school to earn leadership. We don't hire outside and say, "Hey, you're on our leadership team." You have to understand our culture to be on our leadership team.

It is the leaders' responsibility, Alicia explains, to model the type of communication and culture that the school needs to maintain a consistent adult and student culture. The leadership team norms that Alicia describes reinforce a culture where leaders maintain a united front,

teachers are expected to be solutions-oriented, and teacher and student-actions are aligned with the mission of the school. For example, when people have interpersonal issues, they take it to the person directly (“bring your problem to the source”). Or, leaders are expected to disagree behind closed doors but consistently enforce agreed-upon goals with the rest of the staff regardless of their differences in opinion with the final decision.

Instructional coaches like Jennifer explains that David gains the leaders’ commitment by “communicating a sense of urgency, communicating high expectations, and showing that he cares personally.” Jennifer conveys respect for and commitment to David’s leadership at the school: "David’s really good at getting people to want to be great. He walks into a room and it's not impressing him but I do have that respect for him. I want him to know that I'm doing everything I can to do my job well.”

Whereas David gains the leaders’ commitment through personal relationships and strong belief in his leaders, Alicia also wants them to feel empowered and leverage their expertise to make autonomous decisions. For example, when she decided to overhaul the middle school’s curriculum she leveraged the instructional coaches and department chairs to improve their academic systems.

I'm not an expert in science or math so my job is more visionary, right? We need these aligned benchmarks. We need this lesson plan template. We need to make sure that this professional development session is implemented. I'm giving the vision and they're the ones who are doing the hard work of implementing the curriculum...They turn intention into action and it's of the highest quality, which makes my job easier or our principals’ jobs easier when we have such a strong leadership team.

Iliana echoes the process that Alicia describes:

David (as the principal) sets the vision and then gives us whatever we need to feel like we can make that happen within our own departments or grade levels or whatever thing that we're in charge of, our content, our curriculum.

When I was a classroom teacher, teaching in 2013-14, which was the year after Common Core, I remember him wanting me to look at my curriculum and make changes. They were my kids, it was my data, and it is possible if I close this gap.

I suggest that for some teachers, putting the weight of a curriculum and the students results fully on a teacher's shoulders can be overwhelming. For Iliana, in fact, it feels empowering. She feels it comes from David and Alicia's ethos of care and belief in people's ability to grow that makes people want to try harder.

We have a vision for you that you don't realize you can achieve yet. David's trying to get all of our leadership team to really own [our growth]. We want people to feel like this is a place that they can and should learn and grow. In addition, I had seen success. I [experienced it], and had the hunger to close [the achievement gap] again. Having a belief in myself as well and in our kids, this is something that is attainable, it's not far-fetched. It's just with some systematic changes if you look back and you reflect, you can improve.

Alicia and David have materially invested in their leadership team's professional development by enrolling them in Relay Graduate School of Education's National Principal Academy, a year-long professional development program for principals and assistant principals, at significant cost. Investing their leaders is dual-purpose: instructional leaders are trained with the same language, system, and process for observation and feedback, data-driven instructional coaching, and school-wide culture practices. Before attending this program, David and Alicia spent significant time observing in and learning from North Star Academy schools, a charter school group in New Jersey affiliated with the Uncommon Charter School network. Uncommon has codified tightly vertically and horizontally aligned curriculum and instructional practices to make lesson planning, instructional coaching, and student achievement data systems consistent.

Having instructional leaders who are trained on the same teacher observation and feedback process, weekly data meetings, and student culture expectations grounds teachers and leaders in shared language and a common vision of "good teaching". For example, outside every classroom door, teachers hang a clipboard with lesson plans for the entire week. Instructional

coaches, or anyone visiting the classroom, can walk into the classroom, follow the lesson, and provide real-time feedback to teachers.

Lesson plans all follow similar structure ensuring there is multiple rounds of practices, teachers have planned for and wrote questions to check for understanding and incorporated times when they are going to circulate the classroom looking at student work and responding to common errors so they can re-teach key ideas in the moment. Instructional coaches can see where the lesson is headed, therefore they can co-circulate the classroom and look at students' responses, and coach teachers in the moment to make instructional shifts.

By investing in and developing more instructional leaders in the school, David and Alicia can ensure more teachers are getting frequent feedback on their teaching multiple times each month. Teachers are not only reliant on principals and assistant principals to observe them quarterly or monthly, but they can receive rapid feedback to improve their practice on a weekly basis.

*Defining and upholding school-wide culture.* David defines culture as the thing that “informs your behavior when nobody's around.” He believes the culture of the environment “informs your energies, your efforts at any time in your life.” Strong culture at Morris Charter school is characterized by three qualities: high expectations, consistency, and students' understanding the intentions of the school culture.

1) High expectations. In Morris Charter, holding students to high expectations is believing and insisting that every student is capable of participating and learning all the time. This is called “being 100%” as in, 100 percentage of students should be meeting fundamental classroom expectations, all the time. This includes, participating, raising their hands to answer questions; coming into a classroom quickly, silently and purposefully and starting their warm-up

assignment right away; and “tracking”. In ten out of thirteen classrooms I observed one day, teachers insisted on students “tracking the speaker” (looking at the person who is talking). Teachers say “track” and students quickly turn their heads in the direction of the voice. Many of the teachers use timers to precisely manage times spent on exercises, review answers, and maintain a purposeful pace to the lesson. When a student is called on for an answer, the teacher did not quickly give up if the students said, “I don’t know”. Teachers prompt students with more questions, until students arrive at the answer. Teachers are developed to wait and prompt students to communicate to them, that they can get the right answer with time and effective effort.

Jennifer believes that “the culture of 100% among kids is probably really hard for a traditional setting to achieve.” She also believes this is a foundational belief that informs teacher practice and enables Morris Charter to excel:

So much of where academic success comes from goes back to our idea of, “We believe every kid can do this.” So, we're going to wait for every hand in the air to be raised or stick with somebody who we cold-call and isn't getting the answer. People ask a lot, when they observe the school, how we did that. They are a product of six years of the teacher's going to wait for 100% hands and now hopefully in the tenth grade you don't have to wait for it as long. I don't know if that's a bite size enough thing for another school to work on but I think 100% would be a big one.

2) Consistency. Strong culture means that norms and expectations are spelled out and more importantly, consistently upheld. George explains, “A lot of schools have dress codes, but one sign of a dress code or a school culture that's healthy is that it's being upheld.” Consistency involves “sweating the small stuff” like asking students to leave and re-enter the classroom if they do not follow the exact directions the teacher gives for what students should do when they enter. Consistency also involves the standard way desks are set up in classrooms (desks in row), teachers asks students to follow the same behavior expectations from classroom to classroom

(“track”; “hands raised”; use of timers; silently entering a classroom and starting a “do now” a short assignment before the lesson begins). In the fourth and fifth grade classrooms teachers give precise directions about where students’ hands should be (“on the desk, folded,” “in the air, raised”). There are consistencies in pedagogy, as well:

- a. Above and beyond: many of the student assignment sheets had a section called “above and beyond” where students can practice more challenging questions if they are finished with the minimal assignment.
- b. “Aggressive monitoring”: this involves creating tasks that students can do independently; teachers writing an exemplar response and criteria for success; teacher circulating and checking students’ work; teachers physically counting and noting which students are meeting the criteria for success and which are not to determine the re-teach plan.
- c. Real-life application in lessons: In eleven out of thirteen classrooms I visited during one walk through, students were problem-solving or doing a task that had connection to the real-world or were relevant and applicable to everyday life.

3) Students understand why rules and expectations are in place. George believes a litmus test to distinguish schools with good intentions to establish strong culture versus ones that do is how much students have internalized the rationale behind rules and can explain how the rules benefit them. In a school with strong culture, there is “some level of student pride or appreciation for the school that they attend.” Especially among high school students, George explains:

Most students don't glow about their school, but most students articulate a strong belief that their school is helping them succeed, and it's a good school, and at the end of the day, despite the fact that they don't like the uniform, despite the fact that they have a lot of homework, despite the fact that they go to school longer and for a longer school year, they could usually articulate some level of, "Yeah, it's hard but," and then tell me the reason why they go and why it's such a good school.

4) Establishing a strong culture. George believes crafting the school-wide culture begins with hiring the right teachers and leaders for the school: “My staff culture was a product of who I was hiring. I knew what I was looking for in people.” In addition to hiring mission-aligned teachers, the principals invest a significant amount of time working on forming the adult culture during summer professional development sessions. Alicia believes investing the time with teachers to normalize the adult culture is important so that teachers can hold each other accountable to living the values of the school. Alicia insists that the leaders are the “guardians of the culture” because the principals’ eyes and ears cannot be everywhere.

If someone's going to walk into the copy room and go, "Man, these kids are just like off the chain today. I don't know what's going on." You're going to have someone on staff looking at you like, "What did you just say?" Then another person pulling you to the side, and giving you feedback on how to talk about kids. Then, you're going to get a third person coming up to a leadership team member saying, "I want to put this situation on your radar." Those people, the nay-sayers, or negative people, or people who are not onboard, wouldn't be able to survive in our culture.

Jennifer feels that because high expectations and adult culture are vertically aligned across schools and consistent from grade-level to grade-level, there are multiple teachers who can help novice teachers develop their proficiency with holding and maintaining Morris Charter’s vision for student culture in the classroom. Students enter high school knowing what their teachers expect because they have been living Morris Charter’s culture from fourth through eighth grades.

Coaches also support teachers with maintaining and upholding consistent school-wide culture in teachers’ classrooms. Coaches frequently video record teachers so that teachers can “see gaps in their own room and realize, ‘It's not the end of the world that my classroom's not perfect,’” Jennifer says. The purpose of using videos in coaching is to help teacher identify their own gaps so they can refine their practice. Jennifer explains, “Trying to build relationships with

the people I coach so that they understand that they can be vulnerable,” allows her to coach teachers. “That there’s a certain level of trust within the room that comes from us both wanting the same thing.”

Evan explains that the foundation of a strong student culture is communicating high expectations coupled with belief in the student. He will say to students, “I’m going to be really hard on you when I need to be because this is really important for you, but I’m always going to follow up with you and you’re going to know that I care about you.” Evan learned how to be warm and demanding with students from a mentor teacher, a black veteran teacher from the community, during his first year with Teach For America. In describing her, Evan says:

Kids knew that she loved them, but they also knew that she wasn’t going to tolerate things that were taking away learning from other kids. They knew what to expect when they went in there and they knew that she would be hard on them, but she’d build them up afterwards and they knew that whenever she was hard on them, there was a reason for it. Kids responded to her.

Evan takes a page from her book and models how he might coach a student who is not meeting expectations:

[Pretending to talk to a student] “Right now, I need you to look at me. You’re not being your best self in this class right now. I’ve seen you be better than this. I’ve seen your work. Right now, I’m not seeing that. That’s preventing you from being the best you can be and doing the best in this class. I’m going to come check in with you in fifteen minutes and I want to see your work done and I want to see you be the best that you can be.”

Check in with the child. Hopefully the child has done the work. You can pump them up. They can go back to their seat and you can write a note in their planner that they bounced back or call the family and let them know that they bounced back. Then you’ve not only helped the child see what they should be doing, but you’ve also now strengthened your relationship with the child. Ideally you can do both. Sometimes you can’t. I think that a lot of times when we are hard on our kids, they respond well because teachers do take the time to build the relationship with them.

*Developing teachers through coaching and rapid implementation.* Recruiting mission-aligned teachers who are skilled enough to teach both academics and character at a high level to

students who enter Morris Charter with academic skills several grade levels below their expected performance is challenging. Jennifer acknowledges that their school recruits many novice teachers. Therefore, Morris Charter invests heavily in developing their leadership team members' skills in instructional coaching. Coaching teachers to plan and teach lessons at a high level requires having teachers who are open and willing to be constantly pushed on their practice.

George explains:

Unquestionably, the first [characteristic] is someone who is open to feedback and shows a good amount of humility. To teach at our school, unless you've been doing it our way, even if you've been in education for a while, it just takes a lot of relearning. If you're new to teaching, it just takes a whole lot of hard work. It gets really frustrating really quick if you're not one of those kind of people that can just say, "Oh, I did that wrong. Let me try it again," instead of saying, "I didn't do that wrong. You're wrong. That doesn't work," and getting defensive. I would say humility was number one, and openness to feedback.

Teachers get observed and coached on a weekly basis. New teachers are observed and coached every day for 20 minutes or longer for the first several weeks of school. Jennifer explains:

I meet with my teachers weekly. Part of our meetings is a result of my observations, and they'll receive an action step. Their action step is something that they should be able to achieve in one week. It's usually pretty bite-sized manageable but also is what I've determined to be highest leverage to help them get better in the next week. Then my next observation I would give feedback through that targeted lens as well. Our goal is that every teacher masters their action step within two weeks, ideally one week, and moves to another. We have routinized a trajectory that we want, our rookie teachers especially, to move through.

The coaches and principals have all attended Relay's National Principal Academy and utilize the coaching trajectory for new teachers using Get Better Faster by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo. Having all the instructional leaders trained and using the same coaching model, using the same instructional coaching rubrics, and conducting walk-throughs of classrooms together every six weeks on instructional "inspections" to ensure coaches are normed to look for and coach teachers on the same cultural practices ensures consistency and alignment. Secondly, coaching can happen in a meeting before or after classroom observation, as Jennifer described

above. Sometimes teachers are coached in real-time while they are teaching. When I follow Jennifer into a classroom observation of a high school teacher, Jennifer is actively circulating and looking at students' work. She writes notes on the computer (items she will follow up with the teacher in an in-person meeting). She also approaches the teacher and whispers something in her ear to do right away.

The third coaching approach is to video record teachers teaching. All the instructional coaches use a web-based coaching platform called Whetstone where they record classroom observation notes, detail the feedback that teachers must implement and practice within the week. Coaches record whether teachers have followed-through or mastered the piece of coaching feedback. David and Alicia can look at the coaches' notes Whetstone at any time, look for trends, and use the coaches' notes to inform how they plan and design their weekly professional development sessions for teachers. They also use the notes to coach the instructional coaches, and help them plan their department or grade level team meetings. Coaches also use video to record small segments of a lesson that the teacher and coach are working on together. Then in the coaching meeting, Jennifer will pull up the video teaching segment on her computer and show the teacher, "Remember how we talked about this? Is [video clip of you teaching] meeting your vision for what we stated that you wanted to work on?"

This conversation leads to the fourth part of their coaching model: modeling for teachers who to hold themselves accountable to deliverables and deadlines while being supportive and building relationships with them. Jennifer's describes her intentions for teachers:

I have two main things that at least this year I'm working on with all my teachers. I really want all my teachers to feel cared about and supported but at the same time I want them to feel that I push them and hold them accountable. Day-to-day, I think I'm operating a fine line between being empathetic and being understanding, with also being uncompromising and unyielding in my standard. Hopefully same way we do with kids in terms of warmth and strictness. Hopefully appealing to both those sides. So, creating a

relationship that motivates them to want to work hard and get better while holding them accountable for what they've set as their goals to improve.

The accountability part sounds like this:

I will track any breaches and deadlines or things like that so that when I sit with them I can present a pattern that's based in data. It's coming from a place that's not personal so that it feels very much like, "All right, that's the fourth deadline that you've missed. Talk to me about what's happening. Let's problem solve so that we know how to attack this so it doesn't continue happening."

Supportive actions for teachers vary, but can be informal or formal. Jennifer shares:

Teachers know they can text, they can email. In the middle of a class, like you saw [teacher] do, come over and whisper a question to me. I can be used as a resource in that way. I've had teachers text me in the middle of the class, "This is not going well. Come help." And I try to.

More importantly, Jennifer finds that developing a baseline of trusting relationships with teachers allows them to be open to feedback, pushes, and challenges from her.

I try to learn about them as people. Outside of our coaching relationship, I have conversations with them, which is not always easy given that time is this finite commodity. But being intentional about knowing who people are and knowing more and more about them.

By making herself available and responsive to teachers' needs, whenever they need it, with structured and regular times for coaching meetings, teachers at Morris Charter school are actively and regularly coached to teach and uphold a classroom culture in a way that is normed and aligned with the standards that the leaders establish for the school.

### Leadership Evolution, Strengths, and Opportunities

*Research Question 3: How have the schools evolved over time while staying committed to their mission? What are their strengths and opportunities for development in pursuit of their mission?*

The results for this research question will be based on interviews, walkthroughs, classroom observations and documents from Morris Charter's middle school. The first section will discuss the strengths and the ways Morris Charter evolved to maintain its strength. The

second part highlights the opportunities for development that leaders identified for their own school.

*Strengths in pursuit of the mission.*

1) Providing transportation and cafeteria to make the school accessible. David believes that student demographics of student enrollment can be engineered based on the services and requirements of the school.

There was a charter school that put in parameters like, mandatory parent volunteer hours, no bussing, no child nutrition, things like that. I mean, you're making your enrollment. It's pretty obvious what the output's going to be.

The output he is referring to is the racial and socio-economic make-up of the school.

[Monies for] transportation and food are not provided for charter schools. Very easily if you take out transportation and food, very easily you also take out a demographic [group of people]; the accessibility is not there, right? As far as our budget and what we valued and what we talked about and what we problem-solved and what we raised funds for and what we geared our board to help us with, [offering] transportation and food non-negotiable. It's expensive but we're going to do it. We made sure that we had transportation and food.

Providing bus services to transport students to school in a rural area is a costly affair. Alicia explains:

We're always struggling financially and so we think about taking out food and buses and how much more money we'd have. If the state provided funds for those two things the white flight wouldn't be such a big conversation [among charter schools].

George believes that “even if you say it's open enrollment, if you don't offer those two things—transportation and child nutrition services—you're going to block out a certain set of students.”

2) Positioning the school to serve low-income students. In selecting the location of Morris Charter schools, David and Alicia intentionally selected a site in the center of the poorest section of town. Alicia says, “putting our building in the highest need area in the town of Morris ensured that we reached the demographics that our mission states that we will.” The along with

intentionally canvassing neighborhoods in the surrounding community and promoting the school at local churches ensure Morris Charter is serving their intended audience. Currently, David thinks that between 8-10% of the students live in the town where the school is located. Majority of students are bussed in from neighboring counties.

3) Operating like an “independent charter”. The year Common Core Standards were integrated into the state exams was a turning point for Morris Charter school. As the Dean of Curriculum and Instruction, Alicia did not like the academic results of the school and had the decision-making rights and the nimbleness of a small school system to “throw out” the curriculum and re-write ones that matched the rigor of the new standards. Alicia says, “That’s what’s nice about being an independent charter, right? We can take from who we want. We can throw away from who we want.”

#### *Opportunities.*

1) Balancing character education versus compliance. In reflecting upon opportunities for the school, David worries about crossing the line between upholding a positive school-wide culture versus overemphasizing student compliance.

Are we really helping kids become better people or have we gone overboard with compliance? That line is a lot thinner than people think and it gets confused and it gets muddled, and we have to make sure that clarity is there. A child being compliant is not building character, there is purpose in compliance.

2) Authentic curriculum. Although Morris Charter has created strong systems to helping student pass state standardized exams, David wants to expand the curriculum to ensure students have an authentic and well-balanced educational experience, beyond standardized test preparation.

To attend and graduate from their college of choice means that they've had a well-rounded education. It means that the content is alive and well and it means something bigger than the test that you took that week, and so we've got to continuously challenge

ourselves in that regard of what is the academic offerings we're having towards kids that allow them to bring out their talents and contribute to our school in a way that's organic to them.

3) Becoming problem-solvers. Of the three parts of Morris Charter's mission – helping students become better people (character education), helping them attend and graduate from the college of their choice (academics), and helping them be world problem solvers—the leaders believe they have operationalized their character and academic systems better than the third part of the mission. Becoming “world problem solvers” means improving their curriculum and pedagogical practices so students learn, think, and create in ways that match the rigor of prestigious universities. David hopes to create a “Problem Solving” classroom where students can authentically engage with each other to solve, “real life problem, real life situations”.

It involves multiple skillsets, interdisciplinary aspects to it, so it's not just like a written report, a research report, it's really an aspect of pulling all of your ideas together, pulling the talents of different people together, and collaboratively coming up with the solutions. We actually have a name for that room. It's like our problem-solving room. Taking it after a room in Harvard where literally it's just a bunch of whiteboards around and people just go to town. That's what we want to be able to set up those things a lot better.

Jennifer Lazio believes that students could speak to and describe the character and academics part of the mission but they would have a harder time explaining what the school does that helps them become “world changers” and problem solvers.

Change the world aspect...we don't really have examples to point to. We haven't done a great job of bringing in people that could speak to that. I don't think we've done enough to talk about specifically what that could look like for them. It is almost this pie in the sky thing for kids I think.

## **Summary**

The major research questions examined the beliefs and the practices of charter school founders and their leadership team members on schools that successfully serve students of color, analyzed through the tenets of Critical Race Theory. In Chapter 5, a comparison of Lincoln

College Preparatory and Morris Charters' leadership beliefs and practices will be discussed in more detail. In addition, limitations of this research and recommendations for future studies will be discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Summary of Results and Discussion of the Findings

This final chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides a discussion of the final research question of the study which compares the findings of the two charter school founders' beliefs and their schools' practices. The second section is an analysis of the results through tenets of Critical Race Theory, the theoretical framework for this study. The third section is a discussion of the study—the study's significance, limitations, applications, and recommendations for future research. The fourth and final section concludes with a personal reflection on the purpose of the study.

### What Might We Learn from These Leaders?

*Research Question 4: Taking these two examples together, what might we learn about the theoretical groundings and practices of equitable and excellent charter school leaders that serve students of color?*

This section will discuss the research question in two parts. The first section will discuss the theoretical groundings and beliefs of the two school founders. The second section will examine their practices.

#### Beliefs

Both the leaders of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter school share the following beliefs:

- Students of color living in economically disadvantaged communities have had not access to high quality education. They believe that their students are deserving, capable, and have the potential to succeed in a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, and can go to and through the college of their choice.
- With additional time, effective effort, and relentless pursuit of teaching strategies, they can reach all students.
- For charter schools to provide equitable access and opportunity to economically disadvantaged students, schools should take measures to ensure that racially, linguistically, and economically diverse families are actively recruited and enabled to send their children to any school of their choice. Therefore, leaders of equitable charter schools must provide material means in the form of free school transportation, cafeteria services. It also means not requiring parent volunteer hours or creating complicated application processes.
- Both school founders believe that ensuring students go to and through college is the best way to ensure students from economically disadvantaged areas increase career and economic mobility in life.

Apart from these commonalities, there are four notable differences in the beliefs expressed by Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter leaders:

- 1) How they define success
- 2) What drives their sense of urgency
- 3) How they work with parents and the community
- 4) Their self-awareness of the impact of race when working across lines of difference.

*How they define success.* While leaders of both Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter want students to matriculate and graduate from college, they define success differently. Allison Bartlett believes that student performance on state standardized exams and college graduation rates are indicators of progress but not the goal. Lincoln College Preparatory has had four classes of alumni graduate from college. They want their alumni to have meaningful careers and economic mobility, but they define success as the number of alumni who are pursuing their passions, living as engaged citizens who are counteracting systems of oppression, and working towards creating a more equitable society in their own way. For Lincoln College Preparatory leaders, being “college and career ready” is not the same thing as developing students who are engaged, happy, connected to their communities, and empowered with the critical consciousness to interrupt systems of oppression that have impacted their families and communities. Visible metrics like student test scores and college matriculation rates are worth celebrating, but they want students to return to their communities as teachers, leaders and change agents to improve their local region.

Just seven years into its founding, Morris Charter’s first class of students are still high school juniors. Therefore, their primary focus is ensuring that their students enter four-year colleges of their choice. They are intent on defying expectations and challenging people’s beliefs about the academic achievement levels that economically disadvantaged students of color can achieve. Their leaders believe equity will be achieved when students have met and exceeded the standards to enter the college of their choice which will in turn enable them to lead a choice-filled life. Although they talk about wanting students to become “world changers” and problem-solvers, that vision is still an abstraction as they still have six years before their founding class of students graduate from college.

*What drives their sense of urgency.* In both schools, leaders operate with a sense of urgency to ensure that their students are academically achieving, developing their character skills, and fostering a positive learning environment. Because many students are not performing on grade level when they first enroll in either school, leaders have increased school hours to provide longer classes and additional supports for students to perform on grade level and graduate with knowledge and skills to succeed in college.

In addition to supporting students with academic growth, leaders at Lincoln College Preparatory convey an urgency around developing their teachers' socio-political consciousness and integrating cultural relevance into curriculum. The first professional development session of the school year for all teachers focuses on social justice. Leaders share that equity content is frequently, although not regularly raised in professional development sessions. The leaders noted that creating systems or processes for supporting teachers with curriculum and culturally relevant pedagogy was still an area of development.

At Morris Charter, all organizational priorities have matching quantitative goals. These priorities and goals are sequenced in order of importance. Laminated posters of these goals hang inside the teacher work rooms and the instructional coaches' offices. Leaders frequently measure and track these numerical goals to ensure that staff members are making progress at regular intervals. Morris Charter leaders measure what they value in quantifiable goals. Figure 5 below shows the categories of priorities and the individual metrics leaders follow to meet the organizational goals.

| <b>Morris Charter's Organization Goals</b>                   |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Measure</b>   | <b>Goal</b>                              |
| <b>Student Academic Achievement</b>                          |  |
| Student Achievement Results                                  | Exceeds Growth<br>Meets subgroup goals   |
| State Exam Composite Results                                 | Reading 85+/<br>Math 90+/<br>Science 98+ |
| % of Non-State Exam tested classes that meet final exam goal | 90%                                      |
| <b>Rigorous Instruction</b>                                  |  |
| Data Driven Instruction Score                                | 90/100                                   |
| Average Monthly Standing Meetings Per Teacher                | 3  |
| Average Monthly Observations Per Teacher                     | 9  |
| <b>Strong Student Culture</b>                                |  |
| % of Student Paycheck Average 40+                            | 88%                                      |
| % of Bench Students who rejoin in less than 5 days           | 90%                                      |
| Student Culture Rubric Score                                 | 20/24                                    |
| <b>Operations</b>  |  |
| Average Daily Attendance                                     | 97.5%                                    |
| % of Student Supply Fees Collected                           | 95%                                      |
| % of Student Activity Fees Collected                         | 93%                                      |
| % of Parent Participation at Mandatory Events                | 90%                                      |
| % of Staff Who Strongly agree that Staff Morale is High      | 90%                                      |

Figure 5. Morris Charter's Organizational Goals for 2016-17

*How they work with parents and the community.* Both Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter frequently mention leveraging parents as partners for students. Both schools offer numerous opportunities for parents to attend events at the school, with Morris Charter citing over a dozen events at the school, ranging from parent-teacher conferences to Parent Pride Nights where students showcase their learnings to parents, celebrations, and assemblies. Both schools have parents sign a “contract” agreeing to follow through on their roles and responsibilities. Both schools offer opportunities for parents to communication with teachers in their “home language” where possible.

Lincoln College Preparatory leaders frequently mention going into the community to recruit students; visiting families and learning about their strengths; and representing community and families in the schools. Parents teach classes on topics of their choice to high school students during intersessions and to after school clubs. The schools offer “Family Saturdays” where parents attend sessions to learn about curriculum, technology, financial planning for high school, or meet with college admissions officers. In the Parent and Family Engagement Plan, the school conveys a flexible language to accommodate and meet the demands of working parents:

We offer a flexible number of meetings and parent-teacher conferences to ensure that all parents, family members, and other community members have the opportunity to participate with the ultimate goal of improving the achievement of all our children. Since [Lincoln College Preparatory] is an extended day and year program, we are easily accessible to parents at various times throughout the day...beginning as early as 7:00 a.m. and continue until 8:00 p.m. We provide Spanish translators and will meet at places of business or residences if necessary. This allows parents, families, and community members, including those with limited English proficiency and/or disabilities, an equal opportunity to meet with teachers without creating disruption in their workplace.

Teachers often take students on field “lesson” trips to protest rallies, public court hearings on anti-discrimination cases, and meetings at the local NAACP chapter. The principals intentionally express that Lincoln College Preparatory is there to work “alongside the

community” and leverage the community’s strengths to help the community realize their full potential.

Morris Charter school leaders express a belief in the value of building relationships with parents; communicating frequently with parents to partner with them on their children’s progress; and involving parents and families in celebrations of their children’s achievement. The leaders believe that the parents and schools have similar values and desires for their students’ success. At the same time, the leaders at Morris Charter take a stronger stance requiring parents to come to the school to participate in school-related activities. Their Parent Involvement plan states: “All parents/guardians are required to attend the scheduled ‘Parent Nights’. If you cannot attend, a representative must attend in your place.” Their policy states that “Efforts are made to accommodate parents with disabilities and with varying work schedules. Efforts are also made to provide information to parents in the language used at home,” but it does not offer to visit parents at their workplace or extend meetings after normal work day hours.

The principals of Morris Charter draw a stronger line between the cultural forces inside and outside of the school. Evan Forte explains:

Of course, when our kids leave this building they're going to a very different environment. They go into an environment where not everyone is going to be kind and nice to you. They go into an environment where raising two hands would seem crazy. I think where we're run into a lot of challenges is when our kids aren't in school. What they choose to post on social media and how we educate them about that. How they choose to act at the skating rink on a Friday night because they're having to navigate almost two different worlds.

In speaking about students and parents, there is an orientation towards shifting them towards the school’s values and perspective on excellence. For example, Morris Charter’s mission of helping students “become better people” and explicitly asking parents to question or

“shift their paradigm” about academic rigor and “embrace that it’s harder” at Morris Charter are orienting the community *to the school* versus orienting the school *to the community*.

*Awareness of the impact of race when working across lines of difference.* Leaders at Lincoln College Preparatory frequently acknowledge how their race, gender, educational background, and class informed their positionality and impact their interactions with families and the community. They speak in broader terms about the impact of institutionalized and systemic racism on their students; the big financial decisions they make to provide equitable access to the school (e.g. free transportation service or cafeteria services); and how they infuse culturally relevant elements into specific lessons (e.g. examining a song used for a lesson for sexist views). They speak abstractly on how anti-racist perspectives should be incorporated into lessons plans. The leaders believe that the integration of culturally relevant content and pedagogy is an area of growth for the school.

At Morris Charter, the leaders either do not reference how their racial identity impacts their leadership practices when working at a school that serves economically disadvantaged students of color. David Martinez and George Hanson reference their upper middle-class upbringing; they acknowledge that their socio-economic background gave them an advantage and different perspective than students. They convey the belief that college educational attainment provides greater choice and access, without acknowledging the systemic and institutionalized racism that students face even with college degrees. Evan Forte and Alicia Martinez, who were raised in middle class homes, point to how education has helped them rise out of modest financial circumstances. David Martinez does not frequently refer to his Puerto Rican heritage or how his cultural identity informs his work with Latino families in the community.

## Comparison of School-Wide Practices

An analysis of the school-wide practices of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter, shows similarities in two areas and major differences in three. Leaders of both schools are: 1) Excellent communicators who leverage language to invest stakeholders in the mission and vision of their schools; 2) Crystal clear on the qualities they look for when hiring teachers and leaders.

*Skillful communication of the school's mission.* Allison Bartlett and David Martinez passionately convey their belief in the mission of their schools. They articulate their theory of change; and express their values in a manner that is both charismatic and inspiring. Although their messages are different, both leaders are clear about what they believe and why their schools exist. Their clear expression of their school's mission and vision attracts those who are aligned with their beliefs and presumably deters those who do not share their beliefs.

David and Alicia excel in encapsulating their school's mission into memorable phrases ("Help our kids become better people, help them attend and graduate from the college of their choice, help them be world problem solvers that contribute"). They capture their values in sticky statements ("humble, hungry, and smart") then systematize and operationalize their beliefs into leadership training, curriculum, teacher professional development, and campaigns (there are posters explaining and exhorting teachers to be "humble, hungry and smart" in the teacher work rooms and shared office spaces). These beliefs are reinforced through weekly or daily coaching sessions with teachers, quarterly "inspections" of the schools to ensure that schools are operating with consistency.

*Importance of hiring candidates who share values.* Although both schools prioritize different values, leaders both express the importance of having control over personnel hiring.

Both schools' founders name the importance of explicating their schools' values, and standards, during the interview and hiring process. They believe it is important for candidates to understand that they will be expected to work long hours, to listen and respond to voluminous feedback, and practice a growth mindset with children. For example, candidates at Morris Charter teach a sample lesson for the interview and receive on-the-spot feedback from interviewer that they must immediately apply to re-teach the sample lesson. By gauging the interviewee's reaction and ability to immediately apply that feedback into practice, the interviewers gauge how "humble, hungry and smart" the candidates are.

At Lincoln College Preparatory, interviewers listen for the candidates' awareness of the school's mission and issues of inequity and their impact on students. Ms. Bartlett acknowledges that one's self-awareness and understanding of diversity, equity and inclusivity are always evolving, yet, having a growth mindset about the potential of students of color to achieve is a non-negotiable factor in hiring. They must believe that all students—with time, effective effort, and various strategies, can all be prepared to enter college.

#### Differences between Priorities of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter

Both school leaders believed that hiring and communication were important practices for leading effective schools. Aside from these, there the leaders prioritize different elements of school leadership.

At Lincoln College Preparatory, the three essential practices for meeting their school's mission and vision are:

- 1) Curriculum: integrating social justice and equity into every aspect of a lesson
- 2) Teaching self-advocacy & empowering students: "We're trying to teach kids to advocate for themselves and fight against systems and realize that we are a system."

- 3) Cultural Relevance: developing relationships with families for partnership and understanding for the school leaders to better understand how to support students

The leaders of Lincoln College Preparatory emphasize the importance of redesigning their curriculum and pedagogy so that students are better prepared to become agents for social change and social justice. They also emphasize the importance of mining strengths from the community; learning students' stories, understanding their familial context; listening to parents' hopes, dreams, goals, and fears for their children's education; and working in partnership with them so that schools can better match the *family's* aspirations for their children. The only place where leaders do not negotiate with parents is when they challenge the school's social justice curriculum. The leaders also acknowledge that in teaching students how to become change agents, students need to practice self-advocacy. This includes allowing students to research information to challenge school policies and persuade school leaders to change school practices that they find unfair.

At Morris Charter, the three organizational practices that Morris Charter leaders emphasized for achieving their school's mission are:

- 1) Empowering instructional coaches and department chairs to create a rigorous curriculum that was aligned vertically and horizontally and coaching teachers how to use them.
- 2) Leadership Development: Developing and empowering guardians of the culture to execute the school's mission and the founder's vision for excellence
- 3) Accountability: Defining for, teaching, and holding teachers accountable for upholding school-wide culture
- 4) Coaching: giving teachers frequent feedback to ensure consistent execution of school-wide practices.

Morris Charter has a fully grown middle school, but their high school and elementary schools opened a year after each other. With rapid growth, David and Alicia Martinez had to develop their leadership teams so that all three schools operate consistently. David and Alicia focus on developing and leveraging their site-based leaders (the principals, deans, and instructional coaches). By enrolling their leadership in Relay Graduate School of Education principal program, principals and instructional coaches learn to use the same observation and feedback protocol and weekly data meetings processes. They want teachers to maintain a consistent feel in classrooms so that students know teachers communicate with each other and hold the same expectations for behavior or academics in every class. Alicia works closely with the department chairs and instructional coaches to design rigorous curriculum that match the Common Core State Standards. She standardizes lesson plan templates to ensure teachers plan effectively using rigorous curriculum. Then she teaches instructional coaches and deans how to frequently observe and give teachers feedback on their instruction and analyze student work to ensure lesson objectives were achieved.

While leaders at Lincoln College Preparatory are consistent in their beliefs about leveraging education for social justice, the schools are not yet, to the extent Morris Charter has, consistent in their execution of their mission and vision. Lincoln College Preparatory has not yet developed and integrated social justice beliefs into all their curriculum nor communicated clear pedagogical or curricular expectations for teachers on how to do that. On the other hand, Morris Charter's leaders have established strong relationships with their leadership team members, invested them in operationalizing their academic vision into action, yet they operate with a color-blind perspective.

## **Analysis of Results through Theoretical Frameworks**

Using the lens of Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006), the following section will analyze the findings from both Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter through each tenet.

### Permanence of Racism

Allison Bartlett's unequivocal stance that Lincoln College Preparatory was explicitly founded to "fight for social justice to serve groups of people who were historically underserved," acknowledges the permanence of racism (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Programs created with a color-blind perspective, meaning treating everyone the same way regardless of history or context, do not address the systemic and institutionalized racism that resulted in differential outcomes for students of color in the South (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Ms. Bartlett uses the mission of the school—to fight for social justice by serving historically underserved people of color—as a decision-making filter and has taught her principals to do the same. When parents challenge use of books or teaching topics that address racial inequality or discrimination, the leaders can base their decision, not just on their personal beliefs, but on the institution's mission. In this way, Ms. Bartlett has institutionalized practices that promote social justice and racial equity because policies are not dependent on individual leaders, but on Lincoln College Preparatory's mission.

Morris Charter schools leaders are consistent and aligned in communicating and investing stakeholders in their vision of excellence. They have operationalized—from leadership teams, to teacher teams, to classrooms—the instructional and cultural practices they want to see. They leaders are coaching teachers consistently by training them on the same instructional coaching model and measuring their teachers' practices with quantifiable goals frequently. Their beliefs, systems, and practices, are consistent and aligned vertically (within grade levels) and

horizontally (across grade levels). The school focuses on preparing individual students and helping them exceed societal expectations, rather than teaching students to recognize, antagonize, and challenge systems of oppression within their schools and outside its walls.

Despite strong academic systems, the leaders themselves did not name the permanence of racism and the systemic and historical reasons why generations of black families in their county have had not access to high quality education. The leaders promote individualism and meritocracy by emphasizing that with hard work, students can meet the school leaders' bar of excellence; and by demonstrating "good character" students can become "better people" who enter their college of choice. By negating parents' concerns on whether the schools' high demands on children are developmentally appropriate, the leaders communicate the message that they have more accurate insight about the readiness skills and work ethic required for college-bound students than parents.

### Critique of Liberalism

The leaders of Lincoln College Preparatory believe in social change, activism, and student agency. Their pedagogy and curriculum, however, betray an incrementalist approach to social change. There is still strong evidence students are being "schooled" to white cultural norms through reward and punishment systems such as paychecks and bench and not allowed to exercise a developmentally appropriate level of self-management and self-regulation. During independent work time, sixth grade students were required to raise a silent hand to signal to the teacher they needed a facial tissue or needed to borrow a hand-held pencil sharpener, which they were not allowed to get themselves. Students received points on behavior "paychecks" for being compliant, and lost points if they acted out of turn. Although the leaders strongly believe in creating equitable schools and dismantling notions of white supremacy, there was weak

alignment between the leaders' beliefs and how teachers internalized and operationalized them into practice.

As Delano and Stefancic (2001) say, treating people with a color-blind and meritcratic way does not address endemic racism; especially ones that students will face once they leave the protective fold of their schools. Morris Charter focuses on preparing graduates to become individually successful and have individual life choices due to accessing property based on their individual efforts. The leaders betray a colorblind perspective that if all students develop the academic and character skills comparable to those of students in wealthier (white) communities, students of color can also access college education, and have a choice-filled life. The focus is on preparing individuals to succeed in college, not addressing the systems of oppression and institutionalized racism. Rather than critiquing the existing order, students are trained to become proficient with behaviors and skills to be successful in existing social order.

### Whiteness as Property

Ms. Bartlett teaches students, teachers, and leaders, that literacy and college education had been reserved for white populations in the South in order to maintain a white supremacist culture of power. Her active leadership on reframing education, which has historically been property right of whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), as a method to empower students who can dismantle systems of oppression in their communities, is her way of leading for social change and racial equity.

Morris Charter school leaders emphasize students gaining parity with more affluent (white) communities which unwittingly perpetuates the perception that whiteness and white presence is superior (Pearsall, 1988) to black communities. By seeking to make their schools more like the white affluent schools, and teaching students to embody the behaviors and cultural

norms of those institutions, the leaders are unwittingly driving the message that to become successful, students must embody whiteness (Harris, 1993). Students and families are encouraged, rewarded, and disciplined to follow the prescribed rules and policies of the school to access property (e.g. college degree and salaried career) (Harris, 1993) thus have more choices in life and escape current conditions of poverty. Is Morris Charter's way of teaching, defining and knowing what excellence education is reflective of the community? Whose culture and community does Morris Charter reinforce and privilege?

### Counter-Storytelling

The leaders at Lincoln College Preparatory all acknowledge that their racial identity has implications for the way they must enter the community. The principals are careful to name the historical power dynamics between whites and blacks in the South. They name how their racialized identity gives them privilege, and name the additional steps they must take to listen to students' and families counter-stories, mine for strengths within the community, be cognizant of the history of race relations in the area and their impact on older generations of blacks in the community. Mr. Oakes, for example, described how he encouraged parents to share their lived experience with other parents so they could speak to how families of color from low-income areas have successfully supported their children to and through college thus challenging the notion that college education can only be attained by upper middle class resources. Ms. Bartlett leverages the origin story of the school (school founded on a "soybean and peanut field") to debunk the notion that schools in rural farming areas cannot be one of the highest college-matriculating schools in the state. Teachers bring students to protest rallies at the Capitol, bring busloads of students to visit college campuses at Duke University or University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to not only make college access seem tangible and desirable to students,

but to also normalize the presence of black and Latino students in predominantly white institutions.

What is limited however, is the integration of the voice of the community and parents inside the school. There is frequent representation of students' voices, yet, limited examples of times when parents and community leaders were taken into consideration to significantly change the curriculum or pedagogy of the schools.

The leaders of Morris Charter are developing their own counter-story of what students in their community are capable of achieving. They focus on countering the belief that poor, racial minority students do not deserve equally excellent school facilities. They want to change the notion that rigorous, high quality curriculum, taken for granted in more affluent communities, could also be found in one of the poorest counties in the state. And they want children from the community to attend the college of their choice. They emphasize that achievement and success are within anyone's reach if students apply an ethic of hard work, sacrifice, determination, and humility. At the same time, most of the leaders discuss leveraging parents and community members voices to serve the *school's* intentions, not to amplify the parents' or community leaders' voices so that the school serve *their* intentions.

In Morris Charter, storytelling usually involved showing *parents* that their children were capable of doing more than they might expect. For example, for a Hispanic Heritage Month celebration, Mr. Martinez described teachers practicing with students to perfect a performance in front of parents, and that it was important for parents to see visible examples of students achieving at high levels so that *they* could see what their children were capable of achieving. I wondered if his description betrayed an assumption that parents had lower expectations for their children than those of the school leaders and teachers (or that parents did not have insight into

just how capable their children were)? By speaking of parents in this way, is Mr. Martinez perpetuating the stereotype that parents of color in low-income communities know less and have lower expectations for their own children than educators who know better?

### **Discussion of the Study**

There are many shared characteristics of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter, given that the founders of Morris Charter gained their initial leadership experience working at Lincoln College Preparatory. Both schools are situated in counties with high percentage of residents living in poverty, and both serve economically disadvantaged students of color. Both schools focus on developing character and academic skills and work towards helping students matriculate into four-year colleges and universities. In both schools, students wear uniforms; parents sign “contracts” or letters of commitment agreeing to follow the schools’ practices; the teachers and leaders are alumni of Teach For America and not from the communities they serve; the schools provide busing and cafeteria services; and most importantly, they are performing above most other charter schools serving similar student populations.

By analyzing the specific leadership beliefs and practices of Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter, this study can contribute to the growing body of literature on how leadership is enacted in successful charter schools that serve students of color in economically disadvantaged areas. Portraiture creates a multi-layered representation of school leadership team (from founder, to principals to assistant principals or deans) and tells a more complete story of how the leaders: 1) developed the goals, organizational systems and vision of their schools; 2) leveraged shared leaders and teachers to actualize the vision of the school; 3) influenced the instructional content and pedagogical practice of classrooms; and 4) shaped professional culture of the school.

### Limitations on Application of Findings

Given the emerging body of literature on how leadership is enacted in charter schools (Brickmore & Dowell, 2015), this study focused on the theoretical groundings and beliefs of two school founders and their schools and how the beliefs translated into practice. This study did not analyze financial models, policies, systems, or technical practice (e.g. governance, structure, financial models, their impact on policy, and student student scores), as most studies on charter school studies have done (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007; Lubiesnki & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002).

Given that this study focused school founders and leaders of two charter school organizations in North Carolina, there are many limitations to generalizing the results to other situations.

1. Lincoln College Preparatory is affiliated with a national charter management organization that offers annual leadership and teacher development resources, including year-long leadership development programs for principals, assistant principals and teachers focusing on instructional leadership and diversity, equity and inclusivity. The founder of Lincoln College Preparatory was selected through a competitive, national selection process and participated in a year-long leadership training program. All the principals of Lincoln College Preparatory also participated in the national CMO's leadership development programs. Morris Charter is an independent charter school, yet they enrolled all their principals in Relay Graduate School of Education's National Principal Academy Fellowship, an intensive year-long principal training program. Both schools had resources and access to year-long leadership development programs. Charter schools in economically disadvantaged communities may

have limited resources to resources to train or fund their leaders through development programs.

2. This study focused on charter school organizations where the founders are still leading their schools. Allison Bartlett is reaching her fifteenth year as teacher, principal and executive director of Lincoln College Preparatory. Morris Charter has been in existence for seven years with no leadership turnover. These schools have had stable leadership in contrast with many charter schools where 29% of principals leave their positions each year (School Leader Network, 2014) with this rate being higher for those working in high poverty communities (Baker et al, 2010; Beteille et al, 2007; Gates et al, 2006; Papa, 2007; Partlow & Ridenour, 2008).
3. Most charter schools in North Carolina serve white, non-economically disadvantaged students whereas Lincoln College Preparatory and Morris Charter have predominantly economically disadvantaged students of color. Teachers and leaders who work at both schools are recruited and hired for their desire to specifically work with historically disadvantaged communities.

### Interpretation of the Findings

Previous research studies on effective charter school leadership focus on practice, resources, or leadership preparation (Banks, Bodkin, & Heissel, 2011; Bickmore and Sultenic, 2014; Carter, 2000; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b; Merseth, 2009; Peyser, 2011). Studies on charter school leaders' beliefs, self-awareness, socio-political consciousness, or values underpinning their practice is undertheorized. The examination of two charter school founders and their schools through the lens of Critical Race Theory illuminated six resonant beliefs and practices

for leading equitable and excellent schools that serve economically disadvantaged students of color.

*Self-awareness.* At Lincoln College Preparatory, the school founder and principals demonstrated self-awareness of their racial identity and the impact that their identity had on building relationships and communicating with students and families across lines of difference.

Leaders for equity and excellence understand themselves, their racial identity, positionality, and how those factors combined impact others. For example, given that most of the principals at Lincoln College Preparatory are white, Allison Bartlett invested time leading professional development sessions and book studies with her leadership team so that they could explore how their racial identity, gender, class and various markers of privilege impact how they think about curriculum and pedagogy. By starting the kicking off the start of the school year with all staff members (elementary, middle, and high school campuses) with a discussion about social justice, Ms. Bartlett is symbolically communicating what she believes, values and purposes for the organization.

*Leaders are connected to their community.* Ms. Bartlett refused to take an opportunity for leadership in another state because she did not know the people of the community, the history, and the educational context in which she would be starting a school. She founded Lincoln College Preparatory with a clear rationale for whom the school was designed to serve, which in turn impacted leadership decisions on hiring, budget, curriculum and instruction. Guided by the mission to disrupt systems of oppression and interrupt patterns of educational inequity within her community, Ms. Bartlett invested and developed her leaders to build schools that would prepare students who could pursue their passions and have the socio-political consciousness to challenge oppressive policies or practices in their community. David Martinez was deeply connected to the

community leaders—governmental and business—as well as the informal leaders in community social spaces. This gave him access to resource (e.g. donated land to build their school campus) in addition to social credibility among the black residents in the town to build a state-of-the-arts school, thus symbolically messaging to the community that economically disadvantaged students of color deserve high quality schools.

*Ability to communicate vision and invest stakeholders.* Both Allison Bartlett and David Martinez were deeply invested in creating and bringing their school’s mission and vision to life. They defined the core values for their leadership team and staff and leveraged their leadership team to guard them. The school founders frequently modeled for principals how to explain, defend, and connect, their leadership decisions to the mission of their schools. Through professional development, symbols, and coaching, these two school founders found various ways to help their leadership team internalize and propagate the mission and values of the organizations.

*Hiring staff who aligned with the school’s mission.* The school founders at both schools selectively hired staff members whose skills, beliefs, and practices aligned with their school’s mission. They promoted leaders who had demonstrated strong instructional leadership skills, exemplified the school’s values, and demonstrated past success with leading teams to achieve student academic results. They selected teaching candidates who understood and were specifically invested in working at a charter school whose mission is to bring high quality education to economically disadvantaged students of color and believe that their students can achieve high levels with effective time, effort, and strategies.

*Leaders developing leaders.* The school founders demonstrated an exceptional ability to drive results through other leaders. As charter schools grow from a single building into multiple entities, school founders developed leaders from within.

*Leaders operationalize their vision into action.* A strength of the leaders at Morris Charter is their ability to operationalize their mission into practice. They codified their beliefs into visible, actionable processes with clear metrics to track how leaders and teachers were following through with consistency and fidelity.

### Recommendations for Research

This study of two charter school founders inspires opportunities for further research on how leaders' theoretical groundings and beliefs shape practice. This is salient given the rapid proliferation of charter schools, and their potential decline among ones serving predominantly economically disadvantaged communities of color in North Carolina.

*How beliefs shape school design.* Charter school founders establish not only the instructional vision but the business infrastructure of the school. How does the charter school founders' theoretical groundings, beliefs, life experiences, and training influence their organizational design? How a school's economic model supports or excludes the participation of economically disadvantaged students from charter schools requires further research.

*How beliefs shape staff hiring practices.* Both school founders appreciated having autonomy and flexibility to manage their hiring process. This allowed their organizations to hire and retain staff members who matched the organization's mission, vision, and culture. Further studies on hiring practices of successful charter schools in economically disadvantaged communities can illuminate the relationship between hiring practices, teacher performance, and student outcomes.

*Culturally relevant leadership in charter schools.* Future research studying charter school leaders who have embedded culturally relevant pedagogy into their school-wide systems and practice, and how that translated into the school design, systems, personnel and practice can provide a holistic picture can provide guidance for future leaders.

*How beliefs are surfaced during school founder selection process.* One of the school founders in this study was selected through a competitive leadership fellowship sponsored by a national charter management organization that specifically targets serving economically disadvantaged communities of color. The other wrote an application and formed his own organization without a sponsoring charter management organization or educational management organization. Further research on the process and criteria that charter management organizations use to select school founders who start schools in economically disadvantaged communities of color is warranted. In addition, an examination into the vetting process that charter school authorizers use to examine school founders' beliefs and theoretical underpinnings that inform the school's design is warranted.

*Charter school founder training.* In this study, one of the school founders participated in a year-long leadership development program before starting her school and the other had no official training or leadership experience. Further research on the relationship between charter school leadership preparation programs and their success is needed.

*Future studies at Morris Charter.* In about ten years, Morris Charter will graduate several classes of students from college. Comparing the outcomes of their alumni through various metrics (e.g. college completion, vocations, salaries, life satisfaction, community engagement, social activism) with alumni from Lincoln College Preparatory, can serve as a continuation of this study.

*Charter schools and their communities.* This study largely focused on the school leaders' perspective. Parents, students, and community members were not interviewed for this study. Gathering perspectives of parents, students, and community members of Morris Charter and Lincoln College Preparatory would add tremendous value to this body of research on charter school leadership. Where do parents and students see alignment or discrepancies between what the school leaders' promise and families' lived experiences? Are parents' voices, perspectives, and life experiences actively incorporated into the fabric of the school? Is there a difference in leaders' perception of how integrated parents are into the fabric of the school versus parents' perceptions? Do parents believe that the schools belong to them or to the charter management organization? Do they feel leaders and teachers and parents are co-constructing a vision for their children? Or do they feel they are asked to contribute to the school's vision for their children's future? These questions pose opportunities to deepen research and understanding of the culturally relevant leadership.

#### Recommendations for School Organizations & Leadership Preparation Programs

The following reflections offer ideas that charter school organizations (CMO and EMOs) or leadership preparation programs can consider from this study.

*Hiring and selection practices.* In hiring founders of charter schools that serve economically disadvantaged students of color, the hiring organizations must examine the leaders' connection to, understanding of, and respect for the community. Does the leader understand the history of race and racism in the community and their impact on educational opportunities for students? Does the leader understand how race impacted schooling choices and options for students of color in the community? Does the leader understand which aspects of the community's history and geography must be considered in making leadership decisions (e.g. the

need to allocate funds to provide transportation services; which neighborhoods had access to better schools due to school district lines)? Can they name, with specificity, the strengths of the community? Surfacing what the candidates' deeper connection to the community to collaborate with and respect the community can surface how leaders will glean wisdom from families and communities, and work collaboratively with them to co-construct culturally relevant schools.

*Preparing leaders to hire for mission alignment.* Charter school organizations should consider how to help leaders design performance evaluations and interview processes that select for and promote staff members that closely align with the school's mission, vision, and values. In larger charter organizations or traditional school districts where a central office manages hiring processes, giving school leaders the flexibility to adapt interview questions, activities, and selection rubrics allows for a stronger match between hires and their school leaders.

Leadership preparation programs should consider teaching principals how to develop promotion and hiring criteria that matches their school's mission, vision and values; and construct a variety of interview methods that allows candidates to demonstrate their fit with the school.

*Developing principals to develop leaders.* Charter management organizations, board of directors, or school districts should communicate expectations and provide resources (time, funding, mentorship) for school founders to build their leadership team members' capacity. Leaders' ability to develop leadership capacity in others allows them to distribute power, incorporate diverse perspectives in decision-making at their schools, and allows them to stay longer in their role.

*Leadership development for charter school leaders.* For small charter school organizations with limited funds, personnel and capacity, creating a professional development

program for leaders and teachers is costly and time-consuming. There is opportunity to support charter schools with continuous professional development for their leaders, so that they can develop their own leadership teams and teachers.

*Growing self-awareness of racialized identity in leaders.* Leadership development programs, particularly for charter school founders who wish to open schools in economically disadvantaged communities serving students of color should dedicate time and space for leaders to examine how elements of their identity influence their leadership beliefs and their practice. Leaders must examine how their conceptions of race, class, power and privilege impact their relationships with students, families and communities, to lead equitable schools.

In preparing charter school founders, leadership development programs should assign leaders with learning opportunities to understand the local families' hopes and aspirations for their children. Leaders should also be charged to meet and develop relationships with elders and informal leaders of the community. These relationships can inform leaders of the strengths and resources within the community, so they can lead with respect and humility.

### **A Personal Reflection and Conclusion**

The experience of researching Lincoln College Preparatory as a former teacher at the school was revelatory. I do not recall the school leaders communicating the school's mission for social justice and equity back then with the same clarity and passion I heard through this study. Ten years ago, I was just beginning to examine my racial identity therefore their messages, perhaps same then as they are now, did not resonate so clearly. Back then, even though I was already eight years in education, I had not studied the history of racial injustice and educational inequity in the community where I worked. Had I spent some time listening to stories of the community's elders—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who endured desegregation and re-

segregation of schools—I might have been more attuned to the community’s struggles to resist oppression and white supremacy. I might not have seen myself as one who had “arrived” and was helping the disadvantaged attain “success” like me.

In developing the title of this study, I deliberately chose the phrase “in pursuit” since the school leaders would describe themselves as pursuing, not yet arriving the states of equity and excellence at their schools. Through the lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009), a school that is equitable and excellent does not subscribe to “assimilationist teaching” (p.25). They define excellence beyond achievement on standardized test scores; leaders share the responsibility for attaining excellence with parents, the community and students; they work with parents, not despite them; they bring communities into the school, not extract students from them. Leaders and teachers see themselves as members of the community who are teaching their students to be more fluent *in* their community, not become exceptions or outliers (Ladson-Billings, 2009) of it. Rather than banking, training, and prescribing white normative behaviors in students, leaders for equity and excellent help their students develop Community Cultural Wealth, which Yosso (2006) defines as a constellation of skills that include six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant.

- Aspirational: “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers,” (p.176)
- Linguistic: the ability to speak in multiple languages, tell stories, communicate through art, poetry, or music; fluently relate with different audiences
- Familial: kinship and cultural knowledge of the family, the community’s history, cultural traditions; consciousness of familial ties

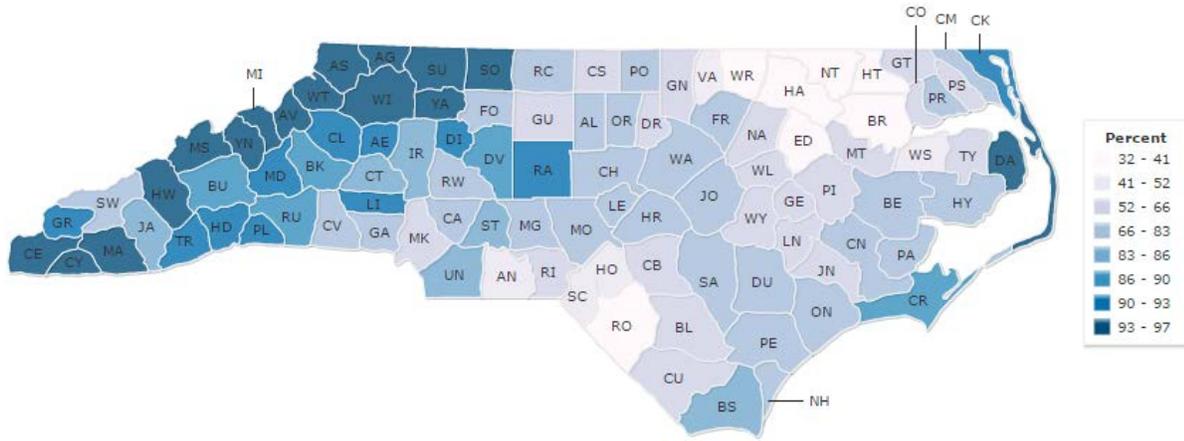
- Social: leveraging experiential knowledge within the community to navigate through institutions and social-emotional challenges
- Navigational: ability to navigate and succeed in “institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind,” (p.178)
- Resistant: the knowledge and skills to resist subordination and challenge the status quo

A leader’s ability to recognize whether she is espousing equity versus enacting it begins with examining herself. Leadership begins with self. Every leadership action and decision is informed by the leader’s self. Understanding and examining beliefs begins with self-awareness of one’s identity. To lead for equity and excellence, the leader must examine her identity and positionality through the lens of race, gender, cultural background, family history, class and sexuality. Doing so enables her to better understand who she is, in relation to the stories and histories of the community she serves, so that she can lead with socio-political consciousness and cultural proficiency, and challenge notions of excellence that have historically be defined by the culture of power. Without an examination of self (and life experiences informed those beliefs) leaders may unwittingly perpetuate racism by enacting their biases or internalized racism thus perpetuating the status quo.

# APPENDIX A: WHITENESS AND SCHOOL QUALITY AND PROPERTY VALUE

North Carolina White Population Percentage, 2013 by County

(U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, 2013)



Average School Rating by County, 2016

(Zillow & Great Schools, 2016)



**APPENDIX B: COMPARISON OF AVERAGE HOME LISTING PRICE WITH WHITE POPULATION AND COUNTY/DISTRICT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OUTCOMES, 2014-15**

| Name         | Average Home Listing Price | Percent White Population | Performance Composite Percent College/Career Ready, 2014-15 |
|--------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Currituck    | \$589,754                  | 90.7                     | 49.3  |
| Transylvania | \$474,856                  | 93.3                     | 52.8  |
| Dare         | \$467,980                  | 94.1                     | 53.8  |
| Polk         | \$453,641                  | 93                       | 60.3  |
| Chatham      | \$453,405                  | 82.3                     | 47.6  |
| Union        | \$451,113                  | 83.5                     | 63.3  |
| Buncombe     | \$449,853                  | 89.7                     | 51.2  |
| Orange       | \$449,658                  | 77                       | 50.7  |
| New Hanover  | \$415,995                  | 81.3                     | 54.2  |
| Wake         | \$398,176                  | 69.3                     | 58  |
| Iredell      | \$392,563                  | 83.2                     | 48.7  |
| Jackson      | \$366,502                  | 85.5                     | 41.4  |
| Mecklenburg  | \$364,874                  | 59.7                     | 50.5  |
| Lincoln      | \$353,866                  | 91.8                     | 55  |
| Watauga      | \$352,025                  | 95.3                     | 60.7  |
| Morris       | \$350,423                  | 93.1                     | 56.7  |
| Moore        | \$331,263                  | 82.7                     | 50.2  |
| Hyde         | \$319,849                  | 67.8                     | 43.7  |
| Carteret     | \$317,844                  | 89.8                     | 58.2  |
| Durham       | \$317,259                  | 53.1                     | 35  |
| Avery        | \$302,563                  | 93.8                     | 50.9  |
| Pender       | \$300,971                  | 79.3                     | 48  |
| Brunswick    | \$300,423                  | 85.4                     | 44.7  |
| Person       | \$298,770                  | 70.1                     | 42.8  |
| Montgomery   | \$295,947                  | 77.2                     | 36.7  |
| Madison      | \$292,277                  | 96.1                     | 49.4  |
| Yancey       | \$279,838                  | 96.6                     | 56  |
| Macon        | \$277,025                  | 95.7                     | 44.2  |
| Haywood      | \$273,238                  | 96.6                     | 55.5  |
| Camden       | \$270,218                  | 82                       | 55.3  |
| Davie        | \$268,789                  | 90.5                     | 53.3  |
| Warren       | \$267,646                  | 40.8                     | 26  |

| Name        | Average Home Listing Price | Percent White Population | Performance Composite Percent College/Career Ready, 2014-15 |
|-------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Wilkes      | \$265,417                  | 93.5                     | 45.1  |
| Pamlico     | \$264,778                  | 77                       | 43.1  |
| Ashe        | \$264,725                  | 97.2                     | 53  |
| Rutherford  | \$256,398                  | 87.3                     | 43.8  |
| Chowan      | \$254,950                  | 63.2                     | 40.2  |
| Clay        | \$252,226                  | 96.9                     | 45.7  |
| Northampton | \$249,190                  | 39.6                     | 18.9  |
| Cabarrus    | \$245,947                  | 78.3                     | 51.3  |
| Guilford    | \$242,304                  | 58.8                     | 44  |
| Caswell     | \$242,081                  | 64.2                     | 34.3  |
| Alexander   | \$241,705                  | 91.4                     | 47.8  |
| Granville   | \$236,716                  | 64.9                     | 33.6  |
| Catawba     | \$236,329                  | 85                       | 49.4  |
| Stanly      | \$234,154                  | 84.9                     | 44.6  |
| Forsyth     | \$229,383                  | 67.8                     | 44.1  |
| Swain       | \$229,036                  | 65.9                     | 42.8  |
| Johnston    | \$228,707                  | 80.5                     | 48.1  |
| Caldwell    | \$223,705                  | 92.2                     | 46.4  |
| Franklin    | \$222,206                  | 69.8                     | 37  |
| Perquimans  | \$217,820                  | 73.1                     | 37  |
| Graham      | \$217,471                  | 90.3                     | 43.2  |
| Stokes      | \$213,542                  | 94                       | 45.8  |
| Beaufort    | \$213,454                  | 71.8                     | 40.8  |
| Tyrrell     | \$213,430                  | 58.9                     | 32.6  |
| McDowell    | \$212,739                  | 92.9                     | 41.9  |
| Burke       | \$203,746                  | 86.5                     | 51.2  |
| Mitchell    | \$200,490                  | 96.9                     | 47  |
| Alleghany   | \$200,121                  | 95.7                     | 52.2  |
| Bladen      | \$196,661                  | 60.7                     | 30  |
| Onslow      | \$194,677                  | 76.7                     | 43.3  |
| Randolph    | \$194,043                  | 90                       | 42.5  |
| Rowan       | \$192,673                  | 80.3                     | 32.7  |
| Davidson    | \$187,702                  | 87.1                     | 49.5  |
| Craven      | \$186,716                  | 72.4                     | 47.5  |
| Cherokee    | \$186,490                  | 93.8                     | 44.4  |
| Alamance    | \$181,787                  | 75.8                     | 40.2  |
| Yadkin      | \$181,739                  | 94.5                     | 48.8  |

| Name          | Average Home Listing Price | Percent White Population | Performance Composite Percent College/Career Ready, 2014-15 |
|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Hoke          | \$179,018                  | 50.4                     | 37.8  |
| Duplin        | \$178,749                  | 70.4                     | 32.7  |
| Harnett       | \$176,188                  | 72.3                     | 36.2  |
| Vance         | \$174,083                  | 46.7                     | 28.3  |
| Halifax       | \$173,486                  | 40.9                     | 22.1  |
| Nash          | \$169,566                  | 57.3                     | 31.6  |
| Cleveland     | \$163,355                  | 76.5                     | 47.1  |
| Lee           | \$161,494                  | 75.5                     | 39.1  |
| Pitt          | \$160,965                  | 61.1                     | 41.4  |
| Columbus      | \$157,787                  | 64                       | 34  |
| Rockingham    | \$155,577                  | 78.2                     | 41  |
| Cumberland    | \$154,490                  | 53.6                     | 43.3  |
| Jones         | \$153,209                  | 65.5                     | 42.4  |
| Sampson       | \$147,702                  | 67.4                     | 44.3  |
| Surry         | \$140,031                  | 93.5                     | 51.4  |
| Pasquotank    | \$136,936                  | 58.1                     | 34.2  |
| Hertford      | \$135,076                  | 36.4                     | 24.1  |
| Gates         | \$130,833                  | 63.9                     | 44.5  |
| Wayne         | \$129,395                  | 63.6                     | 35  |
| Wilson        | \$125,211                  | 57.3                     | 36.5  |
| Robeson       | \$119,398                  | 32.4                     | 26.2  |
| Lenoir        | \$118,813                  | 56.5                     | 31.2  |
| Richmond      | \$118,155                  | 62.7                     | 39.8  |
| Lincoln       | \$112,181                  | 48.1                     | 25.2  |
| Scotland      | \$111,897                  | 46.5                     | 41.2  |
| Greene        | \$111,008                  | 59.5                     | 28.5  |
| Anson         | \$106,055                  | 48.2                     | 28.6  |
| Bertie        | \$101,938                  | 36                       | 26.4  |
| Martin        | \$101,067                  | 54.8                     | 31.4  |
| Edgecombe     | \$90,848                   | 40.3                     | 24  |
| <b>MEDIAN</b> | <b>\$222,956</b>           | <b>77</b>                | <b>43.75</b>  |
| <b>MEAN</b>   | <b>\$240,848</b>           | <b>74.282</b>            | <b>42.78</b>  |

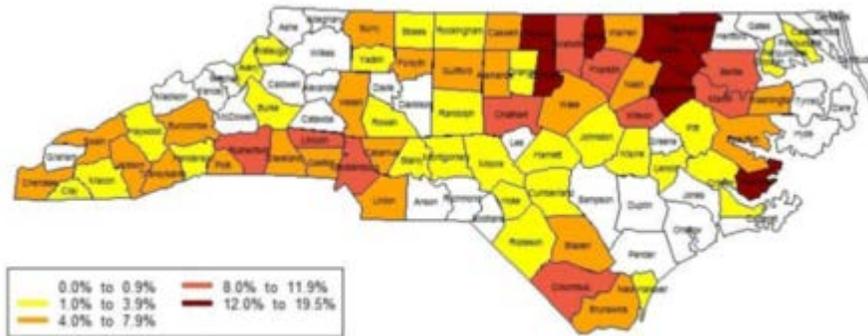
## APPENDIX C: NORTH CAROLINA CHARTER SCHOOLS BY COUNTY

Percentage of Public School Students in

Membership at Charter Schools

Month 1 2015-16

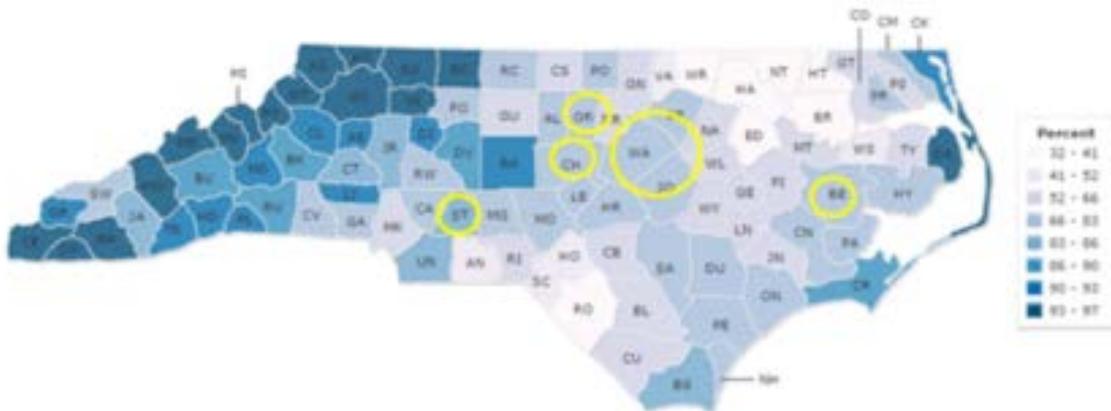
Source: Public Schools of North Carolina (2015)



Where are the top performing charter schools in North Carolina?

North Carolina White Population Percentage, 2013 by County

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Estimate Program (PEP)



**APPENDIX D: HIGHEST PERFORMING CHARTER SCHOOLS, 2014-15**

Source: Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015

| <b>School Name</b>                | <b>Percent Grade Level Proficient (GLP) 2014-15</b> | <b>Percent Economically Disadvantaged Students Reported</b> |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Quest Academy                     | 94.9  | 0   |
| Gray Stone Day                    | 94.3  | 0   |
| Endeavor Charter                  | 92.2  | 0   |
| Woods Charter                     | 89.3  | 0   |
| Triangle Math and Science Academy | 88.4  | 0   |
| Envision Science Academy          | 88.1  | 0   |
| Sterling Montessori Academy       | 87.1  | 0   |
| Tiller School                     | 87.0  | 0   |
| The Expedition School             | 85.2  | 0   |
| Morris Charter                    | 84.9  | 89.8  |

## **APPENDIX E: SCHOOL FOUNDER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Walk me through your personal history and what led you to education.
2. What led you to this part of Eastern North Carolina?
3. What were your childhood aspirations?
4. What were your educational experiences like in K-12 education? How does it compare to what your students experience here at your school?
5. What led you to found your school? Why did you want to found a school in this community?  
In this area?
6. Did you set out to serve predominantly economically disadvantaged students? Students of color?
7. Had you worked with demographically different student populations before?
8. Talk to me about how you arrived at your school's mission and vision statements.
9. What does equity mean to you?
10. What does excellence in schools mean to you?
11. When you think about a charter school that is equitable and excellent, what are the key components or practices that make it so?
12. What are the strengths of this community?
13. How did the community respond when you wanted to open the school?
14. What did your students and families want in their school? What are their aspirations for their children?
15. When you designed and planned this school, what were the big goals you had in mind for your students? What were your non-negotiables? What systems and structures did you want to put in place?

16. What services, practices, or features should a charter school that serves predominantly economically disadvantaged offer?
  - a. How did you prioritize what to offer? What did you have to sacrifice in order to offer these things? What were the advantages or disadvantages of those choices?
17. What makes your school particularly strong with academic excellence? How did you achieve that?
18. How did you invest and develop your staff to achieve these outcomes?
19. When you founded this school, what was the ultimate outcome you wanted for your students? How did you plan to reach those outcomes?
20. Have your goals for your school evolved? How so?
21. What are some effective practices you do that you believe all traditional schools can do and should be doing to better serve economically disadvantaged students? Racial minorities?
  - a. Is your school doing all of those things?
24. What do you think traditional schools that serve predominantly economically disadvantaged minority students can do to achieve the same results as your school?
25. Have your beliefs about education or school leadership changed over time? If so, what are the changes?
26. What do you foresee as opportunities and challenges for their schools in the years ahead?

**APPENDIX F: ALIGNMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCHOOL FOUNDER  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

| Research Questions  | School Founder Interview Questions |
|---|------------------------------------|
| RQ1: What are the theoretical groundings and beliefs of charter school founders that successfully serve economically disadvantaged students of color?                         | 1-14, 19                           |
| RQ2: How do school leaders translate these beliefs into practice?   | 11, 14-19, 23-24                   |
| RQ3: How have the schools evolved over time while staying committed to their mission? What are their strengths and opportunities for development in pursuit of their mission? | 14, 16, 23-24                      |
| RQ4: Taking these two examples together, what might we learn about the theoretical groundings and practices of equitable and excellent charter schools and their leaders?     | 20, 25-26                          |

## **APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW WITH MEMBERS OF THE LEADERSHIP TEAM**

1. What led you to your current work in education and to this school?
2. What were your childhood aspirations?
3. What were your educational experiences like in K-12 education? How does it compare to what your students experience here at your school?
4. [If not from this local area] What led you to this part of Eastern North Carolina?
5. Why did you want to work at this school, in this community?
6. Did you set out to serve predominantly economically disadvantaged students? Students of color?
7. Had you worked with demographically different student populations before?
8. What attracted you to work at this school?
9. What does equity mean to you?
10. What does excellence in schools mean to you?
11. When you think about a charter school that is equitable and excellent, what are the key components or practices that make it so?
12. What are the strengths of this community?
13. What did your students and families want in their school? What are their aspirations for their children?
14. What are the big goals you have in mind for your students? As a leader of this school, what are your non-negotiables? How do you operationalize those non-negotiables into the school's practice?
15. What makes your school particularly strong with academic excellence? How did you achieve that?

16. How do you invest and develop your staff to achieve these outcomes?
17. What do you aspire to do professionally in the next 5-10 years?
18. What are some effective practices you do that you believe all charter schools can do and to better serve students of color? Economically disadvantaged students?
  - a. Is your school doing all of those things?
19. What do you think traditional schools that serve predominantly economically disadvantaged minority students can do to achieve the same results as your school?
20. Have your beliefs about education or school leadership changed since you started working here? If so, what are the changes?
21. What do you foresee as opportunities and challenges for their schools in the years ahead?

## APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

August 11, 2016

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your consideration of participating in this study. Yours and your school's participation will add richness and substance to this study and the field of social justice education.

**Topic of study:** The theoretical beliefs that undergird the practices of leading charter schools where students of color consistently academically achieve

**Description of study:** This is a qualitative study for examining the theoretical groundings that undergird the design of charter schools where students of color consistently academically achieve at high levels. Through interviews with school leaders and founder(s), observations of school days and classes, and focus group interviews with key staff members, this study will examine how the school's intentions inform every day practice. The study will be conducted from August to October 2016.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine the strengths and opportunities of charter schools that strive to shift the narrative of racialized outcomes for students of color and hold promise for other public schools to follow through the lens of Critical Race Theory.

**Sources of data to be collected:**

Phase 1 – Interviews with founder(s) and school leaders

Phase 2 - Observations of leadership meetings, staff meetings, classes and school operations; document review; focus group interview with key staff members

**Length of interview with school leader:** Up to 60 minutes. Participants are encouraged to ask clarifying questions, may choose not to respond to particular questions, or quit the interview at any time. Elaboration and introduction of related ideas by the scholar/researcher will be encouraged by the researcher.

**Protection of the interviewee's anonymity and confidentiality:**

You will be asked to choose a pseudonym for yourself and your school. You will also be given full access to all data collected and to my interpretation of that data. You will be given multiple opportunities to check the data that would be used in the final narrative product, the dissertation, which may eventually be submitted for publication. I will be purposeful in protecting your and your schools' anonymity. Your data will be securely stored following UNC's Information Technology Services (ITS) security recommendations.

Your name, your schools' names, your schools' location (city and county) will not appear in any publication or presentation about my research, and you will not be identifiable to others in the final dissertation product or any future publication or presentation.

Audio recordings of the interviews will be maintained on password protected recording device during the research process and deleted once the study is completed.

Classroom or school-wide observations will only be recorded in writing. No videos or audio-recordings of students or teachers without their informed consent will be taken. Students, including any minors under the age of eighteen, will not be interviewed for this study.

Teachers who are interviewed for the focus group will be chosen by you and/or the school leaders. They will be asked to give informed consent for their interviews.

Please contact the researcher with any questions or the dissertation committee chair, Dr. Fenwick English, using the contact information provided below. You also may contact the Institutional Review Board (919-966-3113) for Study #16-1525 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Please note that your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time. If you agree to participate in the interview process as described for this study, please complete and return the requested information below by September 1. If you have any questions, contact the researcher or other contacts provided in the enclosed letter.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation! I look forward to hearing your insights and ideas about the topic.

Son Young Esther Hahm, Researcher



Dr. Fenwick English, Dissertation Chair  
Eaves Distinguished Professor of  
Educational Leadership at  
UNC at Chapel Hill  
[fenglish@email.unc.edu](mailto:fenglish@email.unc.edu)

Enclosure: Interview Questions

**APPENDIX I: ALIGNMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND INTERVIEW  
QUESTIONS**

| Research Questions  | Interviews with Members of the Leadership Team |
|---|--|
| RQ1: What are the theoretical groundings and beliefs of charter school founders that successfully serve economically disadvantaged students of color?                         | 1-13   |
| RQ2: How do school leaders translate these beliefs into practice?   | 11, 14-16                                      |
| RQ3: How have the schools evolved over time while staying committed to their mission? What are their strengths and opportunities for development in pursuit of their mission? | 20-21  |
| RQ4: Taking these two examples together, what might we learn about the theoretical groundings and practices of equitable and excellent charter schools and their leaders?     | 22-23  |

## APPENDIX J: TIMELINE OF RESEARCH

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| April 30          | IRB Approval for Research   |
| May 2             | Email school sites for permission to conduct research   |
| August            | Round 1 of interviews with School Founders<br>Conduct observations of the school<br>Collect documents and artifacts |
| August - December | Conduct Interview with Leadership Team<br>Transcribe and analyze interviews   |
| January - May     | Transcribe and analyze interviews<br>Analyze documents and artifacts<br>Writing analytic memos                      |
| June - August     | Analyze data, synthesize key themes, patterns, and concepts   |
| August - October  | Draft results and discussion of research study  |
| November          | Defend final dissertation   |

**APPENDIX K: PROFILE OF LINCOLN COLLEGE PREPARATORY AND MORRIS  
CHARTER SCHOOLS, 2015-16**

|                            | Lincoln College Preparatory | Morris Charter |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Total Number of Students   | 1280                        | 610            |
| Grades Served              | K-12                        | 4-9            |
| Native American            | <1.0                        | <1.0           |
| Asian                      | 1.0                         | <1.0           |
| Hispanic                   | 2.8                         | 19.5           |
| Black                      | 77.3                        | 72.3           |
| White                      | 14.5                        | 4.8            |
| Pacific Islander           | 0                           | 0              |
| Multi-Racial               | 3.3                         | 2.8            |
| Economically Disadvantaged | 73.1                        | 89.8           |

## APPENDIX L: INTERVIEWEES

### Lincoln College Preparatory

| Name             | Title                                   | School Level      |
|------------------|---|-------------------|
| Allison Bartlett | Executive Director & Co-Founder         | All levels        |
| Erin Evanlin     | Co-Principal                            | Middle School     |
| Gary Houston     | Co-Principal                            | Middle School     |
| Ina Mehta        | Principal                               | High School       |
| Carrie Donovan   | Principal                               | Elementary School |
| Nathan Oakes     | Assistant Principal (Interim Principal) | High School       |
| Penelope Queen   | Teacher Leader                          | Middle School     |
| Rachel Sydney    | Teacher Leader                          | Middle School     |
| Tom Underwood    | Teacher Leader                          | Middle School     |

### Morris Charter

| Name            | Title   | School Level  |
|-----------------|---|---------------|
| David Martinez  | Executive Director & Co-Founder                 | All levels    |
| Alicia Martinez | Co-Founder & Dean of Instruction and Curriculum | All levels    |
| Evan Forte      | Principal                                       | Middle School |
| George Hanson   | Principal                                       | High School   |
| Iliana Hanson   | Teacher Leader                                  | Middle School |
| Jennifer Lazio  | Instructional Coach                             | High School   |

## APPENDIX M: LINCOLN COLLEGE PREPARATORY SOCIAL JUSTICE COURSE

### **Social Justice Course Description**

In this course we will examine the concepts of democracy and justice; worldwide inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and the societal and legal constructions of power that have created them. In order to develop an understanding of our place in the world and our roles as democratic citizens, we will explore the historical AND current motivations for the use of democratic institutions and principles in order to achieve equality for the oppressed, under-represented, under-privileged, and unrecognized populations worldwide.

To develop a more complete sense of history's social component, particular emphasis will be placed on the exploration of social issues, problems, and changes worldwide. Together we will determine who we are, where come from, how we differ, our common interests and the common bonds we share that give us *power* to create *change* as citizens of the world.

The historical knowledge gleaned from the study of social injustices and civil rights movements of the past and the investigatory tools acquired doing hands-on public work will prepare student to be critical readers, writers, and thinkers as they continue their study of social sciences throughout high school and in college. More importantly, this course will give students the tools they need to make conscientious choices about their roles and responsibilities as members of society.

### **Topics of Study**

#### *First Nine Weeks:*

- Identity, Power, and Oppression
- Social Change Theory, Introduction to Change Movements → The Birmingham Children's March Case Study, The REAL Rosa Parks Story
- Racism and Classism in Education → Social Change in our Peanut Field (KIPP, North Carolina, and the achievement gap)

#### *Second Nine Weeks:*

- Ableism and Disability Rights → IDEA Act, Equity, Access
- Sexism and Women's Rights → Then, Now, Around the World, Media Portrayals
- Heterosexism and Gay Rights → The Laramie Project, Harvey Milk, and Marriage

#### *Third Nine Weeks:*

- International Human Rights → UNDHR
- Imperialism, Colonialism, and Conflict → Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Cuba, South Africa, Argentina, India

#### *Fourth Nine Weeks:*

- Contemporary Issues in Social Justice → Healthcare, Immigration, Worker's Rights
- Research and Action → Our Issues, Our Solutions

### ***Enduring Understandings***

- Social justice reflects the way human *rights* are manifested in the everyday lives of ALL members of society.
- Personal or group *identity* has historically, and continues to be, a factor in whether or not one receives equal rights and treatment in society.
- To achieve social justice we must study our past and use it to inform our present and future *actions* to address inequalities.
- Citizens have the *responsibility* to be active participants in their community, country, and world; freedom is never free.
- The mindsets of people in *power* are reflected in the laws they enact, and the mindsets of those enforcing the law are reflected in the equity of their decisions.
- No government completely fulfills their promises of freedom.
- Ordinary people have the *power* to create *change*, having a positive impact on social injustices on an individual, group, community, country, and world level (myself, my school, my city, my country, my world).
- By going to this school, I am contributing to the movement to close the achievement gap in education.

### *Essential Questions*

- Who is free?
- How do governments fall short of their promises of freedom?
- If we live in a world of puppets, who is pulling the strings?
- How do my own actions support systems of oppression?
- What am I willing to fight for?
- Who has the ability to change the world?
- How do the mistakes of the past influence our choices for the future?
- How does going to our school contribute to a social change movement?

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