

A SITE OF RESISTANCE AND/OR RECLAMATION?  
THE ROLE OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT

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## **ABSTRACT**

Danielle Joi Allen: A Site of Resistance and/or Reclamation?  
The Role of the Black Church in the Charter School Movement  
(Under the direction of Lora Cohen-Vogel)

The struggle for equitable educational opportunities for students of color and those from low income families began well before the seminal *Brown* case, and continues with each new wave of education reform. The charter school movement is one such reform rapidly expanding across the United States and often targeting students from low-income communities of color (Berends, 2013; Reardon, 2011). Black churches have traditionally played a significant role in the education of African Americans (Billingsley, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Pinn & Pinn, 2002), and have become increasingly involved in the charter movement. To date, there has been little scholarly investigation into the nature of this involvement.

Through a set of three studies, this dissertation examines nine predominantly Black churches and the ways they have mobilized as sites of resistance and/or reclamation of Black education through the charter school movement. Article 1 examines the types of Black church participation in the charter movement, and Article 2 examines discursive claims around their reasons and motivations for becoming involved. Finally, Article 3, a related case study, examines a coalition of Black clergy that mobilized politically to defeat legislation that would have expanded the reach of charter schools in Georgia.

Preliminary findings suggest that Black church participation in the charter movement falls into four categories: political mobilization, parent and community education, creation and engagement of school choice-related coalitions, and “birthing” and/or supporting charter schools. There appear to be two emerging discourses regarding motivations for becoming involved in the charter school movement: health of the church and community revitalization. These discourses are not currently included in the literature on African-Americans’ motivations for supporting school choice, and further research is necessary to determine the extent to which they are pervasive across Black faith communities. Finally, the related case study reveals that key strategies of Black church political mobilization in the charter school movement include data mining and problem identification, resource employment, coalition building, and celebration, debriefing, and re-engagement.

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*Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.  
-1 Corinthians 10:31b*

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## **CHAPTER 1: TOWARD A THEORY OF BEHAVIORS EXHIBITED BY BLACK CHURCHES PARTICIPATING IN THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT**

The role of the Black church in the charter movement has been largely overlooked by scholars. In beginning to fill that void, this study determines the types of behaviors exhibited by Black churches participating in charter school reform using data from church histories, sermons, charter school applications, newspaper articles, charter school board meeting minutes, archival records, and interviews. To organize the data and present it in a systematically transparent fashion, I set out to conduct a typological analysis to create a typology of Black church involvement based on two dimensions: the first, levels of church activism, was previously set out by Billingsley (1999). The second proposed dimension, beliefs about charter schools, was selected by the researcher based on the research objectives. As the findings will show, the behaviors identified in the data do not fit a typology along beliefs and activism levels; however, there do appear to be several emerging categories of behaviors arising from the data that I contend form the basis for a new theory around Black church involvement in the charter school movement.

For the purposes of this work and in much of the literature on Black churches, “Black church” is defined as a religious institution where the majority of the congregation and the leadership, or senior minister, are both Black (Billingsley and Caldwell, 1991). As Billingsley and Caldwell note, this definition excludes some congregations in Black communities where the

membership is predominantly Black and the leadership is White (some Catholic churches, for example). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) note that “Black church” speaks to those “independent, historic, and totally Black controlled denominations” (p. 1), however, I extended this definition to include predominantly Black non-denominational churches that were led by an African-American senior minister. One of the non-denominational churches included in this study began as a Baptist church, and the other was led by a Black pastor with roots in the African-American church. Extending the definition in this way allowed the flexibility of expanding the pool of potential participants while still being able to discuss dynamics of Black self-help, Black power, and Black leadership as they relate to the charter school movement. This bounding of the definition of “Black church” is necessary in this study, as these three dynamics have historically lent themselves to heightened social activism in the Black church (Wilmore, 1998), as well as in the Black independent school movement.

While embracing this definition, it is critical to acknowledge that there exists no singular, monolithic “Black church.” On the contrary, the Black church is comprised of at least seven separate denominations<sup>1</sup>, each with distinct histories, agendas, traditions, and governance structures. For example, a number of Black Methodist denominations grew from the Methodist Episcopal church, and all congregations in those denominations are governed by a central body, whereas Baptist congregations may join national bodies, but are generally independent and self-

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<sup>1</sup> The seven historically Black denominations are the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the National Baptist Convention of America International, Inc. (NBCA), the National Baptist Convention (NBC), and the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC).

governing (Woodson, 1921). One can imagine that this difference in governance may influence the freedom and latitude churches have to make decisions and advocate in controversial issues, including charter schools. During the Civil Rights Movement, for example, leaders of the National Baptist Convention adopted a conservative position and blocked many member churches from participating in protests and strikes (Carter, 2007). This ultimately led to outspoken Baptist ministers—including Martin Luther King, Jr.—splitting away and forming the Progressive National Baptist Convention. The heterogeneity within and among Black church denominations is important and must be acknowledged at the outset of this dissertation. When I use “Black church” here, I am referring to the “vibrancy of a shared tradition of Christian commitment that has helped shape the collective Black community” (Pinn & Pinn, 2002), however, this should not be construed as homogenizing the diversity that exists within the Black church.

Savage (2008) speaks to this diversity of histories and, perhaps more importantly, the tensions that exist within the Black church as it relates to their political natures. She maintains that “shifting demographic, social, and theological conditions [made] the relationship between African American religion and political activism [...] vexed and contentious” (p. 8). Moreover, she emphasizes that “Black churches [...] are among the most local, the most decentralized, and the most idiosyncratic of all social organizations,” and that “the concept [of the Black church itself] imposes the notion of a unified command, a national entity, a papal-like authority that does not and has never existed” (p. 9). I concede these points and acknowledge them here, in an attempt to account for their significance and still make an important contribution to our understanding of the role Black churches have played in the charter school movement. I

recognize the distinctions among each denomination, and to the extent possible, given the limitations of my data, acknowledge those differences in my data collection and analyses.

In the sections that follow, I describe the typological analysis method and follow with a detailed description of how the dimensions of the proposed typology were determined, as these dimensions formed the theoretical framework underpinning data collection and analysis. I then outline the research question for this study, and the methods used to answer it. Next, I detail the steps taken in data collection and analysis, describe the types of data collected, and how I analyzed the data. Finally, I share findings from the data, discuss the emerging theory arising from my analysis, and what implications these findings hold for policy, advocacy, and future research.

## **Background**

### **History of charter schools**

In the early 1970s, education professor Ray Budde developed an idea wherein teachers would be given the freedom to “charter” academic departments or programs of study (Budde, 1996; Kolderie, 2005; Nathan, 1996; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Weil, 2009). Groups of teachers would receive charters from their local school board, and these charters would free educators from some state and/or district regulations, give programs 3-5 years to demonstrate success, and then allow programs desiring an extended charter to undergo a stringent review process (Budde, 1998; Kolderie, 2005; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). The charter school concept found support from a widely varied field of education reform advocates. A number of organizations (with an equally varied number of desired outcomes) felt that schools independent of government reach (but still funded by state money) were necessary to reach their desired end,

be that greater autonomy for teachers, greater community control over schools, the “lifting of all boats” through market forces and competition, or greater parent choice in the education of their children (Bulkley, 1998).

In a 1988 address to the National Press Club, educator and American Federation of Teachers President Al Shanker seized upon Budde’s idea of chartering academic departments, and expanded it to chartering small schools, possibly within currently large, existing schools (Nathan, 1996; Shanker, 1988a; Shanker 1988b). Shanker’s vision of charter schools placed teachers’ unions in a much more decisive role, with greater decision-making power and authority over which groups of teachers would be granted charters (Kahlenberg, 2007; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). Ultimately, he hoped for charter schools to give teachers themselves greater autonomy, decision-making power, and influence in the educational process (Shanker, 1988a).

After much debate over the scope of charter school autonomy and accountability, the first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991 (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). This legislation allowed eight schools to open statewide, required charters to obtain approval from both the state school board and a local school board, and required the majority of charter school board members to also teach in the school (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Nathan, 1996). One year later, the nation’s first charter school opened in St. Paul, MN, and by 1996, more than half the states in the US passed charter legislation (Henig, 2008; Weil, 2009). Currently, charter schools are rapidly expanding in the United States, with 43 states and the District of Columbia having charter school laws on the books (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015).

While the research on charter school effectiveness is mixed, scholars have laid out a clear case for how charter schools should function. Mead and Green (2012) maintain that federal laws

dictating the manner in which public education must serve all children include charters, as they too are funded by public dollars. The degree to which charter schools are truly public is highly debated, with critics contending that the governing and variable accountability structures are but one characteristic of charters that undercut their designation as public, while supporters maintain that charter schools' government-based funding stream and accountability mandates requiring students at charter schools to take the same standardized assessments as their counterparts in traditional public schools cement their place in the public school system (Lubienski, 2013). Seminal anti-discrimination laws have been passed to ensure that all children, no matter their race, disability, national origin, language, or sex, are afforded equal educational opportunities. Moreover, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) stipulated that federal funding be provided to low-income districts to mitigate- or eliminate- the impacts of poverty on student achievement (Lubienski, 2013). In 2002, the federal government issued a mandate that student achievement data be reported disaggregated by subgroup, with schools failing to meet a specific threshold being labeled as "in need of improvement." Schools labeled as "needs improvement" for five or more years are required to undergo restructuring, with conversion to a charter school being one allowable manner of restructuring. Scholars have shown that concentrated poverty often results in lower student achievement, and charters are often heralded as one way for parents to remove their children from substandard schools and give them a greater chance of academic success.

The recent education reform and charter school movements, especially in hotbeds of education reform such as Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Chicago, have faced criticism that they are forced upon communities of color by outsiders with few ties to the cities and communities in

which they are located (Dixson, Royal, Henry, 2014; Dixson, Buras, Jeffers, 2015). More specifically, scholars contend that because of the way school choice reforms have been adopted in these particular contexts—with little input from local communities—they have exacerbated racial and educational inequities (Dixson, Royal, Henry, 2012; Dixson, Buras, Jeffers, 2015).

Given the highly contentious nature of charter school reform, it is not surprising that one finds both advocates and opponents of charter schools within the Black community. While a number of grassroots parent and community organizations have been created to spark dialogue and effect change in the charter movement, Black churches are situated in an ideal space in which to engage in the movement. A historical bulwark in the Black community, the Black church may be just the institution to assume an influential advocacy role in the education reform and charter school movement.

### **Role of religious organizations in charter school movement**

Faith-based organizations have increasingly turned to sponsoring charter schools because the cost of operating independent schools is often prohibitively expensive (Bailey & Cooper, 2009). Bailey and Cooper (2009) define religious charter schools as having “a social and cultural mission [...] enlivening the state curriculum with their cultural historical perspectives, values, and customs” (p. 276). The schools do not claim to be religious, but the missions at each school speaks to a culturally relevant curriculum, specifically tailored to that culture. Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and other faith-based organizations have all sponsored charter schools. They are required to admit students and hire teachers of other faiths, and while they do not teach religion explicitly, they may teach religious values, have opportunities for prayer and worship before and after school, or teach languages specific to their culture or religion (Bailey & Cooper,

2009). I contend that the charter schools discussed in this dissertation are not “religious charter schools” as they have no explicit connection to any particular religion or culture.

### **History of Black church involvement in education**

Having developed in response to systems of racial oppression, many Black church denominations are rooted in a tradition of resistance (Dubois, 1903; Frazier, 1974; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). The Black church was the site of much activity during the Civil Rights Movement, and this social activism extends to the education arena. A number of scholars (Barnes, 2005, 2015; Barrett, 2010; Brown & Gadson, 2010; Caldwell, 2012; Childs, 2009; Dubois 1903; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Rubin, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994) have investigated the African American church and its involvement in the provision of education services for children, but the extent of Black churches’ involvement in the charter school movement has rarely been examined. Further, the degree to which Black churches’ involvement in the charter school movement reflects a desire to have greater control over the education of their children and those in the surrounding community is yet to be uncovered.

The self-help and social change doctrine of the early Black church manifested itself in a wide variety of community activism, including the provision of educational services for Blacks, even when such activity was illegal (Pinn and Pinn, 2002). One of the first to establish complete independence from White congregations, the African Methodist Episcopal church placed high emphasis on the importance of education for the wellbeing of the church institution and Black liberation (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Daniel Payne, an AME pastor, was instrumental in the founding of one of the first Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Wilberforce College, located in Wilberforce, Ohio (Pinn and Pinn, 2002). Further, several denominations established

publishing houses to produce materials discussing pressing social issues, and these outlets often emphasized the importance of education (Pinn and Pinn, 2002).

Lincoln and Mamiya (2003) maintain that post-emancipation, “freedom meant, among other things, the right to be educated” (p. 4). To that end, Blacks turned to education as a source of liberation. Black churches came together to establish schools, mobilize an all-Black teaching force, and discuss education reform (Anderson, 1988; Billingsley, 1999; Forman, 2005; Frazier, 1974). The Sabbath schools established by Black churches were an important example of freedmen “seeking, establishing, and supporting their own schools” (p. 15). White missionaries such as Julius Rosenwald<sup>2</sup> provided funds and teachers for Black schools in the South, and Black pastors, often the most highly-educated men in their community, were encouraged to establish additional schools themselves (Frazier, 1974; Hoffschewelle, 2006; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990).

This work was all the more significant as southern states severely underfunded public education for Black students during this period of time (Frazier, 1974). Black churches raised a sizeable sum through dinners and other programs to establish schools, provide facilities, pay teachers, and disseminate scholarship funds (Frazier, 1974; Littlefield, 2005). In addition to helping establish elementary and secondary schools, Black churches helped to create the first

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<sup>2</sup> Julius Rosenwald was a prominent White businessman and philanthropist who funded the building of schools across the rural south between 1913 and 1932 (Hoffenschwelle, 2006). He collaborated with Booker T. Washington, scholar and founder of the famed Tuskegee Institute, to build modern school buildings for Black children. Rosenwald required communities to fundraise a portion of the funds needed to build schools, and he subsidized the remainder. Hoffenschwelle asserts that the program was a “well intentioned but limited effort” to mitigate the effects of substandard or nonexistent schooling for Black children in the south (p. 2). For more on White philanthropy in the education of African Americans, see Anderson and Moss (1999) *Dangerous donations: Northern philanthropy and southern Black education, 1902-1930*.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999; Littlefield, 2005). Bush (2004) maintains that the AME, AMEZ, and CME churches have served as the most consistent sources of funding for independent Black schools, which have historically shied away from accepting government funding in an attempt to retain control over their schools.

During and after the Civil Rights Movement, African American churches played an integral role in the struggle for equitable educational opportunities for Black children (Henig et al, 1999). Churches served as sites for planning strategies and protests, and ministers assumed roles on local school boards. In cities across the country, Black pastors became vocal school reform advocates (Henig et al, 1999). In Baltimore, Black clergy formed an organization that advocated for education reforms such as “site-based management and [...] neighborhood school autonomy,” and in Atlanta, Black churches partnered with local neighborhood schools through a collaborative between churches and the local school district (p. 140).

**Contemporary Black church involvement in education.** The contemporary Black church continues to play a role in the provision of educational services such as tutoring programs, independent schools, and scholarship funds, however, some scholars maintain that it remains an untapped resource within the Black community (Childs, 2009; Brown & Gadson, 2010). Middleton (2001) contends that “the considerable power of the African American church has not been harnessed to speak with a united voice and demand better schools for urban students” (p. 428). While individual congregations have worked to bridge the divide between congregations and schools, she argues, “the church has not served as a primary institutional instrument to affect agendas in urban America” (p. 428). In a study of Black church educational involvement across the country, George et al. (1989) found that almost two-thirds of Black

churches were conducting nonreligious educational programs in the community, with the most common programs being tutoring, preschool/daycare services, and field trips. Churches with memberships above 750 tended to offer more non-religious educational programs, and 42% of participants in non-religious educational programs were not members of the church (George et al., 1989). Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) conducted a study on the Black church, family, and school, and found that 70% of Black congregations operated one or more community programs, while almost 50% operated three or more. Of the programs being offered by churches, nearly one-third were focused on children and youth (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991).

More recent scholarship by Barnes (2010; 2015) shows that Black churches are continuing to provide educational programs for the surrounding communities; these initiatives include Head-Start programs, GED courses, and SAT preparatory classes. In a national sample of 1,863 predominantly Black churches, 62% sponsored tutoring and literacy programs (Barnes, 2010). Churches that sponsor these types of initiatives often boast a large membership, are led by a formally-educated pastor, sponsor a number of religious programs and have a college-educated congregation (Barnes, 2015). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) assert that denominations—such as African Methodist Episcopal and Presbyterian—that tend to attract more economically stable and formally educated individuals were more likely to host educational programs; however, Barnes (2010; 2015) finds evidence that Baptist and other non-denominational Black churches also have well-established educational programs.

A large percentage of African American parents continue to enroll their children in public schools, leading many scholars to contend that the Black church stands to make the greatest impact on education through partnerships with the public school system (Billingsley and

Caldwell, 1991; Childs, 2009). George et al. (1989) maintain that the socioeconomic levels of Black church members is, on average, higher than that of its surrounding community, and churches have a wealth of other resources at their disposal—including space to house programs, access to volunteers, and a tradition of involvement in the community—that makes them ideal providers of education services.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Typological Analysis**

Typological analysis is a research method that consists of dividing observed qualities or behaviors into categories based on predetermined characteristics (Ayres & Knafl, 2008; Bailey, 1994; Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Hatch, 2002; Kluge, 2000; Kuckartz, 2014). Particularly well-suited for describing clusters of behaviors, a typology is useful in this study precisely because scholars know so little about what Black churches are doing as it relates to the support of and opposition to charter schools. Typologies can be useful for understanding responses to education reforms, and to understand and catalog behaviors and phenomenon before investigating specific aspects of them (Midkiff & Cohen Vogel, 2015). Moreover, typologies are useful in comprehending and explaining complex social realities (Ayres & Knafl, 2008; Kluge, 2000). Following this logic, I proposed a typology of Black church behaviors in the charter school movement.

The goal of a typology is to create a set of related but distinct categories or groups, where within group variation is minimized, and among group variation is maximized (Bailey, 1994; Hatch, 2002; Johnson & Christenson; Kluge, 2000; Kuckartz, 2014). Typologies can be uni- or multidimensional, with dimensions or key characteristics on the axes arising from theory,

conceptual models, and/or research objectives (Ayres & Knafl, 2008; Bailey, 1994; Hatch, 2002). Bailey (1994) maintains that researchers identifying categories for a typology must aim for *exhaustivity* and *mutual exclusivity*, where each case, action, or behavior being classified has an appropriate class (exhaustivity), but with no case, action, or behavior being a member of two classes (mutual exclusivity). Once all cases have been typified, they can be described on a number of dimensions.

### **Dimensions of Typology of Black Church Involvement**

**Beliefs about charter schools.** At the study's outset, I expected that a typology of Black church involvement would highlight churches' *beliefs* about charter schools, and churches' *level of activism*, as described by Billingsley (1999) (see Figure 1 for graphic representation of proposed typology).

**Proposed Typology**

|                               |         | CONSERVATIVE | MODERATELY ACTIVE | ACTIVIST |
|-------------------------------|---------|--------------|-------------------|----------|
| BELIEFS ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS | SUPPORT |              |                   |          |
|                               | OPPOSE  |              |                   |          |
|                               | NEUTRAL |              |                   |          |

Figure 1. Proposed Typology of Black Church Behaviors. This figure illustrates a proposed typology of Black church involvement in the charter movement, along the axes of *beliefs* and *level of activism*.

Following Hatch (2002) and Ayres and Knafl (2008), individual Black churches’ *beliefs* about charter schools—whether their actions are in support, neutral, or in opposition— could form one axis of the typology. These scholars maintain that dimensions may be selected based on the research objectives of a study. Given that this study seeks to identify ways that Black churches have opposed and supported the charter school movement, beliefs was selected as one axis of the typology. Any activities or involvement a Black church has taken in the expressed support of charter schools (e.g., providing space, opening a charter school, petitioning legislators

for favorable charter laws, mobilizing community members to support friendly charter policies) could be categorized as *support*. Any involvement Black churches have that is not in direct support of or opposition to charter schools (e.g., simply informing parents of school age children about both the charter and traditional public schooling options available to them, without encouraging them to select one type of school over the other) could be classified as *neutral*. Finally, any collective actions that are in direct opposition to charters (e.g., holding community forums on the dangers of charter growth, participating in anti-charter protests) could be classified as *opposition*.

Churches' collective discourses will be used to justify the classification of actions that are not necessarily in support, neutral, or in opposition, in and of themselves. For example, holding a community forum on the importance of investing in traditional public schools is not pro- or anti-charter per se. However, if churches claim they are holding the forums to inhibit the growth and support of charter schools, then these actions will be classified as opposition.

Following Bailey (1994), this first dimension is exhaustive, in that all Black church involvement identified in data collection should fall under one of the three categories. It is also mutually exclusive, as the actions—in conjunction with the discourses—should not fit more than one category on the belief dimension. Church claims and discourses on the charter movement will be used to ensure that types of involvement are accurately classified.

**Levels of activism.** The second dimension of a typology to describe the role of Black churches in the charter school movement might come from Billingsley's (1999) types of activist Black churches. He proposes that in periods of social, economic, and political hardship, Black communities look to Black churches and their leaders to provide support and guidance. While

not all Black churches will be inclined to attend to these secular concerns, others will be so inclined, and they will respond based on the capacity of the congregation and church leadership. He terms these categories of activism *conservative*, *moderately active*, and *active*.

According to Billingsley (1999), *conservative* churches will “[confine] themselves to their basic spiritual and religious work, thus ignoring, or seeming to ignore, the social crisis around them” (p. 185). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) speak to the inclination of churches to prioritize congregants’ spiritual versus secular needs in his privatistic versus communal dialectic. Churches with a privatistic orientation will focus on members’ spiritual well-being and personal relationship with God, whereas those with a more communal orientation will acknowledge and address the social, economic, and political problems its members face. The ability to respond to these needs depends on congregations’ and pastors’ strength, independence, and resourcefulness, according to Billingsley (1999).

Similar to conservative congregations, *moderately active* churches will largely prioritize their spiritual mission over any obligation to the secular needs of the community, however, they will take some minor actions to address social issues (Billingsley, 1999). Moderately active churches may invite guest speakers, hold forums, or host community meetings on social issues. However, these actions do not take place on a consistent and sustained basis. Billingsley (1999) maintains that these activities take place on “special and irregular” occasions (p. 185).

The most involved congregations are *activist* churches, and they are usually led by highly activist pastors. Closely aligned with Lincoln and Mamiya’s *communal* dialectic, these churches view sacred and secular issues as one and the same, and feel a responsibility to meet both needs. Billingsley (1999) suggests that activist churches “move with vigor into the community to

confront the secular crises engulfing the people” (p. 185).

Given the dearth of research on the role of the Black church in the charter school movement, this study seeks to begin to fill that void by creating a typology of involvement present among churches supporting and opposing the charter school movement. Findings from this study will provide community leaders, policymakers, and researchers with knowledge of how Black churches might continue to engage in the charter school movement and how the Black church has and can harness its myriad resources to assume a more influential role in contemporary education reform efforts. To that end, this study asks: What are the various types of Black church involvement in the charter movement?

### **Research Design and Methods**

To answer the question outlined above and create the typology, I conducted a qualitative typological analysis.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

The identification of potential data sources for this content analysis and resulting typology consisted of Internet searches, word-of-mouth, social media searches, and snowball sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participant recruitment began by reaching out via email to head pastors of churches located within the state that I knew were involved in the charter school movement, either through firsthand knowledge or through informal conversations with colleagues. Interviews were scheduled with these senior pastors, and at the conclusion of the interview I asked if there were additional individuals with whom I should speak in order to learn more about their church’s charter activity.

At the same time I was coordinating interviews with these senior pastors, I conducted

Internet searches of potential participants, specifying a set of keyword combinations, including “Black churches” AND “charter schools” and “African American churches” AND “charter schools” to identify churches that had either started charter schools, had partnered with them in some manner, or had worked to mobilize communities against the expansion of charter schools. These search terms occasionally led directly to websites of Black churches involved in the charter movement, while other times they led to newspaper articles mentioning churches, individuals from churches involved in the charter school movement, or the names of schools being chartered by African-American faith communities. I eventually broadened my search to include terms “African American pastors” AND “charter schools” and “Black pastors” AND “charter schools.”

From these sources, I compiled a list of potential churches and schools, and reached out to senior pastors via phone, email, and/or Facebook message. In an attempt to reach someone from a potential church, I often sent messages to the church’s Facebook page, or to the senior pastor directly, if a personal page existed. I also posted messages on my personal Facebook page soliciting the names of African-American churches, individuals, or community organizations involved in connecting Black churches to the charter school movement. Through this method, I was connected with a number of potential churches and organizations. When attempting to reach individuals on social media with whom I was unacquainted, I occasionally enlisted the assistance of “mutual friends” to introduce us or make a connection. In one case, I consulted a conference program to identify African-American faith leaders who had been involved in actively opposing the charter movement.

As outlined in the introduction, this study constrained “Black church” to include faith

communities that were comprised predominantly of African-American members. I initially limited recruitment to congregations of the seven historically Black denominations, but eventually loosened this restriction to include two predominantly African-American nondenominational congregations, both led by African-American senior pastors. “Involvement” was limited to faith leaders and congregations who had taken an active role in advocating either in favor of or in opposition to charter schools. This includes but is not limited to starting or attempting to start charter schools, conducting or hosting community meetings about charter schools, or speaking to elected officials about charter schools. Churches who rented or leased space to charter schools without taking an active role in either the ideation or administration of the school were eliminated from the final sample.

None of the churches in the sample held a charter. Many states expressly prohibit religious organizations from sponsoring charter schools, in order to maintain a separation of church and state. Each faith leader of a church opening a charter school or attempting to obtain a charter school maintained that the church and school were two entirely separate entities. In one case in the sample, an independent non-profit holds the charter, and in two others, the senior pastors are the holders of the charters. The governing board of each school is comprised of both church members and non-members, and each school operates entirely independently from the congregation. There remains, however, a partnership and sharing of resources, often taking the form of shared land and buildings. Continual and sustained financial support—such as yearly fundraisers and Sunday collection offerings specifically for the charter school—from the church to the school is another example of resource sharing. So while the church is technically not operating the school, there is a coupling of resources and history that links the church to the

school. As the pastor of one of the churches emphasized,

In Connecticut, churches cannot hold charters, so I started a whole separate entity, a whole separate group for [the school]. The connection to the church is literally myself, as the pastor, and the name. I chair the board, I'm the founder of the school, and it's its own legal entity. So while it may seem like it was church sponsored, or it was birthed from the church, which it was, it is its own organization that has literally nothing to do with the church.

Similarly, the pastor of another church that converted its independent school to a charter maintained that the school was “never designed to be a church school.” The school always had a separate board from the church, and the charter school was run by an independent non-profit. This nuance is important to articulate, as multiple participants were direct in distinguishing any connections between the church and school. However, that the schools were “birthed” out of these congregations is without question, as participants acknowledge.

At the conclusion of the recruitment phase of this study, the total sample included nine churches: three in the Northeast, all acting generally in favor of charter schools, and six in the Southeast, three involved in the support of charter schools and three involved in opposition. Next I present a brief overview of the final sample for this study, organized by region. Each church has been given a pseudonym, as have each of the interview participants.

**Northeast.**

*Hunter's Chapel AME Zion Church.* The previous pastor was the visionary for this church's charter involvement, and spearheaded the process of obtaining a state charter. In addition to opening a charter school in August 2014, the (former) pastor and his congregation

have attended and spoken at major rallies in support of charter funding, petitioned local and state government officials for support, and held a number of fundraisers to support the school. With 2,000 active members, the church has a yearly summer academic enrichment program as well as thriving children's and youth ministries. Interviews at this church were conducted with the senior pastor, Eric Matthews, who spearheaded the efforts to obtain a state charter, Cheryl Forest, a public educator who served on the initial planning committee for the charter school and now serves on the Board of Directors, and Tina Pembroke, a member of the church and former youth ministry leader.

***Williams CME Church.*** Established in the northeast United States in the mid-1950s, this church's previous pastor was a founding member of an organization aimed at educating clergy about contemporary education reforms, including charter schools and vouchers. He has since transitioned into the role of traveling preacher in a different state, but still advocates for increased school choice and continues to serve on the board of directors for the non-profit he helped create. An interview was conducted with the former senior pastor, Joseph White.

***New Town Baptist Church.*** Located in the northeastern United States, this congregation was formed in 1927 in a small storefront. The current pastor assumed his role in 2009 after serving under the tutelage of the previous pastor, who was instrumental in turning the church's focus towards community uplift and social justice. The church is a member of a coalition of faith communities in its city, and as a part of that coalition has contributed to the building of affordable homes for community residents, a senior living building, and criminal justice reform. Highly active in community organizing, the current pastor has worked on a number of education reform efforts, including implementing the small school reform model in its neighborhood.

Under the leadership of the previous pastor, the congregation raised the funds to build and open an independent Christian school, which operated for almost 30 years before closing and being reopened as an all-boys public charter school in 2010. An interview was conducted with the senior pastor of this congregation, Daniel Barnes.

**Southeast.**

***Mt. Vernon Baptist Church.*** Founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this 7,000-member congregation in the southeast is one of the the largest African-American faith communities in its city. In 2010, the church obtained state approval to convert its independent school into a public charter school. Interviews were conducted with the senior pastor, Kyle Hilliard, the individual primarily responsible for spearheading the charter activity, Jonathan Jones, and a member of the church and former public school educator, Anne Anderson.

***Greenville International Christian Church.*** This predominantly African-American, non-denominational church located in the southeast is the outgrowth of a merger between a predominantly Black Baptist church and predominantly White non-denominational church. Before the merger, the non-denominational church operated an independent Christian school for over 30 years, however, the school closed in 2013. Since that time, the senior pastor has been working alongside a retired public school administrator to obtain a charter for a new school, but have been unsuccessful in gaining state approval. They recently submitted their fourth application for a charter, and hope to be approved to open in the fall of 2018. Interviews were conducted with the senior pastor of the church, Andrew Starnes, and the individual primarily responsible for the church's charter activity, Steve Mindstrom.

***Ninth Street Baptist Church.*** Established in the mid-1950s by freedmen and enslaved

Africans, this southeastern congregation was the sixth Baptist church to be formed in its city. The senior pastor ran for elected office and served for one four-year term, chairing the board for two of those four years as a vocal advocate against what he felt was the unchecked expansion of charter schools in his city. He continues to advocate on behalf of families whose children are enrolled in charter schools. An interview was conducted with the senior pastor, Thomas Smith, and a member of the church involved in the charter school activity, Diane Burns.

***Rocky Mount Christian Church.*** Located in the southeast, this predominantly Black, nondenominational church was established in 2003. The senior pastor co-founded a (now-defunct) alliance of progressive African-American ministers who sought to promote educational alternatives and choice for students. In addition to petitioning state legislators for charter funding and holding community forums to educate Black parents about school choice options, this minister also began the process of writing an application for a local charter. After realizing the local school board was unlikely to approve them for a charter, his team of writers disbanded and discontinued writing the application. An interview was conducted with the founder and senior pastor of the church, Moses Reeves.

***Middlebrooks Baptist Church.*** Established in 1868, this small, Baptist congregation is located in a rural area of the southeastern United States. The senior pastor has been assigned to this church for seven years, and is a vocal opponent of charter expansion. While the church does not have as many children's ministries as he would like, he has lent his voice to advocacy efforts on behalf of traditional public schools, traveling across the state to educate pastors and congregations on the dangers of rapid charter growth and urging legislators at the state capitol to reconsider charter expansion legislation. An interview was conducted with the senior pastor of

the church, Vernon Stevens.

***First Baptist Church.*** Established in a southeastern urban city in 1984, this Baptist congregation has a membership of approximately 1,500. The senior pastor has been at the helm of the church since 1984, and is a highly respected civil and community rights activist. In addition to sponsoring community forums on the importance of supporting traditional public schools, he has been a vocal opponent of charter expansion. An interview was conducted with the senior pastor, Tony Mackins.

### **Data Collection**

Once a church was officially added to the list of participants (meaning at least the individual primarily responsible for involvement in the charter movement, usually the senior pastor, agreed to participate in an interview), I began collecting additional documents for data collection. Additional sources of data included church histories, church newsletters, newspaper articles around the church and/or its participation in the charter school movement, sermons, charter school applications and mission statements, charter school board meeting minutes, and archival records. The vast majority of this information was available via church websites. However, in a few cases, this information was gathered from participants themselves.

A total of nine churches were included in the final study, three in the Northeast (one in New York and two in Connecticut), and six in the Southeast (two in North Carolina, one in South Carolina, two in Georgia, and one in Louisiana). In order to maintain the anonymity of churches and individual participants, I do not reveal the name of the state in which each congregation is located. A chart outlining the final list of participants and the additional documents analyzed can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. *List of church participants and data used for analysis in Article 1 and Article 2.*

| Participant   | Data Analyzed   |
|---|---|
| Mt. Vernon Baptist Church (Southeast)                 | Interviews, church history, church website, newspaper articles, charter school application mission statement, charter school website, charter school meeting minutes                            |
| Greenville International Christian Church (Southeast) | Interviews, church history, church website, social media pages, newspaper articles, charter school application, mission statement   |
| Hunters Chapel AME Zion (Northeast)                   | Interviews, church history, church website, newspaper articles, press releases, charter school application, school mission statement, charter school meeting minutes                            |
| Williams CME (Northeast)                              | Interview, church history, newspaper articles, event advertisement  |
| New Town Baptist (Northeast)                          | Interview, church history, church website, newspaper articles, charter school application, school mission statement, published scholarship on church's/pastor's community advocacy and activism |
| Ninth Street Baptist (Southeast)                      | Interviews, church history, church website, newspaper articles  |
| Rocky Mount Christian Church (Southeast)              | Interview, church history, community newsletter, church newsletter, church website, newspaper articles  |
| Middlebrooks Baptist (Southeast)                      | Interview, church history   |
| First Baptist Church (Southeast)                      | Interview, church history, church website, newspaper articles, sermon   |

The interview protocol for this article was drafted based on information from the literature on church involvement in social justice movements, and piloted with a local pastor who was tangentially involved in the charter school movement. The protocol pilot lasted approximately one hour, wherein we went through the entire interview protocol, and he answered each question as if he were an actual participant, offering feedback on the flow and wording of questions. At the conclusion of the pilot he offered overall feedback and suggestions

for additional participants. His feedback was incorporated into the protocol, and the protocol was finalized for use with participants. The full interview protocol is located in Appendix A. With the exception of one, all interviews were conducted by phone, and lasted between 20 minutes to one hour. Interviews were transcribed and coded in Dedoose. Additional data collected from church websites and the Internet were also coded.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred in several phases. Immediately following each interview, a summary of notes was written as a basis from which to identify emerging themes. A profile on each church was created, listing important details such as location, date of founding, size of congregation, general educational activities, type and general date of charter involvement, participants interviewed, and summaries/major themes of interviews. This form served as a template from which to begin writing church level analytic memos.

Once data collection was completed for each church, I began the coding process. For the first round of coding, a priori codes developed from the literature on Black church activism were used. The codes related to church *beliefs* (with subcodes of *support*, *oppose*, and *neutral*) and *level of activism* (with subcodes *active*, *moderately active*, and *conservative*). As the question I sought to answer around the types of Black church involvement, I created an additional code for *behavior*, which captured any specific actions church leaders or members took related to the charter school movement. In the second round, additional codes were added, largely derived from the interview protocol. These included *denomination*, *educational activities/ministries*, *legal/policy implications*, *rationale for charter activity*, and *role of church*. Finally, in the third round, I added three emergent codes: *barriers to charter involvement* to capture hindrances to

participation as identified by participants, *capacity of congregation* to capture the characteristics of the congregation that participants say had an impact on their ability to participate in the charter movement, and *capacity of leadership* to capture qualities about the senior pastor him or herself that contributed to a church's ability to participate in the charter movement.

### **Findings**

As will be shown, the initial findings from data analysis indicated that a typology using the proposed axes of *beliefs* and *level of activism* was inappropriate for describing the behaviors of Black churches involved in the charter movement. Moreover, as the data were analyzed, it became clear that the categories themselves do not fit the stipulations of a typology as set forth in the typological analysis literature, as originally thought. Bailey (1994) maintains that while classification is simple, it is the complexity of the cases involved that make creating typologies a complicated endeavor. In the sections that follow, I outline why the data do not fit the definition of a typology, and why these axes are inappropriate for categorizing the behaviors of Black churches involved in the charter school movement.

In establishing categories for a typology, the literature maintains that categories must be *exhaustive* and *mutually exclusive* (Bailey, 1994). After analyzing the data for types of behavior, I realized that at least one axis of categories originally proposed, beliefs, was not mutually exclusive. The data reveal that pastors' and churches' beliefs about charter schools do not fall neatly into a single box, category, or continuum. Churches' behaviors were expected to fit into either "supporting," "opposing," or remaining "neutral" in the charter school movement. However, as the data show, behaviors that may appear to support the charter movement, such as starting a charter school, were sometimes enacted by pastors who held serious reservations

about—and in some cases, opposed—the charter school movement, and would have preferred a different, more independent route to improving educational options for children. These faith leaders found chartering the most feasible avenue given the economic realities of their communities and congregations. As another example, some behaviors that were essentially in opposition to the charter movement were enacted by individuals who agreed with the basic premise of charter schools, but disagreed with how they were being implemented in their respective cities and states. For these reasons, it is a misrepresentation of the data to simply categorize church behaviors as supporting or opposing, without elaborating on the rationale and nuance of beliefs held by faith leaders and their congregations.

Level of activism was the second proposed axis of the typology, and was ultimately shown to be inadequate for this data, and more specifically for the method of sampling for this study. As previously discussed, the three categories for level of activism were *conservative*, *moderately active*, and *activist*, with conservative churches largely ignoring the social needs of their members, moderately active churches sporadically engaging in social justice issues, and activist churches engaging in sustained, consistent behaviors. The method of sampling for this study ensured that all included churches would at least fall into the *moderately active* or *activist* categories. Churches that prioritized members' spiritual needs over the secular would likely not be involved in an issue such as charter schools, and therefore would be excluded from the sample. In fact, all of the churches included in the sample engaged in some type of charter school activism.

Another problem with categorizing churches in this manner for this study is that the level, or consistency, of involvement often revolved around the intended goals or type of actions taken.

For example, the churches fighting against charter expansion legislation were generally only active in the charter movement up until the day of the election. There was discussion about next steps for their activism, but it was largely centered around defeating a piece of legislation, and therefore essentially ended once the election was over and the proposed initiative had been defeated. On the other hand, churches that started schools had, by default, committed to a more long-term, consistent type of involvement in the way of raising funds, managing debt service on school building mortgages, and other types of support for the schools. Based on the sample for this study, that would have led to a skewed typology, with churches acting in “opposition” to charters mostly being classified as “moderately active,” and churches acting in “support” to charters being classified as “activist.” Perhaps a larger sample of churches—including those *not* active in the charter school movement—would be more appropriate for distilling types of involvement onto an axis of “level of activism.”

Bailey (1994) maintains that the “ability to ascertain the fundamental characteristics” of a phenomenon is essential to the creation of a typology. While it appeared from the literature that “stance” or “beliefs” would be a defining characteristics of churches’ involvement in the charter movement, the data showed that stance is not easily ascertained simply by a church’s behavior. This leads one seeking to create a typology to the question, “what are the defining characteristics of Black churches involved in the charter movement?” The qualities of churches most likely to engage in social outreach as established by the literature include size of congregation, amount of formal education possessed by the minister, and use of church facilities by the general public (Billingsley, 2003; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Caldwell, 2012; Littlefield, 2005; Rubin, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994). The sample of churches in this study varied widely in size, with

congregations ranging from “small country church” to memberships of over 7,000. The level of education of the pastors in the sample ranged from bachelors degrees to doctorates. While these characteristics may have some bearing on specific types of charter involvement (for example, all of the churches in the sample that successfully opened schools had memberships over 3,000), these metrics do not appear to make up the defining characteristics of involvement in the charter school movement overall. The sample size and nature of qualitative research bar the researcher from making any broad, generalizable statements about the defining characteristics of Black church involvement in the charter school movement.

The analysis revealed that the nine Black churches in the study participated in the charter school movement in several key ways. These included convening community and church forums on the negative impact of proposed charter legislation, educating families and communities about successful charter schools and state charter school funding formulas, educating parents about accessing better options for their children, helping parents navigate charter school systems, teaching parents how to advocate for themselves and their children, speaking on radio shows about school choice reform and school choice policies, writing and publishing editorials, raising money for charter schools, writing applications for charter schools, submitting applications for charter schools, opening charter schools, creating school choice coalitions, consulting with education choice reform organizations before applying for charter status, serving as plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed in opposition to charter expansion legislation, speaking at press conferences regarding the charter application process, attending political rallies, praying with lawmakers before legislative budget sessions, making public addresses related to charter schools, running for and assuming public office, conducting sit-ins at school board meetings, and putting forth

proposals for a unified school district.

For the purposes of this article, some behaviors have been combined into a more condensed list of 12 behaviors: convening community and church forums (five out of nine churches), advocating for parents of charter school students and teaching parents to advocate for themselves (one out of nine churches), petitioning state lawmakers for charter funding (three out of nine churches), writing and/or submitting charter applications (five out of nine churches), financially supporting charter schools (four out of nine churches), providing volunteers to charter schools (two out of nine), creating and/or engaging school-choice related coalitions (five out of nine churches), delivering public speeches (three out of nine), engaging elected officials (three out of nine), running for public school board office (one out of nine), proposing a unified charter and traditional public school district (one out of nine), and serving as a plaintiff in a lawsuit against charter-related legislation (one out of nine). Next, I describe each of these charter school-related behaviors exhibited by churches in the sample.

### **Behaviors of Black Churches Involved in the Charter School Movement**

**Convening community and church forums.** The most commonly exhibited type of involvement was convening community and church forums on charter related issues. Out of nine churches in the sample, five sponsored and facilitated forums for congregation and community members to attend and learn about charter schools, charter school legislation, and how this type of reform would affect their families and communities. Ninth Street Baptist, Williams CME, Greenville International Christian, Middlebrooks Baptist, and First Baptist all sponsored these types of meetings.

Pastor Mackins from First Baptist and Pastor Stevens from Middlebrooks Baptist, both in

the southeast, both traveled (separately) across the state holding forums to educate parishioners and community members about how charter schools could negatively impact traditional public schools. They invited members of the state teacher's union, the president of the local NAACP, and other prominent pastors to the forums to present information as well. Pastor Stevens, a rural Baptist preacher, stated, "we had [influential people] to come down and to give a presentation to [churches in the area where I pastor] and explaining what this program could do to education...A lot of people suffer from a lack of information." Pastor Mackins described traveling across the state, educating pastors and their congregations on upcoming charter legislation, and how detrimental it would be for traditional public schools.

We are seekers of truth. We want the people to know the truth, have the knowledge, be armed with the facts. We had several luncheons, breakfast meetings, forums, rallies, just about all of them at churches, just so we could get the information to our people. We met all across the state.

Faith leaders also convened community meetings and forums to educate parents about their educational choice options; both Greenville International Christian Church in the southeast and Williams CME in the northeast sponsored events at their respective churches for the general public to attend. Says Pastor White from Williams CME, "We started making sure that we are educating families about these [charter] schools, that we thought would be helpful, that were proven. About how funding operated, and how we could move towards getting our parents better options for their kids." At Greenville International, Pastor Starnes and Dr. Mindstrom held community meetings at the church where members of the congregation and community could come learn about the new charter school they were hoping to open.

Members of Pastor Smith's congregation at Ninth Street Baptist in the southeast met at the church for focus groups where they could share their experiences in charter schools. Mrs. Burns, a long time member of the church and community advocate stated,

In the church, we had focus groups [for what we wanted public education to look like]. People are having a range of living experiences around what's happening [in terms of education reform] and what's happened to public education. They have certainly been willing to add their voices and their experiences to broader advocacy efforts to impact how the system was evolving.

When asked about why she felt it was important that the church be a central location for these focus group sessions, Mrs. Burns emphasized the "highly politicized," "deeply visceral," and "very polarized" nature of education reform in her city. Many community members saw the church as a safe space wherein they could share their experiences with charter school reform without fear of retribution from employers, school administrators, and other members of the community.

Using radio and print as a medium through which to educate the community about charter school reform and charter policies was also used by churches active in the charter school movement. Pastor Starnes from Greenville International Christian Church and his colleague, retired educator Mr. Mindstrom, used radio broadcasts to spread the word about the new charter school they are hoping to gain state approval to open. Pastor Smith from Ninth Street Baptist in the southeast regularly participated in a weekly community radio broadcast to discuss education choice reform as it unfolded in his city and state.

Pastor Mackins from First Baptist and Pastor Barnes' predecessor at New Town Baptist

both wrote and published school choice related editorials. Pastor Mackins submitted an essay to the local paper outlining the dangers of charter legislation being proposed in his state, asserting that the legislation would strip local control from schools and reduce accountability and community involvement. At New Town Baptist in the northeast, Pastor Barnes' predecessor, Pastor Young, wrote and submitted an editorial to the local newspaper in 2002, asserting that the school system was continuing to fail its most vulnerable students. Pastor Young, who spearheaded New Town's efforts to open a private, Christian school, encouraged a "hostile takeover" of the city's public schools, and advocated for mayoral control over the school system. In a published essay, Pastor Young advocated that the city's mayor work to "create a space bank for innovative public and charter school expansion" (Young\* & Maire, 2002).

**Advocating for parents of charter school students, and teaching them to advocate for themselves.** In addition to serving as a safe space where members of the congregation and community could come and voice their concerns about education reform, Pastor Smith, maintained that his church also advocated for parents, and taught them to advocate for themselves. When asked how his church could best serve kids, he stated,

[One] piece is being involved in advocacy and helping them [parents and families] speak for, or training to speak for themselves, when they see themselves in situations that try to diminish their humanity...[For us] it's been about trying to be a resource for people, families, and children who have been mistreated by the lack of a system and have suffered inequities...So when people bring issues, or we see they're aware of issues, it's not just complaining about it, but showing their parents how to deal with that system. Modeling it for them. So it's about engaging it in that process and teaching them about

that process.

Helping parents and students work with other families in similar situations to find a solution to systems of inequality was also a major thrust of his church's involvement:

It's been about trying to be a resource for people, families, and children who have been mistreated by the lack of a system and have suffered inequities, so whether its schools closing and the kids not having a place to go, not being allowed to go when that school reopens. Or...suspensions and expulsion which has been a tremendous problem post-Katrina. Dealing with special education, where many schools tell parents 'we can't serve your child so you have to go elsewhere,' outright illegal activities. So really trying to gather up those cases, helping them work together to gain support from each other and make progress on a case by case basis. And then say 'Okay, how can we stop going from case to case but elevate it and see it as a social issue rather than individual concerns?'

**Traveling to the state capitol to petition for charter school funding.** Three out of nine churches—Hunters Chapel AME Zion, Williams CME, and Rocky Mount Christian Church—all discussed traveling to their respective state capitols to ask lawmakers to better fund charter schools. Reverend Joseph White of Williams CME in the northeast reported traveling to the capitol with a group of ministers prior to legislative budget meetings, saying, "We made trips to the Capitol to discuss pertinent issues with our state reps. We met with the governor. I prayed for the governor as they went into the budget/legislative session as they're thinking about securing funding for charter schools." Reverend Matthews from Hunters Chapel also joined pastors in petitioning state representatives for charter funding. A local newspaper article called Reverend Matthews as a "cause célèbre for the charter movement," and described his petition for charter

funding as an act of reciprocity for a large charter proponent organization that lent support for his application for a state charter.

Pastor Reeves from Rocky Mount Christian in the southeast also petitioned state lawmakers for charter funding in the form of tax credits. He discussed sponsoring at least two events on the State House grounds that were initially aimed at obtaining tax credits for businesses that contributed to a fund that would offset costs that the public felt they were losing to charter schools. Businesses could contribute charitable dollars to either a single fund to be disbursed to charter schools, or to charter schools themselves. This fund would supplant the amount of money disbursed to charter schools from the state, and in return, businesses would receive tax credits. Charter schools were still a highly politically charged issue at the time, with much of the criticism revolving around the concern that charter schools drained funding from traditional public schools. Pastor Reeves maintained that after his work proposing tax credits for businesses and corporations that donated monies to these funds (as a compromise for charter opponents), the legislature began to seriously consider charter schools for their state.

**Writing and/or submitting charter applications.** Four out of nine churches formed teams that wrote and submitted applications for charters, and one additional church formed a team that began writing an application for a charter but stopped writing before the application was completed. Pastor Reeves from Rocky Mount Christian in the southeast described gathering a team of individuals from his church and local community to write an application for a charter school. When their group convened in 2007, Pastor Reeves maintained that state charter legislation dictated that although the state could approve charter applications, applicants had to receive approval from the local education agency in order to open a charter school. The team of

writers started writing the application for a charter, and once they got halfway through, they began to check the temperature of the local school board to determine how open they would be to approving the application for a charter. At that time, there was only one charter in the area, geared towards teens with emotional disabilities. The writing team determined that the local school board was not likely to approve their application, and decided to stop the writing process.

Pastor Starnes and Dr. Mindstrom at Greenville International Christian Church in the southeast decided to partner in the efforts to open a charter school. Mr. Mindstrom had been unsuccessful in locating a building in which to house the charter school he wanted to open (as well as unsuccessful in gaining approval for a state charter), and Pastor Starnes had “absorbed a [private] school that was fledgling” as a result of a merger between his congregation and another congregation nearby. Eventually the independent Christian school closed, and Pastor Starnes and his congregation began to consider other options, “realizing that the need [had] not diminished for [them] to be educationally minded and driven.” They began looking into chartering a school, and mutual community acquaintances joined Pastor Starnes and Dr. Mindstrom together. Not only did Pastor Starnes agree to house the school, as previously mentioned, but he also agreed to eventually build a facility for the charter school. The team of partners is currently working to obtain a state charter; they just recently submitted their fourth application to the state advisory board for approval.

In speaking about the difficulty the team has been encountering in gaining approval, Pastor Starnes stated,

I think that there’s an invisible wall that is erected that dissuades many people and groups from pursuing [a charter]. Not just the church. But certainly when churches begin to look

at that level of difficulty that they'll face, they'll shy away. I think that's something to consider. I won't call it wrong, I don't think it should be a cakewalk, but I do believe it should not be something that you're discouraged from doing. And I think there are powers that be that are deliberately trying to be discouraging. The same individuals who would like to discount and disqualify persons like Mr. Mindstrom or the church are not desirous to acknowledge the underperforming results.

Out of nine churches in the sample, three completed charter applications and gained approval to open charters. A common thread through each case was that each church either operated an independent school, or considered opening an independent school before deciding that the charter route would be more sustainable and more feasible for the population of students they sought to serve.

Pastor Matthews from Hunters Chapel initially considered opening an independent school, after observing the dire circumstances of youth in his community and the gap in achievement between students of color in Connecticut's schools and their white peers. He realized, however, that the families of students he felt needed to be served simply could not afford anything other than an entirely public school.

At first [I considered starting] an independent, Christian academy or school, but seeing the issues in education in the state of Connecticut, the largest achievement gap, and really understanding the economic plight of the parents in the community that I serve, I really understood that parents could not afford to send their kids to anything [but] a public option. So for us to have control over curriculum, and to be able to hire teachers, to be able to shape what we wanted the school to become, the best route was for me to go the

state charter route.

According to Dr. Forest, a member of Pastor Matthews' original planning team and now a member of the charter school's board of directors, the planning team decided to pilot how their school would operate by expanding the church's annual summer camp into an academic enrichment program.

We started modeling what our school would look like through the summer camps. We even did the basement of our church's sanctuary and fellowship hall. Gave it classrooms to make it look like a school, just to see what draw we would get from kids in the community and church. We got a good number of kids...we started tracking the data and tracking the kids.

In addition, Dr. Forest "was familiar with the politics and grantwriting that it takes to open a school," so the team began "positioning [themselves] politically, getting in the right circles, and doing outreach across the state." Pastor Matthews took inspiration for the school from a former enslaved African who rose to prominence as an orator and civil rights leader. This individual delivered his final public address from the pulpit of Hunters Chapel and founded a school for Black teachers next to the church, so the pastor and his planning team thought it fitting to honor him through the creation of the school.

After withdrawing the first application because they felt that it needed to be stronger to successfully gain approval from the state, the planning team submitted a second. Pastor Matthews stated that the board "decided to find a school leader and boost wraparound services tending to kids' social-emotional needs" before resubmitting their application the following year. The very next year the board reapplied for a state charter to open a school with grades K-3, and

the application was approved with a unanimous decision.

At Mt. Vernon Baptist in the southeast, their independent, Christian school was converted into a charter. Pastor Hilliard said he was inspired to start a tuition-free, independent school after a vision that he termed “divine.” Similar to Hunters Chapel, Mt. Vernon had a previous academic enrichment program that served as a model for how Pastor Hilliard wanted the school to function, complete with wraparound services for students in grades 6-8. A prominent local professor and member of the church, Dr. Jones, partnered with Pastor Hilliard to sponsor the enrichment program and cultivated corporate sponsorships that yielded millions of dollars in private funding for the school. Dr. Jones was interested in building the school as a “beta test site for more ideas on innovation and how to educate vulnerable children.” School leaders added innovative ideas to the school’s blueprint, including nutrition education, character development, entrepreneurship, global awareness, and economic literacy. Moreover, Dr. Jones sought out this partnership because “it’s the largest Black church in the city, with a very dynamic leader who advocates community based ministries and was concerned about the communities around the church.”

The congregation raised the funds to begin construction on the school, ultimately pledging ten million dollars for the building to be completed. Pastor Hilliard and Dr. Jones convened a school design team with a “board of trustees, people from the church, experts from the business community, and school of education.” The team created the curriculum, student recruitment plan, and other logistics for the operation of the school, and in 2008 the school opened for grades K-8. For two years the school functioned as a tuition-free school for underserved students in the community, however, in the wake of the recession, board trustees

found it difficult to keep the school afloat.

School and church leaders began considering the charter route as a way to keep the school in operation. Pastor Hilliard stated that the school always had a separate board from the churches' Board of Trustees, and was always a separate non-profit organization. It was under this organization that the school applied for charter status. They met with a former governor who was highly respected for the progress he made in the state's education sector to discuss their plan to convert their independent school to a traditional public charter, and gained his support. In 2010, the board applied for a charter from the state and was approved, obtaining the last of 100 charters designated by the State Board of Education. In 2011, the school opened as a charter.

New Town Baptist was the third church in the sample to write and submit an application for a charter, and ultimately gain state approval. Like Mt. Vernon, New Town Baptist in the northeast previously operated an independent school, although New Town's school was in operation for more than two decades. The school ceased operations in June 2008. Pastor Barnes stated,

We had a Christian school here and the church was supporting that school, and we are in one of the poorest neighborhoods in [the entire state]. The average income of a family in walking distance to this church is \$34,000...so for many it's just not feasible to pay tuition and the church had to support that. It became very challenging for the church to continue that in the economic realities in which we live.

After the school closed down, Pastor Barnes gathered the educators of his congregation to announce that he was interested in starting an all-male charter school and wanted their input on what kind of school they wanted. He maintains that the meeting was "the most fruitless two

hours of [his] life. They argued over everything, because educators have different ideologies. I got frustrated, said nevermind, and ended the meeting.” He later decided to reconvene the group of educators and reframe the discussion, instead asking them, “What type of student do you want?” They began listing characteristics they wanted to see in their students, and it ultimately revolved around leadership. Pastor Barnes attributes much of the vision to the sense of hope and excitement during President Barack Obama’s presidency. “It was during the time of President Obama’s inauguration. There was a great sense of hope and aspiration in the nation, and belief that we could be anything we wanted to be.”

Pastor Barnes explained that both the chancellor of the department of education and the governor were charter advocates, so his planning team felt it was an opportune time to apply for a state charter. He maintains that they “struggled with writing the charter,” because it was difficult for some of the public school educators on the team to “see something new, want and think something different.” They attempted to hire a consultant to write the application for them, but were unsuccessful. Ultimately, the team elected to write the application themselves. “I’m not saying it was a masterful piece, but it got through. And we’ve had to revise it since.”

**Financial support of charter schools.** For churches that were able to open charter schools, financial support from the congregation was a major component of their charter activity. One pastor mentioned that every year he had to raise at least one million dollars to keep the school in operation, and surmised that the availability of funds or access to funds would likely prevent more African American churches from leading the charter movement. Moreover, he noted that Black churches “don’t typically have the political connections [to be physically present] when major funding decisions are going on.” Several of the pastors starting or desiring

to start charter schools led churches that previously operated independent schools, and understood first-hand the financial strain associated with keeping a school afloat. Drops in enrollment and a lack of funding contributed to these churches' decisions to either convert to or re-open as a charter school. Pastor Starnes from Greenville International Christian Church in the southeast stated,

We had a Christian school for 33 years but it began to suffer in enrollment... We absorbed a school that was fledgling and I wasn't able to resuscitate it. We began to consider some other options... and the charter is something we began to investigate.

Hunters Chapel AMEZ, Mt. Vernon Baptist, and New Town Baptist all sponsored fundraisers to support the charter schools birthed from their congregations. Taking up a church offering was one of the more common ways pastors raised funds. At New Town Baptist, Pastor Barnes preached a sermon on boys' education, where he maintained young Black boys were a "population that no one wants to help." By the end of the day the congregation had raised \$100,000, which served as seed money for the all-boys charter school he opened a year later (Marshall, 2013). In addition to the cash raised for the new charter school, New Town Baptist also had an existing school building for the charter school to occupy, thereby lessening some of the burden for school officials to locate and finance a building. This was a common characteristic of the synergistic relationship between Black churches and the charter schools that were connected; although the churches were often unable to sustain an independent school, once their independent schools received charter status, the churches were able to shoulder some of the burden many new charter schools face by providing or paying the mortgage on existing school buildings.

At Greenville International Church, which had thus far been unable to obtain a state charter, Mr. Mindstrom, the individual leading the efforts to start a school asserted that a major benefit of partnering with the church was that the school would be able to occupy an already existing structure provided by the church:

Schools cannot open unless they have a facility that can accommodate the educational program. The fact that he was willing to first let us move into this facility, and then eventually build us a facility means that we would not have to go out and build our own. As a charter school we're not given any additional funds for building, so we're required to go out and fundraise or find some type of partnership.

At Mt. Vernon Baptist, the pastor stated that the church carried the debt service for the building which housed the charter school, and Dr. Jones, the university professor who was primarily responsible for obtaining the charter and who currently ran the school's governing board maintained that every year the church sponsored a fundraising campaign for the school, and donated "a certain amount" to operate the school. (On at least one occasion, I personally attended a service where the pastor solicited funds for the school to be collected during the general Sunday morning collection.) Ms. Anderson, a member of the church not closely involved with Mt. Vernon's charter activity, shared that some congregants who donated money to build the church's independent school were unhappy with the leadership's decision to charter, as they had donated money on the belief that the school would be a private one for their children to attend.

A lot of the older congregation bought bricks to build the church and donated tens of thousands of dollars to have the school built. The membership was like, '[...] if I paid

five thousand dollars to have this school built, then I want my grandbaby to go here.’ [...]

What happened was, with it being a charter and having a lottery, lots of parents who were members were like ‘well...am I going to send my kid here? Or to [a local private school]? Or they could just go to public schools. A lot of parents opted for [the traditional public school option].

While Ms. Anderson was unsure about the specific amount of money the congregation donated to the charter school, she stated forcefully, “I know the church gives a *lot* of money to that school. A *lot* of money.”

Finally, Hunters Chapel sponsored a number of fundraisers to support the charter school connected to their church; one was a concert where well-known gospel and rhythm & blues artists performed for the community, with a portion of the proceeds going towards college scholarships and another portion going to the charter school. At least one church member, who also served on the school design team and now sat on the governing board, intended to sponsor a private fundraiser in her home. Pastor Matthews also stated that the “church gives a special Sunday offering to the school every now and then.”

**Providing volunteers for charter schools.** Churches also supported charter schools by providing regular and consistent volunteers. Interviewees from both Mt. Vernon Baptist and New Town Baptist emphasized the volunteerism from members of the church that supported various aspects of running the school and serving students. Ms. Anderson, a member of Mt. Vernon, maintained that one of the reasons she was most supportive of the school was because it gave church members who believed helping children was their ministry an opportunity to serve. School leaders implemented a program during intercession where “volunteers would read to

them, plan activities, [and] feed the kids” to ensure that not only were students still able to eat, but they were also in a safe environment working to shore up academic skills. Moreover, church volunteers conducted backpack drives and a “Secret Santa” drive for students. At New Town Baptist, Pastor Barnes discussed a church mentoring program aimed at middle school and high school aged males, with the elder and senior men of the church serving as models for the boys and young men. Ultimately, the church sought to counteract the “cradle to prison pipeline,” and to that end, sent men to the charter school to “volunteer and make a difference and model manhood in our young sons.”

**Creating and/or engaging school choice-related coalitions.** A number of faith leaders mentioned either working to create coalitions of clergy and community members focused on school choice initiatives. Pastor White from Williams CME first served on a strategic planning committee to determine “how to start an organization that could advocate for better educational options.” Pastor Reeves from Rocky Mount Christian Church also worked to build a coalition of faith leaders in his state, to ensure that churches and community leaders were working to provide children with the education they needed, whether it was through starting charter schools, educating parents about voucher opportunities, or starting afterschool and summer academic enrichment programs.

Pastor Matthews, of Hunters Chapel AMEZ in the northeast, found it prudent to forge a less commonly seen set of allies. Although he elected to petition the state for a charter instead of the local school district, in addition to receiving a unanimous decision from the state board and full support from the previous superintendent, he received a public letter of support from the current local superintendent as well as a cautious vote of confidence from the president of the

local teacher's union. In a public statement, the current superintendent averred,

We are excited to have Douglass Academy and look forward to working with new partners, including Hunters Chapel AMEZ, an organization with deep roots in our community. This new opportunity creates a chance to have renewed and deeper conversations about the wide range of needs among our City's students, and how the various school types- neighborhood, charter, and magnet- can work together to provide not only choice but an outstanding education to all.

Pastor Matthews mentioned the difficulty of galvanizing support from political leadership, the church, and the community simultaneously, but maintained that keeping the focus on what is best for children slowly brought this coalition to the table. When asked what conflicts arose as he worked to obtain approval for a charter, he stated,

There were conflicts for me personally, with other churches, other pastors, even in our congregation. I've got principals, I've got school board leaders, teachers, administrators all in the congregation, and our greatest ally has been the former superintendent of schools...It was slowly one by one I was able to win people over and I kept the conversation on what's best for children.

To that end, Pastor Matthews had his team reach out to the president of the local teachers' union to discuss how school leaders could work collaboratively with the union. The union president stated that he was encouraged at the steps Douglass Academy leaders were taking to forge a partnership, and thought it was a "step in the right direction."

Not only did pastors work to form formal and informal coalitions, but they also consulted with education choice reform organizations to inform their own strategy. In figuring out the best

way to impact education in their city, Pastor White and other members of the group met with renowned school choice advocate Howard Fuller and the organization he founded, Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), in Milwaukee. Pastor Matthews and his team also engaged choice ally relationships when deciding whether or not to embark on their own journey to open a charter school. “We had a really good relationship with [a major charter management organization] here, and a personal relationship with the founder. So we met with her a couple of times to see if it was something we really wanted to do,” says Mrs. Forest, who helped write the application. While they consulted the EMO to determine if they wanted to start their own school, Mrs. Forest was clear that she would not send her children to a school run by this EMO because she didn’t agree with their “philosophy and the way they discipline kids.” Ultimately the school planning team decided not to partner with that charter management organization.

**Delivering public speeches.** Several pastors discussed delivering public addresses to large crowds in either support of or opposition to the charter movement. Pastor Matthews at Hunters Chapel spoke at a press conference sponsored by education reform advocates in his state. The organizers of the event advocated for a number of education reform initiatives, including charter school expansion and equitable funding formulas for students, no matter what type of public school they attended. Pastor Matthews asserted that the state should “embrace the opening of more charter schools” as they continue to show marked gains for children across the state. He contended that while the process for approving charter applications should be stringent, it should not discourage applicants from applying to open schools.

Pastor Vernon Stevens, who opposed charter school expansion in his state, also reported speaking at a large public event. “I made a speech at the capitol against our governor as far as the

[charter expansion] program goes...I spoke vehemently against it.”

**Engaging elected officials.** Several participants expressed engaging elected officials as a cornerstone of their involvement with the charter movement. Of the three churches that opened schools, the senior pastors of all three commented on the political landscape that made their charter involvement possible. Two of them specifically mentioned meeting with the governor: Pastor Matthews from a church in the northeast stated, “Our church involvement was really initially based on me...I contacted the governor and asked about the route towards gaining a state charter.” In addition to gaining support from the governor, he also forged an alliance with a state senator and eventual mayor of his city.

Pastor Hilliard from a congregation in the southeast also described engaging public officials and meeting with the governor, who lent his support to their charter application and praised the talent leading the school design process. Pastor Hilliard’s team also met with lawmakers as they were considering legislation to remove a cap on the number of charter schools allowed in the state.

When the state was considering the cap lift in order to improve their chance of being awarded Race to the Top funds, we met with the current governor, the governor’s education policy team, and also with a state representative to the U.S. Senate. State legislators voted to lift the charter cap and the state was awarded millions in a Race to the Top grant; however, Pastor Hilliard lamented that charter applications were now being rushed through the approval process, with very little attention paid to quality or chances of success. Reverend White from Williams CME in the northeast also spoke of pastors asserting their political influence as candidates for public office stopped at their churches during campaign

season:

When [the governor] was making a campaign stop, he went to the Black churches. He went to the other CME church in town, and the pastor and some of the other pastors from town kind of cornered him in the office to say ‘we need you to make a commitment about securing funding for these [charter] schools’ and so he made the commitment during the campaign, and we went to Hartford to make sure he started true to his promise.

Pastors themselves were not the only individuals speaking to elected officials; at least one church mobilized members and transported them en masse to public hearings, press conferences, and large rallies to speak on behalf of the charter school they were hoping to open. To show their support for increased charter funding, members of Hunter’s Chapel chartered a bus and sent 30 members to the capitol to attend a rally. They wore shirts with Frederick Douglass Academy emblazoned across the front, and prayed before making the trip to the state capitol. Later on that same day, a public hearing on the charter school application their pastor submitted was scheduled, and several members of the Hunters Chapel signed up to give public comment and support in favor of the school. Members emphasized the need for quality schools in their neighborhood, and the church’s responsibility to ensure children are educated. Moreover, they saw quality schools as part of a solution to turning their neighborhood around, which had been riddled with increasing crime and unemployment.

**Running for elected office.** In one instance, members themselves encouraged their pastor to run for elected office in order to influence education reform policy. When asked how his members felt about his political activism, Pastor Thomas Smith of Ninth Street Baptist Church in the southeast asserted that his congregants,

were so concerned [about what was happening in education] and they said, ‘you can’t just complain about it, you have a skillset that’s needed. You have to get out there and do something.’ So for me, since I had that skillset, I couldn’t just stand in the pulpit and preach against it. [My church was] very supportive in terms of working with me in that whole process.

Pastor Smith asserted that much of the involvement his church had in the charter movement was their giving of the “freedom and flexibility” to be an advocate. He ran for an open seat in local government in 2004, and remained in that position until 2008 as a reform candidate, serving as the chair for two of those years. During his tenure, the city suffered a natural disaster which forced residents to evacuate and schools to close. This period of transition ultimately reshaped the education landscape as city and state officials worked to re-open schools when students returned. The number of charter schools swelled, and Pastor Smith was a vocal advocate of reopening traditional public schools as opposed to shuttering them permanently and/or replacing them with charter schools. Although Pastor Smith is no longer active in local government, the issues his church members continue to face with charter schools (neighborhood schools closing, lack of services for children with special needs, harsh disciplinary tactics) often inform his reform agenda and the concerns he addresses publicly.

Pastor Smith also stressed the importance of being visible members of the community, and stated that he and the members of his congregation were planning to attend a school board meeting en masse, not as a protest against charter schools per se, but moreso to “show their presence.”

**Proposing a unified district of charter and traditional public schools.** As a vocal

opponent of charter takeovers, but a supporter of many of the original tenets of charter schools, Pastor Smith put forth a public proposal for a unified school district. In the wake of the natural disaster, the city school district split into two entities, one entirely comprised of charter schools (some new but many taken over by charter operators after being labeled “failing”) accountable to the state board, and the other comprised of the traditional public schools that still remained and those that elected to convert into charters, which were accountable to the elected city school board. Community members spoke out against what they felt was a loss of local control and school accountability. In recent years, state legislators began discussing the possibility of reunifying the two school districts. Pastor Smith wrote and disseminated a proposal for a unified school district that “respects school autonomy, engages the community, and educates all children and reduced the achievement gap between races.” The state legislature ultimately voted to reunite the two districts, in hopes of beginning reconciliation following a painful moment in the city’s education landscape.

**Serving a plaintiff in lawsuit.** Not only did participants engage members of the legislative branch of government in their charter reform advocacy efforts, but one interacted with the judicial branch as well. Pastor Mackins from First Baptist Church in the southeast was a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the governor for language in a piece of charter expansion legislation that they felt was intentionally misleading and deceptive to the public. The lawsuit asked the court to step in and stop the law from going into effect, should the ballot measure pass. Voters ultimately defeated the referendum.

In sum, Black churches exhibited 12 types of involvement in the charter school movement: convening community and church forums (five churches), advocating for parents of

charter school students and teaching parents to advocate for themselves (one out of nine churches), petitioning state lawmakers for charter funding (three out of nine churches), writing and/or submitting charter applications (five out of nine churches), financially supporting charter schools (four out of nine churches), providing volunteers to charter schools (two out of nine), creating and/or engaging school-choice related coalitions (five out of nine churches), delivering public speeches (three out of nine), engaging elected officials (three out of nine), running for public school board office (one out of nine), proposing a unified charter and traditional public school district (one out of nine), and serving as a plaintiff in a lawsuit against charter-related legislation (one out of nine). Next I will describe an emerging classification of types of Black church participation in the charter school movement.

**Discussion: Towards a Categorization of Charter School Involvement Among Black Churches**

While these data do not appear to fit typology, there do appear to be several emerging classifications into which the behaviors fall (see Figure 2 for graphic of emerging classifications).

Figure 2. *Emerging Classifications of Involvement*

| <b>“Birthing” or Supporting Charter Schools</b>   | <b>Political Mobilization</b>  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Starting charter applications</li> <li>-Submitting charter applications</li> <li>-Opening charter schools</li> <li>-Providing financial resources</li> <li>-Providing volunteers</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Visiting state capitol</li> <li>-Making public addresses re charter reform</li> <li>-Sending members to speak at public hearings and attend rallies</li> <li>-running for/assuming political office</li> <li>-encouraging members to attend school board meetings</li> </ul> |

| <b>Parent/Community Education</b>  | <b>Creating/Engaging School Choice-Related Coalitions</b>  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Convening church/community forums</li> <li>-Educating families about charter funding</li> <li>-Helping parents navigate charter issues</li> <li>-Speaking on radio shows, publishing editorials</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Serving as founding members of choice coalitions</li> <li>-Consulting with choice coalitions for support and strategy</li> </ul> |

After examining the myriad types of participation and combining them into 12 key types based on similarity, a pattern began to emerge. Several types of involvement revolved around “birthing” or starting schools, while several others revolved around participation in the political process. Still others were centered around parent and community education, and the final remaining behaviors revolved around creating and/or engaging coalitions around school choice. Next I describe each of these emerging classifications, the types of participation comprising each classification, and current scholarship—where it exists—on these types of involvement.

Efforts to start and support charter schools comprise the first bucket of Black church behaviors emerging from the data. This includes starting charter applications, submitting charter applications, opening charter schools, and supporting charter schools indirectly tied to the church through financial or human capital resources. This finding reaffirms the historical role the Black church has played in the provision of education, and presents some evidence that churches are continuing to maintain this role in this era of contemporary school choice reform.

Historically, Black churches created educational institutions when they were dissatisfied with the educational opportunities presented by state and local governments (Billingsley, 1999; Frazier, 1974; Littlefield, 2005). Several of the churches in this study have elected to continue

this tradition through the “birthing” of charter schools, largely because pastors and parishioners felt that students from their congregations and communities were not receiving a quality education. In many ways, the charter school movement has allowed them to continue in this endeavor, because operating independent schools is often prohibitively expensive, both for Black churches and for the students they wish to serve (Ratteray, 1992). This leads to the second way that participation in the charter school movement has helped Black churches continue their tradition of providing education—by giving them a vehicle through which they can operate and exert agency over the education of their children.

As previously stated, Black churches have a history of establishing independent schools, with the earliest being Sabbath schools started shortly after emancipation (Anderson, 1988). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the establishment of Black Christian schools mushroomed, with Layman (1994) estimating that between 200 and 400 of these institutions were in operation. The majority of Black Christian schools Layman (1994) identified had been founded in the 1980s. Carper and Layman (1997) assert that these schools exist as an “alternative to urban public education” as the African American community continues to experience a “profound disillusionment” with the state of public education (p. 121). Unfortunately, Black church-operated schools have experienced declines in enrollment, which are often crippling as these schools often rely primarily upon tuition to cover operating costs (Barnes-Wright, 2004; Ratteray, 1992).

All of the churches starting or in the process of starting schools either previously operated independent schools or considered opening an independent school before opting to apply for a state charter. In addition, all of the senior leadership of these churches mentioned the financial strain placed on families and churches when attempting to operate an independent school. For

these faith-leaders, a charter was the most feasible, sustainable manner in which they could provide educational opportunities for children in their communities while retaining control over hiring personnel, curriculum, and school culture.

In addition to providing educational opportunities, Black churches have a history of providing various manner of support for schools, such as sponsoring fundraisers to pay teachers, build schools, and offer scholarships (Frazier, 1974; Littlefield, 2005). In more recent years, Black churches have continued to operate tutoring and literacy programs, often staffed by volunteers (Barnes, 2010; George et al, 1989). Several of the churches in this study provided such programs; however, senior pastors often expressed a desire to “go beyond” these initiatives and use the financial and human capital resources at hand to effect greater change for children. The charter movement appears to provide a ripe opportunity for Black churches to fulfill this mission.

Political participation is the second bucket of behaviors that appears to emerge from the data. Political scientist Allison Calhoun-Brown (1996) outlines types of political participation as “contacting public officials or agencies, signing petitions, attending protest meetings or demonstrations, picketing, boycotting, working for candidates, talking to people to influence their votes, attending rallies, speeches, or dinners in support of a candidate and making financial contributions and/or working for candidates, parties, or issues” (p. 929). The behaviors uncovered through this study fitting the political participation category include: visiting the state capitol to petition lawmakers for charter funding, making public addresses about charter school reform, sending members to speak at public hearings and to attend large rallies, running for and assuming elected office, serving as a plaintiff in a lawsuit in opposition to charter expansion

legislation, proposing a unified school district, and encouraging members to attend school board meetings en masse. More importantly, a wide variety of churches across the spectrum of size, denomination, and charter “stance” in this sample engaged in political participation.

In a study on the challenge of school choice reform in urban contexts, Henig et al (2001) examine Black churches’ political mobilization in education reform in major cities across the country. One of several conclusions that they draw is that the Black church “typically supports the position of the professional educators” (p. 145) because their congregations often contain large contingents of public school teachers and administrators. These findings augment extant scholarship on political mobilization of Black churches in the education reform movement by providing evidence of Black faith leaders being able to politically mobilize their congregations—rife with public school educators—to act in support of the charter school movement. Moreover, accommodationist perspectives of the Black church maintain that Black churches either refrain from political mobilization or were limited in their political activity because of a preoccupation with otherworldly, spiritual concerns. Although this study represents only a small, highly specific subset of churches, we can use the data presented here to identify interesting cases of political mobilization and highlight areas for further research. The Black faith leaders and churches who appeared to be the “least” or most infrequently politically active did not appear so because of a stated focus on spiritual matters; instead, it appeared that their mobilization efforts may have been hampered by congregation size, and/or largely dictated by the issue they were mobilizing around. For example, churches advocating against a specific piece of legislation appeared to be less consistently active than churches mobilizing to garner lawmakers’ support for a charter school, only because once the election passed, their activism momentarily waned.

More research is necessary to draw any strong conclusions, but there appears to be evidence that political mobilization in education reform is a function of more than a preoccupation with spiritual concerns or a desire to maintain the status quo.

Parent and community education is the third category that appears to be emerging from the data, with churches exhibiting behaviors such as convening community and church forums on the negative impact of charter legislation, educating families about charter options and school funding formulas, helping parents navigate issues with charter schools, teaching parents how to advocate for themselves and their children, speaking on radio shows about charter school reform and school choice policies, and writing and publishing editorials on charter school reform. Similar to political participation, parent and community education behaviors were exhibited by churches across the denominational, size, and charter stance spectrum. Again, these behaviors harken back to some of the earliest types of activism seen in the Black church, when early independent Black churches wrote and disseminated anti-slavery literature and preachers wrote anti-slavery editorials for publication in Black newspapers. Similarly, Black faith leaders and churches appear to be taking an active stance in educating their congregations and communities about education reform initiatives such as charter schools.

The final category emerging from the data appears to be creating and engaging school choice coalitions, with participants serving as founding members of organizations bringing together faith leaders and communities around school choice, as well as consulting educational choice reform organizations for support and strategy. While Harris (2005) asserts that forming coalitions is a method of political mobilization, I contend that coalitions in and of themselves do not represent political mobilization. Based on the data presented here, scholars should consider

the purpose of the coalition before determining whether or not engaging a coalition constitutes political mobilization. While several of the coalitions described in this study were efforts to mobilize political forces, others existed simply to serve as a resource for another type of involvement, such as submitting a charter application or starting a school. For example, Pastor Matthews and his school planning team enlisted the assistance of a local charter operator to help them through the charter application process and to help them operate the school. In this instance, they were not engaging the coalition as a manner of influencing the political process. The relationship between these various categories is important to consider, and although this categorization is still in its incipient stages, next I present possible explanations for the relationships existing between the classifications.

The data reveal that each classification appears to have some “overlap” with the other three categories. This means that some types of involvement only fall in one category, while others may fall in two, three, or even four categories. For example, speaking at a political rally in support of increased charter funding is both political mobilization and supporting charter schools. Creating a coalition of school choice supporters to garner support for pending charter legislation is creating/engaging choice-related coalitions, political mobilization, and supporting charter schools. Holding a parent forum to share information about a charter school the church’s pastor is attempting to open is both supporting schools and parent/community education. I contend that the nexus of all four categories of involvement represents “birthing” a charter school, as it is the only type of involvement that appears to involve each of the other three categories. Every Black church in this study that elected to sponsor a charter schools engaged in political mobilization, parent/community organization, and creating/engaging coalitions in order

to write a successful application, obtain a charter, and successfully operate a school. As these categories are only emerging and further research is necessary to gather additional support for them, readers should be careful to take the fluidity between categories into consideration when attempting to classify types of Black church involvement in the charter movement. See Figure 3 for a graphic depiction of how the relationships between classifications may be explained.

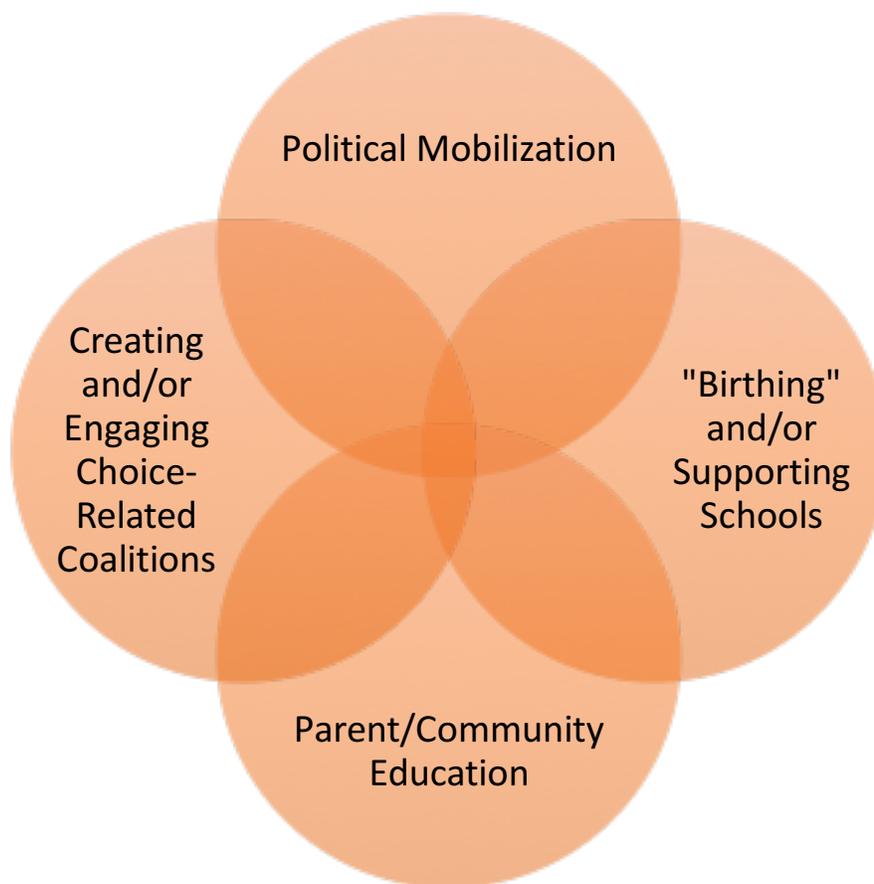


Figure 3. Relationships Between Categories of Involvement. This figure represents how these emerging categories of involvement may be related to one another.

### **Implications**

These findings begin to tell a story about the actions Black churches are taking as they

assert their voice, resources, and power in the contemporary education reform movement. While the literature has thus far focused very little on the agency Black pastors and their congregations have exercised in the charter school reform movement, this study seeks to highlight the myriad types of involvement they have held in advocating for equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Charter school reform is often criticized for being a predominantly White-led reform carried out in- or on- communities of color. Not only do these findings document what actions have been taken by Black churches in charter school reform, but they may provide a preliminary blueprint for other faith communities desiring to become involved as well. This work describes how Black faith leaders and their congregations have taken this moment as an opportunity to speak boldly on behalf of children. In this study, Black churches have marshalled the resources at hand to defeat powerful charter interests, as in the case of First Baptist and Middlebrooks Baptist in the southeast, as well as mobilized congregations and communities to start new charter schools that will meet the needs of underserved students. The churches in this study demonstrate the powerful potential of Black faith communities to assert their influence in a movement that is often portrayed as too powerful to be swayed or stopped.

In addition to illustrating the ability of Black churches to effect change in charter school reform, this study reaffirms that for African Americans, the relationship between the Black community and charter school reform continues to be fraught with tension. Actions cannot simply be categorized as “for” or “against,” and these findings may provide a start for community activists and education reform advocates hoping to find common ground and bring a diverse coalition of stakeholders together. Black pastors and congregations standing in support of

some aspects of the charter movement such as community control, have serious reservations about others such as its White-led, paternalistic nature. Conversely, those standing in opposition to aspects of the charter movement—such as the privatization of education—often agree with and advocate for some benefits that increased flexibility and site-based management provide. This article sheds light on those intricacies in beliefs, and begins to chart common interests between and among the different congregations.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

For scholars, the documentation of four major types of involvement may provide a springboard from which future research can take off. As it does, the following limitations should be taken into consideration. First, the sample included a small number of churches, and the distribution of churches that generally acted in opposition to charter schools was not equal across the two regions- all of the churches were located in the southeast. Moreover, the number of participants per church was small, ranging from one to three individuals agreeing to be interviewed at each church. While qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable, a larger number of churches and a larger number of interviewed participants per church may have yielded additional behaviors or beliefs that were not captured here. In addition, with the exception of two churches, the method of sampling participants led to members who were actively involved in the church's charter activity. This means that the beliefs and perspectives shared by these individuals may not be representative of the entire church membership. In two cases, participants were recruited who attended the church but were not directly involved in their church's decision to become involved in the charter school movement. One participant shared some opinions about the church's decision to become involved in the charter movement that active participants were

either unaware of, or decided not to disclose. Future research may elect to recruit participants from a more representative sample of the general membership in order to gain a better understanding of how the membership at large feels about the church's charter activity. Second, this study limited recruitment to only two regions of the country. Future research may expand to other regions of the country to determine if churches in those regions are engaging in different types of behaviors in the charter school movement.

Additional avenues for future research include a more in-depth study on the motivations behind church involvement, which the second article in this dissertation will explore, as well as the characteristics of African-American churches and their pastors that contribute to their ability to engage in the charter school movement. In addition, surveys, participant observations, and in-depth case studies of African American churches investigating their charter movement-related social activism and education reform more generally could shed light and help draw stronger conclusions about this phenomenon as it unfolds in Black faith communities across the country.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, charter school reform is not only happening "to" communities of color; in many instances including those presented here, African American faith communities are serving as forceful agents of change in the education reform arena. These findings begin to highlight the types of involvement Black churches have exhibited in the charter school movement, and they augment current scholarship on the Black church and political mobilization.

## **CHAPTER 2: AN ANALYSIS OF BLACK CHURCH DISCOURSES EXPLAINING MOTIVATIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT IN THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT**

This dissertation seeks to answer three central questions: *what* are Black churches doing in the charter movement, *why* are they doing this, and *how* are coalitions of Black clergy organizing to influence charter legislation? The second article in the dissertation continues with an analysis of the motivations behind Black church involvement in the charter school movement. Drawing on data from interviews, newspaper articles, charter school applications and mission statements, church histories, and archival records, this study examines the claims Black churches make explaining why they have elected to involve themselves in the charter school movement. Language, or discourse, is an exercise in power, with oral and written texts having the ability to change our knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes (Fairclough, 2003), as well as more concrete effects, for example influencing how individuals and groups understand school choice and charter schools. Benford and Snow (2000) maintain that language is a powerful tool used to help actors identify problems, attribute blame, craft solutions, and encourage others to mobilize with them to bring about change.

This study begins to fill a void in the literature around *why* Black churches have taken it upon themselves to become involved in the charter school movement, how they perceive problems with the current educational system, who or what is to blame for these issues, the best solution to the problem(s) they see, and how they have gathered support among the members of

their congregations for church involvement in the charter movement.

In the sections that follow, I discuss African American discourses around school choice, as these form the theoretical framework underpinning this study. I then outline the research questions and methods employed to answer them before presenting the findings and discussing the implications of these findings for research and practice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As traditionally underrepresented groups have taken on active roles in the school choice movement, scholars have examined the discourses and frames employed to explain their involvement, as well as to highlight tensions that exist between African American supporters and opponents of the movement (Apple & Pedroni, 2005; Boughton, 2008; Cooper, 2005; Crary, 2007; Forman, 2005; Kimathi, 2013; Pedroni, 2003, 2006; Stulberg, 2006, 2015). Their findings formulate the basis of my theoretical framework, as it is from there that I crafted the interview protocol, research questions, and coding framework guiding the analysis.

### **African American Discourses Around School Choice**

In their study on African American discourses around vouchers, Apple and Pedroni (2005) outline a history in Milwaukee (and across the country) of Blacks' frustration with desegregation plans that primarily burdened Black children, through forced busing, the closing of Black schools, and the tracking of Black students into classrooms within "integrated" schools. In addition to identifying sociopolitical contexts leading to African American support for vouchers, Apple and Pedroni (2005) examine the framing of the voucher plan that led to its perception as a solution for educational inequity in Milwaukee, and the discourses employed by Black organizations to explain their position as voucher advocates.

Forman (2007) also examines discourses around school choice, tracing the development of the *values* and *racial-justice* claims made in support of and in opposition to vouchers. He studies how those tensions manifest themselves in widely disparate voucher schemes. This article uses a similar approach, focusing in on the discourses employed by Black churches involved in the charter movement.

A number of recurring narratives about school choice have been highlighted in the scholarship, and I outline them in the following section. African American supporters of school choice tend to articulate several key arguments to explain their stance, including access to high quality schools as a right, the importance of parental choice and community control, and frustration with the state of traditional public schools. African American choice opponents often talk about the continued disinvestment in traditional public schools, the increased segregation that many charter schools display, and the disconnectedness of the charter school reform movement from communities of color. Many of these claims are not limited to African Americans; however, they are included in this theoretical framework because they have been articulated by Black supporters and opponents in empirical studies (Cooper, 2005; Forman, 2007; Stulberg, 2015). Where possible, I have limited the use of scholarship that does not speak specifically to the claims espoused by communities of color. Another caveat to the framework of claims used in this study is that some of the claims are not particular to charter schools, but have also been used in support of vouchers. While this study looks specifically at charter schools, broader statements about school choice and vouchers have been included because they often apply to charter schools. The following subsections describe common narratives held by African Americans about school choice (a table of these narratives is included in Appendix B).

Narratives are separated into two categories, those identified in the literature as supporting school choice, and those identified in the literature as opposing school choice.

**Support.**

***Choice as a civil right.*** Supporters of charter schools often speak of choice as a civil right, an issue of racial justice, and an extension of the *Brown* ruling (Apple & Pedroni, 2005; Cooper, 2005; Forman, 2007; JBHE, 2000; Scott, 2011; Stulberg, 2006; 2015). African American parents have expressed the belief that “choosing public schools is a right not a privilege” (Cooper, 2005, p. 181). The seminal *Brown* ruling forged a connection between racial justice and equal educational opportunity, and contemporary school choice advocates maintain that refusing to grant all parents—particularly those in low-income communities of color—the option of deciding where their children are educated effectively takes away their civil right to an adequate and equal education (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004).

***Frustration with traditional public schools.*** A number of scholars have presented evidence documenting African Americans’ frustration with the failed promises of *Brown* and the quality of education at traditional public schools (Apple & Pedroni, 2005; Cooper, 2005; Forman, 2005; Stulberg 2006). In a study on working-class African American mothers and their perceptions of school choice, Cooper (2005) finds that education is highly valued by the mothers in her study and often seen as the key to socioeconomic advancement, thus carrying very high stakes for them and their children. Those electing to withdraw their children from traditional public schools expressed a perception of “inadequacy of urban, traditional public schools” and “unqualified, uncommitted, uncaring” teachers (p. 180). Forman (2005) presented evidence corroborating this sentiment, maintaining that voucher supporters expressed a desire for more

nurturing and successful educational environments for their children. Overcrowding and the unresponsive nature of bureaucratic school districts have both been found to be a source of discontent among African American parents dissatisfied with the traditional public school system (Cooper, 2005; Forman, 2005)

***Community control over Black education.*** African American parents' desire to have more voice in the education of their children is another oft cited justification for supporting school choice. One reason is what parents perceive to be deficit thinking among members of the faculty and staff at traditional public schools (Cooper, 2005). In addition, some independent Black school leaders champion choice measures as a way to obtain government funding while still retaining a certain degree of autonomy over curriculum, and complete control over governance, staffing, and operations (Bush, 2004). Forman (2005) cites parents' desire for greater control over who taught their children, how much money was spent, where their children went to school, and what their children were taught, the ability to instill community and cultural pride in their children.

Within community control I include discourses around the reclamation of education of Black students. African Americans have a long history of wanting to maintain control over the education of Black children and adults (Anderson, 1988; Forman, 2005; Stulberg, 2004; Williams, 2005). Independent Black schools existed as early as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century because many Whites refused to allow Blacks to attend their schools or even be educated (Ratteray, 1992; Yancey, 2004). All-Black schools served as bastions of Black family and cultural values, until the *Brown* ruling was passed and integration became the model of successful schooling (Yancey, 2004). It was in the years following *Brown* that many all-Black schools were closed, and “the

responsibility of educating African American children appeared to be out of the hands of parents and Black teachers and nestled in the capable arms of the federal government” (Yancey, 2004, p. 128). Independent Black schools experienced renewed interest in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the realities of integration as a burden on African American communities became clear (Yancey, 2004). However, these schools often relied upon tuition to remain open, and were therefore inaccessible to many low-income students of color. Charter school legislation allowing private schools to convert to charter status may help independent Black schools educate a greater swath of students of color from a wider socioeconomic background, while simultaneously retaining their culturally relevant missions.

**Opposition.**

*Increased segregation.* Even African American supporters of public school choice acknowledge that the “choice process can be ‘hard’ and ‘discouraging’” (Cooper, 2005, p. 181). Parents without the knowledge and resources to navigate the school choice environment are often left behind in failing traditional public schools that their more knowledgeable, resourceful counterparts have elected to leave. In addition to a knowledge barrier, many African American parents assert that financial barriers (such as transportation to get their children to charter schools, or funds to cover the deficit remaining after school vouchers have been applied to tuition) prohibit low-income families from taking advantage of choice (Cooper, 2005). The mothers in Cooper’s (2005) study also acknowledged that choice could leave traditional public schools serving the most underserved students, often low-income Black and Latino students. Charter school research demonstrates that charters are often more racially isolated than traditional public schools and often have more extensive segregation than traditional public

schools, lending credence to this claim of increased segregation (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, Wang, Orfield, 2012; Renzulli & Evans, 2005).

***Undermining public education.*** The draining of financial and political support from traditional public schools as a result of market based reforms is a common criticism among African Americans (Broughton, 2008; Cooper, 2005; Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015). As opposed to serving as a mechanism through which all schools are spurred to improvement, charter schools and vouchers are perceived by critics as exacerbating existing inequalities by taking resources from the most underserved schools. Moreover, Forman (2005) finds that African American opponents of vouchers express faith in the existing public schools system and a desire for traditional public schools to be fixed.

***Privatization and corporatization of education.*** Scott and Fuchter (2009) find that parents and communities of color in opposition to school choice initiatives cite the funneling of public dollars to for-profit corporations as a primary criticism. Opponents of school choice initiatives in New Orleans maintain that reforms there “provide the means for White entrepreneurs to raid the public school treasury and create new markets at the expense of poor and working-class students of color” (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015, p. 290).

***Disconnectedness from communities of color.*** Dixson, Buras, and Jeffers (2015) present evidence from Black educators in New Orleans, who lament the fact that many Black veteran educators were fired in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and replaced by predominantly White teachers from around the country, through programs such as Teach for America and the New Teacher Project. They maintain that many of the reformers moving into the city to start charter schools are transplants with few ties to the local community, and local Black parents, teachers,

community members, etc., are given no voice in the reforms being implemented (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015).

### **Research Question**

The key question this study seeks to answer is: 1) What claims do representatives of African American churches make to justify their participation in the charter school movement?

### **Research Design and Methods**

#### **Participants and Recruitment**

Participant recruitment for this study included nine churches from two regions of the country, the northeast and the south. In the northeast, three churches were recruited, and all three were generally in support of the charter movement. In the south, six churches were recruited, three generally opposed to the charter movement and three in support of it. In the subsections that follow, I outline each of the churches recruited for the study, organized by region, and offer a brief description of the church and participants interviewed.

#### **Northeast.**

*Hunters Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church.* Boasting a very rich history, this congregation is the second oldest in its denomination. The previous senior pastor, Eric Matthews, was a highly-respected community activist and credited with bringing the church back from the brink of closing. Under his leadership, the size of the congregation doubled to more than 3,000 members. He spearheaded efforts to open a charter school, and enlisted the assistance of several educators from the church and community-at-large to write the charter application and gain state approval. In addition to leading the opening of a charter school, Pastor Matthews has been a vocal advocate for increased charter funding from the state government. In

addition to Pastor Matthews, interviews were conducted with Cheryl Forest, a long time educator, member of the school planning committee, and current member of the board, and Tina Pembroke, a member of the church.

***Williams Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church.*** The former pastor of this congregation, Joseph White, was instrumental in forming a coalition of clergy in support of school choice and charter school reform. In addition to the activism of the senior pastor, Williams CME hosted community forums aimed at educating parents about school choice options. An interview was conducted with Pastor White.

***New Town Community Baptist Church.*** Pastor Daniel Barnes was the senior pastor of the church and primarily responsible for the charter school opened adjacent to the church. He assumed leadership of the church in 2005 and is a highly visible community advocate and social justice leader. New Town operated an independent Christian school for more than 20 years, but closed around the time of the financial recession in the early 2000s. Pastor Barnes elected to apply for a charter, and the new charter school moved into the building previously occupied by the Christian school. Pastor Barnes was interviewed for this study.

#### **Southeast.**

***Mt. Vernon Baptist Church.*** One of the largest African American congregations in its city, Mt. Vernon has a membership of over 7,000. In an effort to revitalize the community surrounding the church, senior pastor Dr. Kyle Hilliard and local professor Johnathan Jones partnered together to open a tuition-free, independent Christian school. Shortly after the recession, school leaders realized the cost of operating a tuition-free private school was unsustainable, but the majority of students in the community could not afford private school

tuition. They elected to apply for a charter, and eventually converted the independent school into a public charter school. In addition to Dr. Hilliard and Dr. Jones, a long time member of the church, Anne Anderson, was also interviewed for this study. Ms. Anderson, an attorney and former educator, was not involved in the church's decision to convert the school into a charter school.

***Greenville International Christian Church.*** This congregation was the result of a merger between a predominantly Black Baptist church and a predominantly White non-denominational church. The Baptist pastor, Andrew Starnes, is now the senior pastor of the church. Prior to the merger, the non-denominational congregation operated a private Christian school that eventually closed. Pastor Starnes has a desire to open a charter school, and has partnered with community member Steve Mindstrom to write an application for a state charter. Thus far, they have been unsuccessful in gaining state approval. They recently submitted another application, and are awaiting an interview with the state board.

***Ninth Street Baptist Church.*** The senior pastor, Dr. Thomas Smith, ran for elected office and assumed a position in local government to influence how education reform was being implemented and impacting his congregants. Dr. Smith is a proponent of several tenets of the original charter school idea, such as site-based accountability, but disagrees with how charter schools have been implemented in his city. In addition to Dr. Smith, Diane Burns was interviewed. Mrs. Burns is a community advocate and highly involved in the church's charter involvement.

***Rocky Mount Christian Church.*** Moses Reeves, the senior pastor of this congregation, is a charter supporter and founding member of a coalition of clergy in support of school choice. In

addition, Pastor Reeves and a team of educators began writing an application for a charter. After realizing the political landscape of their local school board was not amenable to additional charter schools, Pastor Reeves and his team terminated the writing process. Pastor Reeves participated in an interview for this study.

***Middlebrooks Baptist Church.*** Pastor Vernon Stevens is a vocal charter opponent, and has organized a number of community forums to educate congregations around his state about the dangers of unchecked charter expansion. An interview was conducted with Pastor Stevens.

***First Baptist Church.*** Senior Pastor Tony Mackins is a well-known civil rights activist and the founding pastor of First Baptist Church. He has been a vocal advocate of charter expansion legislation, and has traveled across the state speaking and sponsoring public forums on the potential impacts on communities and traditional public schools. Pastor Mackins participated in an interview for this study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Following Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) method, the interview guide was semi-structured, with questions asking participants about why they feel it is important that their congregation become active in the charter movement, followed by more specific questions about the categories from the theory. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour, and were conducted via telephone. Sample questions include "What motivated your church to become involved in the charter school movement?" and "Why do you think this involvement is important?" This protocol is included in Appendix A.

In addition to interviews with pastors, church members, and individuals closely involved with the churches' charter involvement, specific data sources included public chartering

documents such as charter school applications, charter school mission statements, minutes from charter school board meetings, church newsletters, newspaper articles related to the church's relationship with the charter movement, church histories containing information about the church's charter involvement, and written historical accounts of the role of the church in the community.

I used methods of directed content analysis to analyze these data. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) assert that this method is most appropriate when currently existing theory is being validated or conceptually extended. Using the discourses around school choice synthesized from the literature as a framework, and reclamation as a proposed additional node, I investigated whether Black churches articulate the same motivations for participation in the charter school movement, and whether they employed any discourses not included in extant scholarship.

I began transcribing and coding data as it was collected, as opposed to waiting until fieldwork was complete (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldana, 2009). This allowed me to revise interview protocols and data collection techniques as necessary. I also created a spreadsheet to record all participant interactions, jot notes about additional participants that were identified, and to account for any changes to the research design as a result of emerging themes and patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For example, when less popular opinions about a church's involvement in the charter movement emerged after speaking to a member who was not directly involved in the church's charter participation, I modified my recruitment strategies to reach out to members of other participant churches who may not have been directly involved in charter activity. Finally, I kept a journal of emerging issues and themes, as well as new questions that arose during data collection and personal reflections on my own ideas and biases (Marshall &

Rossman, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Maintaining records in this manner provided a clear audit trail of how data were collected and managed, and how design decisions were made (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I used Dedoose qualitative analysis software to begin coding at the paragraph level using the a priori codes from the literature on African American discourses on school choice (please see Appendix B for the a priori coding framework). As suggested by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the initial coding framework consisted of multiple codes and an operational definition for each code. Each code is a key concept or narrative espoused by African Americans supporting or opposing school choice initiatives, as described in the previous section. As I coded the data, I conducted member checking with participants (who were willing) to validate my findings up until that point of the analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldana, 2009). Data that did not fit a code created in the initial framework were “identified and analyzed separately to determine if they represented a new category or a subcategory of an existing code” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1282). For example, the tendency of charters to “cream students,” or selectively admit top students based on ability, was often articulated by participants. After a separate analysis, I determined that this was not an entirely new code, but instead a subcategory of increasing segregation, as the creaming practices may have led to the homogenization of a charter school’s student body. This code included segregation between schools as well as within them. New codes arising from the data were added to the framework as they emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These included lack of community input and desire for community revitalization.

Following the first round of coding, I wrote detailed code memos defining and elaborating on the codes in the initial framework as well as those emerging from the first round

of data analysis. I reflected on emergent “patterns, categories, themes and concepts” (Saldana, 2009). Evidence from the data was used to support the expanded definitions, and those codes not supported by the data were noted but not removed from the coding framework. During analysis, I was careful to note any a priori nodes and discourses found in the literature which were not being employed by Black churches. Ultimately, each discourse discussed in the literature was employed by at least one participant in the study. Once the coding framework was complete, I conducted a second round of coding to ensure that all data had been coded using the updated, comprehensive framework. The second round of coding was completed at the sentence level.

After the second round of coding, I wrote an analytic memo for each school choice discourse espoused by Black churches, and for each congregation participating in the study, describing in detail the narratives shared by their members. The memo for each narrative discussed patterns and themes supported by the data, described how often that particular discourse was invoked, which participants employed them most often and the characteristics of churches utilizing these discourses.

## **Findings**

In this section, I begin by discussing nuances identified within Black church members’ beliefs about the charter movement. I then describe each discourse identified in the data in detail.

African-American discourses on school choice have generally been separated into discourses espoused by those supporting the charter movement, and discourses espoused by those standing in opposition. An early finding from the data in this study indicates that beliefs from Black churches involved in the charter movement are highly nuanced and do not fall within

a “support” or “oppose” dichotomy. A number of participants maintained that they were not “pro-charter” or “anti-charter,” but instead focused on effective schools for students. Mrs. Forest, a long-time public educator and member of the Frederick Douglass Charter Academy Board of Directors stated, “It’s not that I believe in charter schools, it’s not about the charter philosophy. I believe in creating another option that has less boundaries and restrictions.” Dr. Jones, board chair of World Vision Charter Academy and member of Mt. Vernon Baptist in the southeast echoed this sentiment, “My concern is not charters or school choice, I’m concerned with innovative models about how you educate poor kids. Charter becomes a mechanism for us to think about innovation.”

In addition to not allowing themselves to be categorized as pro- or anti-charter, many participants from churches acting in support of the movement expressed deep concerns about several aspects of charter school reform. Pastor Matthews, who obtained a state charter for Frederick Douglass Charter Academy, stated,

I have some issues with the charter movement. I think it’s a largely white movement that tells Black and Brown people what their kids ought to be learning and knowing. So I’m really against that part of the movement. [...] In fact, I was just at the national charter school movement conference just a month ago, and it is largely a white movement. I really spoke against that, and in Connecticut I had the voice to do so, and I used it.

In the southeast, Pastor Hilliard, who co-led the drive to convert his church’s independent school into a charter school, maintained that he agreed with his state’s decision to lift the cap on charter schools, but he disagreed with *how* the state’s charter cap was lifted, because it led to a flood of charter applicants. He asserted that the plan was to increase the number of schools slowly, and

that was not entirely followed through on. Moreover, he posits that the early intentions of the charter movement backfired, because the movement is no longer entirely focused on providing improved educational models for kids, and some charter operators are using the reform to re-segregate schools.

Conversely, several participants acting in opposition to the movement explicitly stated that they were not “anti-charter.” Mrs. Burns from Ninth Street Baptist in the southeast pushed back against a pro- and anti-charter dichotomy, and maintained that her pastor also acknowledged the nuance in charter beliefs among members of his congregations.

The positions he takes reflect the complexity of the issues and of the lived experience of the church. [...] The richness of being in a church is that those simplistic frames that work for polarizing, that work for framing the debate in black and white are often sufficient and inadequate, and he has the perspective of a congregation to reflect that. Pastor Mackins from the southeast was a vocal opponent of charter expansion legislation in his state, but stated that in general, he wasn’t opposed to charter schools. Further, he supported charter schools that engaged parents, because he believed that was central to successfully educating students. “We do support charter schools. What we do not support is [charter legislation] that takes control from locally elected school boards.” Pastor Schrieves, also from the southeast, generally opposed the charter movement but acknowledged that the potential of charter school expansion served as a “wake up call” because schools “were failing in some aspects” and “need to do more to make sure our children are well educated.”

Participants from churches generally acting in opposition to the charter movement were not opposing charter schools themselves, but moreso how charter schools were being

implemented in their particular contexts- largely because they felt communities were not being included in decisions being made about education. Moreover, many of them agreed with central tenets of the charter school idea, which points to common ground between churches acting in opposition and those acting in support. The discourse around lack of community input is discussed in greater detail later in this section. Next I will discuss findings for each of the discourses discussed in the literature that are also present in these data, and then discourses not found in the literature that are emerging from these data. Discourses are discussed in order of prevalence in the data.

### **Extant School Choice Discourses Espoused by Black Churches**

*Frustration with public education.* With 40 occurrences across 7 of the 9 churches included in the study, the most prevalent discourse was *frustration with the current state of public education*. While this discourse was voiced almost exclusively by Black church supporters of the charter school movement, one participant opposed to charter expansion conceded that the public education system was not meeting the needs of all students. Because this discourse was so common across participants, there did not appear to be any patterns or linkages of any type. It may be that the connection to this pervasive discourse is each church's decision to initiate involvement in the charter movement. In other words, participants' frustration with the state of public education has encouraged them to take an active role in education reform.

Participants often cited low academic achievement as an indication that the public school system was not serving children well. Pastor Reeves, from a congregation in the southeast, maintained that "low SAT scores and GPAs" prevented many students in his district from obtaining state merit scholarships, and Pastor Barnes from the northeast asserted that the district

where his charter school was located had among the lowest graduation rates in the city. In a hearing with the state entity responsible for approving charter applications, southeastern charter supporter Mr. Mindstrom cited low reading scores in his district as his main impetus for wanting to open a charter school. In the northeast, Pastor Matthews cited academic data that showed charter schools outperforming traditional public schools and having long waiting lists, and a member from his church spoke in support of the Frederick Douglass Charter Academy at a hearing, maintaining that traditional public schools were “overcrowded” and “slower kids [were] getting pushed off to the side.” While advocating for the state to grant a charter and acknowledging that his congregants were upset with the traditional public schools in their neighborhood, Pastor Matthews was careful not to say that traditional public schools were failing. In a local newspaper article, Pastor Matthews was quoted:

I’m careful with my words. I was careful not to say, ‘[Students are] ‘trapped’ [in failing schools]’. If they’re trapped, then we’re all trapped. We have 100 kids at Frederick Douglass. The majority of our [Hunters Chapel] kids still go to [traditional] public schools. (Bass, 2014)

Participants expressed frustration with the current state of public education also by seeking to implement more innovative models of education through charter schools. They acknowledged that traditional public schools were not serving all students well, and saw charter schools as one way to ameliorate the harmful effects of a substandard education. The charter application submitted to the state for World Vision Charter in the southeast asserts that the school “integrates an innovative model of strategic partnerships and research-based practices and it involves parents and caregivers in ways that contribute to the health and success of students

and their community.” The chair of the board, Dr. Jones, felt that their model “shouldn’t be unique to a charter environment. [...] It’s more about what public education should look like.”

Yet another frustration voiced by participants was that due to substandard educational options in the traditional public school system, students were not able to compete on global or economic level. Dr. Jones, board chair of World Vision Academy, stated,

We’re in the midst of an unprecedented demographic transformation in this country. [...]

We are in a knowledge economy and are also an aging population, with 80 million people turning 65 to the tune of 8,000 per day. If we’re going to compete globally, it is very important that we create a world-class educational opportunity for every child.

The mission statement from Frederick Douglass Charter Academy in the northeast echoes these sentiments, asserting that its purpose is to produce “responsible and productive citizens prepared to successfully compete in the global marketplace.”

Important to note when discussing the discourse around frustration with public education was some participants’ explicit separation between traditional public school teachers and the system of public education. While some participants did cite poor quality teachers as a major issue in public education, others maintained it was the system strategically set up for their students to fail, as opposed to the fault of educators themselves. Mrs. Forest, a member of Hunters Chapel, bemoaned a system that forced administrators to retain underperforming teachers on the rolls to avoid grievances with the union. “It’s too much red tape in a traditional public school to get things done, and on top of that I have to keep a teacher who is poor performing because of the union? Oh no.” However, Pastor Matthews, also from Hunters Chapel, asserted that “teachers are doing great jobs with where they are and what they have to

work with.” In his opinion, the disparities in achievement were “systematic” and “planned that way.” Pastor White from Williams CME also expressed the concern that the “system is not broken, but it is acting just the way it is designed to, which is to disenfranchise and miseducate.”

***Desire for community control.*** With 34 occurrences across 6 churches, *desire for community/local control* was the second most frequently employed discourse, and the only discourse that was employed both by churches acting in support of and in opposition to the movement. Other discourses were discussed by participants on both sides, but they were often simply acknowledging their awareness of these perspectives, as opposed to employing them as their motivations for behaving in the manner in which they did. However, with this discourse, participants acting in support of the charter movement did so because they desired greater community control, and participants acting in opposition to the charter movement did so because they desired greater community control. This discourse is identified in school choice literature, however, it has generally been ascribed to supporters of the school choice movement.

Participants from all three churches in the sample that acted in opposition to the charter movement stated that they did so largely because the way charter school reform was being implemented in their states was removing control and input from the community. Mrs. Burns from Ninth Street Baptist in the southeast stated,

In the early days, [charter conversion] was a change that was happening with the community, not to a community. You had to have a certain percentage of the parents and a certain percentage of the faculty agree if they wanted to do a conversion charter. The evolution of the movement is exactly the opposite. This happened to this community. This was not driven by this community.

Mrs. Burns, herself, was closely involved with an enrichment program from which the city's first charter school developed, and she emphasized that "it was the ideal combination of community working in context with a partner. That, to me, is the next level of a great charter school." Her pastor, Dr. Smith, was also a strong proponent of community control. Indicative of his commitment to community-controlled schools, Dr. Smith's proposal for a unified district in called for "all schools to have a community-based governing board (charter or not), and site based management." He emphasized the importance of community control, asserting, "how charters have been used in [our state] is that it's not been about community control, but its been used to allow people to come in and usurp community control." Pastor Mackins from First Baptist also in the southeast echoed these sentiments, stating, "When we heard the governor wanted to just take over our schools, we wanted to organize and strategize around how we could stop that." Another pastor in the southeast, from Middlebrooks Baptist, agreed. "I did not want [the charter amendment] to go through because if the school did not reach a certain [academic achievement] level, they would take over the school, without the local citizens or LEAs really having much to say."

Participants from churches acting in support of the charter movement also cited a desire for greater parent and community control as motivation for their involvement. Pastor Matthews emphasized that he wanted Frederick Douglass Charter Academy to function differently than many other charter schools, as it was a largely community-driven endeavor, with the board maintaining "control over curriculum, able to hire teachers, and shape what [they] wanted the school to become." Ms. Pembroke, a member of his church who was not involved in their decision to start a charter, affirmed this commitment to a homegrown effort. "It's so interesting

that the people that are starting schools and running the schools don't necessarily look like the people that are attending the schools. I think that's a distinguishing feature of Hunters Chapel, the fact that you have this predominantly Black church that has started this [charter] school.”

Pastor Reeves from the southeast also discussed a desire for the community to play a larger role in providing better educational opportunities for their students, stating, “If [public education leaders] aren't going to fix the system, we are going to fix it ourselves.” Pastor Barnes at New Town Community Baptist in the northeast was determined to have community and church members play a significant role in the operation of the school, as reflected in this statement from a book published on New Town Baptist's community advocacy efforts:

The charter school is just around the corner from the church and is staffed by many congregants. Further, its mentorship program, which pairs each child with a senior member of the community, also draws from a pool of New Town members. Most of those who work at the school but do not go to St. Paul have, at the very least, grown up in [the neighborhood]: it is a community operation. (Marshall, 2013, p. 79)

***Undermining public education.*** With 21 occurrences across 9 participating churches, *undermining public education* was the third most frequently employed discourse. School choice discourse literature broadly defines this discourse as relating to the draining of resources from traditional public schools. Subthemes within this discourse include *inconclusive research on charter effectiveness*, *lack of accountability*, and *frequent school closures*. *Inconclusive research on charter effectiveness* (4 occurrences) was a recurring theme among some participants, and because it was discussed within the context of taking resources from traditional public schools without definitive research to support this decision, it was subsumed within *undermining public*

education. In addition, *lack of accountability* (7 occurrences) was also a recurring theme, usually in the context of charters draining various types of resources without appropriate accountability measures being put in place to ensure these resources are being used effectively and efficiently. A third theme subsumed within undermining public education was *frequent school closures* (2 occurrences), because charter school closures- sometimes occurring mid-year- may result in financial resources being lost from the public education system indefinitely. These subthemes were not categorized as emerging or new discourses, as other discourses were (such as improves the health of the church and desire to revitalize communities), because they are closely related to currently existing discourses, and do not appear to be specific to the Black church.

Participants employing the general discourse of charter schools draining resources from traditional public schools all attended churches acting in support of the charter movement. (Participants from churches acting in opposition to the movement usually employed other discourses, such as desire for community control, lack of accountability, and inconclusive research on charter effectiveness.) Anne Anderson, whose southeastern pastor converted the church's independent school into a traditional public charter school, held mixed feelings about charter schools. Although she supported charter schools as long as they were "doing right by kids," she felt those resources being diverted to charter schools would be put to better use by being used to improve the traditional public school system.

I think it would be much better to take all the money and resources that you're investing in alternative programs and put them in [traditional] public schools. Pay teachers decent wages, and invest in creating the best public school system that you can with the tools and resources you have, and you don't have to do all the extra stuff. [...] With every

child that leaves, there goes that per pupil expenditure with them. So five kids, that's a teacher.

Tina Pembroke, a member of a northeastern church whose pastor spearheaded efforts to open a charter school, also acknowledged concerns that charter schools impacted the amount of resources available to traditional public schools.

There were definitely people from public schools speaking out against [more charters], saying, 'We need help, we need resources, and here we are going to try opening up one or more new charter schools. It doesn't seem right.' If resources are being depleted where there are too many options, then that's an issue, but I think there is this carrying capacity that the school environment does have for more options.

Pastor Reeves, from a southeastern church hoping to start a charter school, stated that a group of his colleagues discussed the possibility of petitioning lawmakers for tax credits for businesses that contributed to a general fund to offset resources that the public thought they might lose to charter schools.

***Inconclusive research.** Inconclusive research on charter effectiveness* was a discourse emerging from the data that was related to undermining public education. Three participants from three different churches employed this discourse. None of them were explicitly opposed to charter schools; they all maintained that charter schools could be effective but too many unknowns about charter effectiveness remained. Pastor Mackins, from a congregation in the southeast, stated that a lack of conclusive research on charter schools contributed to his hesitation to fully support them. "There are good ones and bad ones, most of them are bad in my opinion. There is no real good research that proves that charter schools are any better than

traditional public schools.” Dr. Smith, from Ninth Street Baptist in the southeast, also cited a lack of conclusive research as his reasoning for voting against a proposal for several new charter schools as school board chair. Finally, Ms. Anderson from the northeast maintained that “charters could work, but [...] there’s not enough research and true accountability.”

***Lack of accountability.*** *Lack of accountability* had 7 occurrences across four different churches. Some participants, such as Pastor Mackins from Georgia and Dr. Smith from the southeast, felt charter schools were unaccountable to the public because they were governed by independent bodies or authorities that answered to outside entities. Dr. Smith advocated for a “single governing body” for all public schools- traditional and charter- to ensure that charter schools were being held accountable. In a proposal presented to local and state lawmakers, he contended that many of his city’s charter schools were unaccountable to parents, and that a unified district would

...have the necessary infrastructure for public accountability to ensure equity and efficiency in the deployment of resources. [...] Parents, students, other elected officials and interested parties need a place of last resort for the sake of accountability. Without a well-defined single source of accountability, ensuring that all students will have access to schools that treat them with equity and excellence will not occur.

Others, such as Ms. Anderson from Mt. Vernon Baptist in the southeast, expressed concerns that charter schools were allowed to hire teachers who were not certified and were held to different reporting standards than traditional public schools.

I don’t like that [charter schools] have different accountability standards from traditional public schools. I’ve been offered jobs for positions at charters where I didn’t have the

licensure for the position. I didn't take it, but it was the premise that if I was talking to a school district, they wouldn't think about hiring me before I have licensure but charters can. I feel like they get away with stuff that the traditional public school doesn't.

Ms. Pembroke, from Hunters Chapel in the northeast, also acknowledged the perspective that charter schools were not held to the same accountability standards as traditional public schools. However, she stopped short of agreeing with these views, maintaining that she simply wanted her children to have better learning opportunities than what was currently available.

I have heard of charter schools that had released a kid or pushed them out. Some public school teachers and administrators feel that these are the kids that need the help the most from the program, and when they are messing up [a charter school's data], you push them out.

***Frequent charter school closures.*** Two participants, both from churches acting in opposition to the charter movement, cited *charter school closures* as reasons they were unable to fully support charter schools. Dr. Smith, from a congregation in the southeast, maintained that a central part of the work his church did was “being a resource for people, families, and children who have been mistreated by the lack of a system, [i.e.] schools closing and the kids not having a place to go, or not being allowed to go when that school reopens.” Dr. Smith elaborated that because charter schools were independently governed, parents and community members were often unsure to whom they could air grievances and seek solutions. Pastor Mackins, also from the southeast, voiced similar concerns. “[Charter schools] have an average life span of three years. [...] We hear about the ones that thrive, we don't hear about the 80% that don't make it or in three years have been closed.”

***Increased segregation.*** School choice literature broadly defines the *increased segregation* discourse as a lack of equal access to charter schools, often resulting in the most underserved students not getting the services that they deserve. *Creaming students* or selectively recruiting, admitting, or serving students, was a secondary discourse emerging from the data, and it was subsumed within increased segregation because it often results in homogenizing student body populations, either by race, class, or ability. There were 14 occurrences of this discourse across six churches. In a published editorial, one participant from the southeast who supported the charter school movement challenged the veracity of any argument that charters were contributing to the re-segregation of the state's schools, writing,

Opponents of reform, including certain media, are now pulling out the race card and arguing that school choice will 're-segregate' public schools. That charge is not just false, it is hypocritical. The fact is, today's public schools are disgracefully segregated. [...] According to Department of Education data, 55% of public school 12<sup>th</sup> graders nationwide are in racially segregated classrooms, compared to 41% of private school 12<sup>th</sup> graders.

He maintained that even in the face of this criticism, parents and students deserved better educational opportunities than they were currently receiving, and he began writing an application for a charter in an attempt to improve educational outcomes for students.

Three participants from southeastern churches described how they felt their state's charter schools were not equally accessible by all students. Ms. Anderson, from Mt. Vernon Baptist, asserted,

While [the charter movement] may provide choice, choice isn't necessarily equal. It all

depends on who you are, where you come from, and what your choices amount to. So if you go to a charter that doesn't provide transportation or lunch, how much of a choice is it for those who rely on those services?

Dr. Mindstrom, who partnered with the senior pastor of Greenville International Christian Church to attempt to charter a school, agreed. "Some of the charter schools that have opened in [our county] are targeting a totally different population, and do not provide transportation or lunch. I think a viable option with certain things in place including transportation and lunch is crucial." The school he sought to open would provide these services for students in an attempt to expand access to high-quality options for students and parents. Pastor Hilliard, who elected to convert his church's independent school into a charter school also expressed concerns that some charter schools were attempting to re-segregate public education. The independent Christian school he conceptualized was tuition-free, and provided students with two meals per day. As a charter school, World Visions continues to provide students with lunch and transportation, to ensure the most underserved students are able to attend.

In addition to concerns about the re-segregation of schools due to inequitable access to charter schools, participants also stated that their involvement in the charter movement was predicated by charter schools *creaming students*, or selectively recruiting, admitting, serving, and retaining students based on ability or class. In addition to participants being concerned that some charter schools excluded certain classes of students by not providing services such as lunch or transportation, participants also expressed concerns that charter schools failed to provide services for students with disabilities, or with behavioral issues. Pastor Mackins, of First Baptist Church in the southeast, maintained, "I'm a traditional public school person because you don't exclude

anybody. In a public school, by law, every child has a right to an education, regardless of disabilities, regardless of labels, regardless of social status.” Along these same lines, Dr. Smith from Ninth Street Baptist in the southeast asserted that his church’s involvement revolved around assisting families experiencing problems in charter schools, “such as dealing with special education, where many schools tell parents, ‘we can’t serve your child, so you have to go to some other school. Outright illegal activities.” Acknowledging this common criticism of charter schools, Pastor Matthews of Hunters Chapel explicitly stated that his charter school would not turn away students with disabilities.

***Disconnectedness from communities of color.*** With ten occurrences across four churches, *disconnectedness from communities of color* is another discourse from the literature that was employed by participants of this study. This discourse is broadly defined as a system wherein education reformers have no relationship with the communities in which they teach and open schools. *Harsh discipline* was a subtheme emerging from the data that was subsumed within *disconnectedness from communities of color*, because scholars have found that “white and middle-class individuals occupy most positions of power in educational settings, [as a result] decisions concerning behavioral expectations and infractions are set forth by a culturally-specific bloc” (Monroe, 2005, p. 47). Moreover, charter schools have been found to suspend Black students at a rate 10 percentage points higher than White students (Losen, Keith, Hodson, Martinez, 2016).

Pastor Stevens, from Middlebrooks Baptist in the southeast, opposed charters and was clear in his disdain for the charter movement’s disconnectedness to the community. Not only did he feel charter reformers did not know how to motivate Black students, but he was also

concerned that they did not know how to engage other community stakeholders, such as pastors. “Many [charter operators] may have been white. And they don’t know about Black culture. They can teach ABCD, but they don’t know how to motivate. They don’t know how to allow Black pastors to get involved the way they should.” As stated previously, Pastor Matthews from Hunters Chapel AME Zion in the northeast was also concerned about this disconnectedness, and reiterated that he used his platform to speak out against it and to ensure that his charter school was a grassroots, community-driven endeavor. “I think it’s largely a white movement that tells Black and Brown people what their kids ought to be learning and knowing.” Ms. Pembroke, a member of Hunters Chapel, spoke about how “the people starting schools and running schools don’t necessarily look like the people that attend them.” Participants from Ninth Street Baptist in the southeast also employed this discourse in describing why they elected to oppose the manner in which charter reform had been implemented in their state. Dr. Smith emphasized that while “a few charter schools [had] been respectful of the community [...] most of them are not and have not.” Mrs. Burns, a member of his church, spoke at length about how she felt this disconnectedness from the community impacted students.

I often find that there is a very deficit-based approach to how communities and parents are viewed. I just fundamentally don’t believe that schools want more for children than parents want. [...] Too much of what I’ve seen evolving in this landscape, would have kids divorce themselves from the very communities from which they come because there’s a deficit-based analysis that your community is broken. I just find that really problematic.

Overall, participants acting on both sides of the charter movement voiced concerns about

disconnectedness from the community, and it motivated them all to participate in the movement in certain ways, whether it was being committed to a “homegrown” charter school, or pushing back against charter reform that has not respected the values and capital present in the communities where charter schools are located.

***Privatization of education.*** The *privatization/corporatization* discourse had three occurrences across three separate churches in the data. Northeastern Pastor Joseph White, who supported the charter movement, cited this discourse as the primary reason he was initially opposed to charter schools. Ultimately, he came to a different realization regarding the privatization of education.

I had a problem with the privatization of public education as well as the commodification of our children in ways that could be problematic. But after going to [a charter school symposium for communities of color], I really discovered that our children are being commodified already. The education system in a public way is a financial complex that seems altruistic, but people are getting paid and making money off our children not being successful. So that critique faded away.

Other participants employed this discourse as a rationale for why they could not wholeheartedly support the charter movement, or why they could not support the movement at all. Ms. Anderson from Mt. Vernon Baptist in the southeast asserted that “charters could work, but because of the influence of outside money,” charter schools lacked accountability that was necessary to ensure high quality. Pastor Stevens, from Middlebrooks Baptist Church in the southeast, stated that the “number one” reason he didn’t support charter expansion legislation in his state was because “it would give those that have economical desires to make money off the

school system. It cannot happen this way.” For him, the possibility of entities profiting off of the public education system was enough to cause him to become involved in opposing the charter school movement.

***Choice as a civil right.*** The *choice as a civil right* discourse was not directly employed by any participants in this study. However, there were five occurrences across three churches- all by pastors acting in support of the charter school movement- of *education as a civil right*, always in the context of closing the achievement gap and taking the steps necessary to ensure that all children receive an equal and adequate education, in these cases, providing parents better educational options. Pastor Reeves of Rocky Mount Christian in the southeast, Pastor White of Williams CME in the northeast, and Pastor Matthews of Hunters Chapel, also in the northeast, all classified education as the preeminent civil rights issue of our time. Pastor White asserted that education was not only the civil rights issue, but also a moral one.

***Reclamation of Black education.*** *Reclamation of Black education*, a hypothesized discourse proposed at the beginning of this study, was only employed by one pastor, a colleague of Pastor Reeves from the southeast, who partnered with him to create a coalition of Black clergy in support of school choice. In an article in the local paper, he stated,

Blacks have been fighting for the right to decide their own destinies for a long time.

Integration was only social. It did not balance the power and economic aspects. This is an opportunity for Black folks to take back over their communities. They need to take over and educate their own children.

The majority of participants did not speak explicitly about wanting to reclaim a system or type of schooling that was lost in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* ruling. However, as was discussed

earlier in this section, a desire to assert greater agency and community control in the education of children was an extensively employed discourse, with the second greatest number of occurrences. Moreover, many of the pastors starting charter schools themselves led congregations that previously operated independent schools. This may be an indication that Black pastors are using charter schools as a way to regain or maintain control over education, however, further research should be done to investigate those questions.

### **Emerging Discourses**

Two discourses not discussed in the literature appear to emerge from this data, and more research is needed to determine how prevalent these these discourses are among Black church leaders and members. The first, *community revitalization*, had nine occurrences, and the second, *health of the church*, had two. I will describe what the data revealed about these discourses, and then offer a working definition, based on what the data show.

***Community revitalization.*** *Community revitalization* was cited by three churches- all of which opened charter schools- as part of their motivation for advocating for increased school choice. Several participants expressed the conviction that schools were the center of the community, and better schooling options would help revitalize neighborhoods that were in crisis. At a budget hearing in the state legislature, Pastor Matthews offered remarks, and asserted that high quality schools were critical to the health of communities. “Schools are anchors in our communities. When you have high performing schools where parents, teachers, and residents rally around and support it, the community is revitalized.” Further, he stated that the need for better educational options was a matter of “life and death,” after two young men from his congregation were killed as a result of gun violence. Church members cited high unemployment

and high crime as indicators that the neighborhood was in need of change.

Dr. Hilliard at Mt. Vernon in the southeast also discussed the state of the community surrounding his church as the main impetus for offering free, high quality education for children in the neighborhood. He described the 95-block neighborhood as under-resourced, with the lowest rates of homeownership, lowest incomes, and lowest achieving schools. He sought to target those students in an effort to improve the quality of life for members of the surrounding community. Anne Anderson, a member of Mt. Vernon who held some reservations about the charter school movement, was emphatic in her support for what the charter school was doing for the community. “I think [school and church administrators] are doing a really great service to that community. [The community] has been blighted for a long time.”

Faith leaders in both the northeast and southeast also expressed community building and revitalization as a driver in their charter movement involvement. Pastor Reeves, who attempted to write a charter application in the southeast, asserted that with a 50% drop out rate in his state, more students were going to jail and joining gangs than finishing school. In order to reverse these statistics, he maintained that students needed greater access to high quality schools. In the northeast, Pastor Barnes was a vocal community advocate who helped spearhead community initiatives such as affordable housing and home ownership programs for low-income residents and voter mobilization drives. He viewed his proposed charter school as a solution for troubled youth in his community, asking his congregation, “why wait until young men are going to prison? Let’s do something about it when they’re children, give them a sense of worth, leadership, and the desire to achieve something in life.” The school’s theme was cultivating leaders, and a key tenet was maintaining a connection to the community. Pastor Barnes and

school leaders felt that cultivating community leaders through their charter school was part of the path to revitalizing the community.

Based on evidence from the data, I propose an initial working definition of the *community revitalization* discourse as advancing a desire to use charter schools as a vehicle to improve indicators of community health such as income, homeownership, and crime levels.

***Health of the church.*** *Health of the church* was another discourse that appeared to be emerging from the data. Two faith leaders, both from the northeast and both acting in support of the charter movement, explained that they were compelled to take an active role in the movement partly due to the fact that the health and sustainability of the church depended on congregants receiving a high quality education. When Pastor Matthews was initially assigned to Hunters Chapel, membership was dwindling and the church edifice was in need of repair. He convened a team of members to begin charting a new course for Hunters Chapel, including financing a new building, when he realized how much the state of education in Connecticut impacted those plans. Pastor Matthews stated,

I was in the midst of working on plans of building a new church, but I understood that if my congregation did not have access to top quality jobs and a stellar education, there's no need for us building or planning anything because we won't be able to sustain it and grow.

Pastor White, of Williams CME, voiced similar motivations in advocating for better educational options. "By advocating for our schools to be better, the church directly benefits. We have better Scripture readers, better worship leaders. We have people who earn higher incomes so we get better tithes, the church is directly impacted by good education." Both participants acknowledged

that the level of education available to their members held serious consequences for the longevity of their churches. Hunters Chapel in the northeast boasted a long, rich history. Even with this extensive history, Pastor Matthews felt that the state of education held his church's future in a tenuous grasp. Similarly, Pastor White was confident that excellent educational opportunities were necessary for his congregants to spiritually and financially sustain the church.

Based on this data, I propose the discourse *health of the church* be defined as participants' acknowledgement that churches have financial, spiritual, and organizational needs that congregants must be able and equipped to fill. To that end, members and their families must have access to high quality educational opportunities- perhaps through charter schools and other forms of school choice- to ensure that they have the capacity to sustain the well-being of the church.

### **Discussion**

By and large, these findings affirm the school choice discourses commonly espoused by African Americans. Although two discourses were dominant across a large proportion of participants and others were only employed by one or two, evidence of each previously discovered discourse—with the exception of *choice as a civil right*—was found in the data. An interesting finding here is that some discourses were motivations for participants' involvement on either side of the charter debate. Here, I distinguish between participants acknowledging discourses in opposition to their own perspectives and participants employing particular discourses to explain their motivations for involvement. For example, pastors opposing the charter movement acknowledged frustrations with the traditional public school system, however, they asserted that charter schools would widen current achievement gaps and further divest funds

and resources from traditional public schools. For them, frustration with the traditional public school system was not a motivation for opposing the charter movement, it was the potential for charter schools to undermine the traditional public school system by draining resources. Conversely, two pastors trying to influence the charter school movement in opposing ways *both* expressed a desire for greater community control as their motivation for involvement within the charter school movement. It demonstrates that, at least in some cases, pastors have the same motivations for acting in what appear to be diametrically opposing ways. However, when we consider this information in conjunction with the nuance in participants' beliefs about the charter movement, it may be that there is a more just, equitable model of charter schools that would result in Black churches coalescing around a single goal. This is discussed in greater detail in the implications section.

There was only limited evidence from the data to support the hypothesis around reclamation of Black education. Only one pastor employed this discourse, referring explicitly to the negative effects of integration on schools and communities, and imploring that school choice be used to give control back to African Americans. One explanation for this is that faith leaders who have elected to sponsor charter schools may be reluctant to vocalize a desire to provide educational opportunities specifically for African American children. Another is that perhaps they are not articulating this discourse, but instead demonstrating it through their actions. An interesting pattern arising in the data is the group of churches that operated or considered operating private, independent schools electing to convert or reopen these schools as charters. While this is not explicitly invoking a discourse of reclamation, this pattern of behavior points to faith leaders' desire to use charter schools as a vehicle through which they can receive

government support while maintaining control over certain aspects of education such as curriculum, school culture, and faculty. While deciding to charter a school means that faith leaders must relinquish a degree of independence, for example, the ability to proselytize, it leaves them with enough authority and decision-making power to make it a popular route.

Some churches did appear to use their congregations' resources and influence to resist what they viewed as harmful effects or qualities of the charter school movement. For example, at least one pastor found the White-led nature of the charter movement problematic, and used his platform as a pastor at one of the largest, fastest-growing Black churches in his city to speak out against this. Moreover, his team committed themselves to providing the children of his neighborhood and city with a grass-roots, homegrown, community-based charter school option, instead of partnering with a large charter management organization. Conversely, two southeastern pastors opposed to the movement marshalled congregations and coalitions across the state to resist charter expansion legislation that they felt would further undermine public education. So while the reclamation discourse found limited use in the data, churches' resistance to aspects of the charter movement were quite apparent.

The emerging discourse *health of the church* should be further examined, but affirms current literature on the Black church that finds that they place a high emphasis on the importance of education for the wellbeing of the church (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). These findings appear to connect those motivations from the earliest Black churches involved in education to those involved in the contemporary education reform movement.

### **Implications**

These findings shed light on why Black churches have elected to become involved in the

charter movement, and they indicate that there may be more commonalities between churches acting on either side of the movement than differences. The debate surrounding charter schools is often highly polarized and in some places, vitriolic. However, the discourses espoused by the churches in this sample seem to point to the possibility for cohesive action among congregations that are currently working towards different solutions to improve public education. Middleton (2001) maintains that African American churches have yet to harness their power to speak with a unified voice on behalf of children of color. This study lays groundwork for identifying where commonalities in motivations exist among churches currently involved in the charter movement. While there were some participants who either staunchly agreed or staunchly disagreed with the charter movement, the majority of individuals in this sample held more moderate stances. Moreover, all participants agreed that the current public education system was not adequately serving all students. Many participants currently acting in opposition to the charter movement maintained that they agreed with several core tenets of the original charter idea, including site-based management, local accountability, community control, and parental involvement. Some participants at churches currently acting in support of the charter movement held reservations about the “White-led” nature of charter reform, harsh discipline policies of certain charter schools, and lack of accountability.

While operating a charter school may not be feasible or even desirable for all churches, these findings could be used to help faith and community leaders develop a charter school model that addresses concerns African Americans harbor about the movement. Moreover, the wealth of resources and varied life experiences of parishioners in the Black church put the church in a unique position to speak on behalf of parents and children in both charter and traditional public

schools. The Black church may even serve as a bridge or linkage between charter and traditional public schools, providing suggestions on how both types of schools can be improved, and best practices shared.

In addition to the possibility of identifying common ground and cultivating coalitions, these findings further current scholarship on why Black churches have become involved in the provision of education, and in particular, why they have become involved in the contemporary education reform movement. As the data show, the most commonly espoused motivations are frustration with the current state of education and a desire for greater community control. Given the history of education within the Black community, these findings are not surprising. As discussed earlier, in the wake of emancipation, African Americans started their own schools because they saw education as the vehicle to power (Williams, 2005). Further, Black churches were the most consistent source of financial support for independent schools, and Black pastors were instrumental in mobilizing their parishioners to advocate for equitable educational opportunities for their children (Bush, 2004; Whelchel, 2011). The evidence arising from this study indicates that Black churches and pastors are continuing the work of mobilizing congregations to advocate on behalf of children.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This work represents an introduction to the work of Black churches in the charter school movement; however, several limitations of the research design and available data constrain the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings. First, the sample was limited to nine churches in two regions of the country. Moreover, several churches were identified through snowball sampling, and shared common membership in various school choice organizations. This may

have resulted in a skewing of the data, in that they may have employed similar discourses because an umbrella organization they were involved with prioritized certain motivations or rationales for participation in the charter movement. In addition, a limited sample may not pick up the all of the discourses employed by Black churches. Future research should include a larger sample, and should include churches from other regions of the country to determine whether or not churches from different geographic regions employ the same discourses. Another limitation of the sample is that, with the exception of two churches, participant recruitment was largely limited to individuals intimately involved in their church's charter participation. Recruiting church members not involved in the church's charter participation may yield dissenting perspectives on the charter movement and their church's decision to get involved.

### **Conclusion**

The motivations behind Black church involvement in the charter movement are important to study because they help scholars, policymakers, and other stakeholders understand their priorities and potential to influence change in education. They also shed light on philosophies on the state of the education system, and the types of change Black church leaders and their congregations would like to see. The commonalities in philosophy indicate that Black churches acting in support of and in opposition to the charter movement have similar concerns about both public education and the charter movement. Further, these findings indicate that Black faith leaders and their congregations support several qualities of charter schools that they would like to see replicated in traditional public schools. This work forms a basis for future scholarship on Black church activism in contemporary education reform, and augments extant literature on the role the Black church has played in the provision of education.

### **CHAPTER 3: “HERE COME THE GRASSHOPPERS”: A CASE STUDY OF BLACK CLERGY, POLITICAL MOBILIZATION, AND RESISTANCE TO THE POTENTIAL EXPANSION OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT**

This study seeks to expand on prior research on political mobilization by Black churches involved in the charter movement by conducting a single, in-depth case study on a coalition of Black clergy in the South and documenting how this coalition mobilized political opposition to charter-related legislation. The findings from this case study will help scholars understand the processes through which Black churches mobilize congregations and communities around charter-related issues, and will add to the literature on the role of the Black church in political mobilization and in education reform. Moreover, it will create a blueprint for how these conditions can be replicated in other Black faith-based coalitions to maximize their influence in this rapidly growing reform movement.

In the sections that follow, I will describe the legislation against which this coalition mobilized, the coalition’s history, case study as a methodology and my justification for its use in this study, the proposed research questions, and the research design I will use to guide data collection and analysis.

#### **Background**

##### **Black Clergy Working for Change**

Founded in 1983, Black Clergy Working for Change (BCWC) was organized after a group of mothers whose children had been abducted and/or killed approached a group of African

American pastors for assistance (Wimberly, 2017). Between 1979 and 1981, more than two dozen African-American children and young adults were killed, and communities across the city were terrified with fear (Polk, 2010). Several mothers of abducted children heard that a group of Black pastors met weekly at Paschal's, a local restaurant, and decided to ask them for assistance with burials and bringing media attention to the issue. Paschal's has a storied history of its own, being founded by two African American brothers who were actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s (Paschal's Restaurant, 2017). The restaurant served as a central meeting place for civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the owners were involved in posting bond for arrested protesters, serving meals to arrested protesters and their families, and providing extended hours for arrested protesters and their families to reunite after their release from jail (Paschal's Restaurant, 2017). In the aftermath of Dr. King's death, civil rights groups persisted in their work, continuing to use Paschal's as a weekly meeting place. Several Black pastors took up the call to action when approached by the families of murdered children, being convinced that an organized coalition was necessary not only to address this present need, but also any future crises that may arise and necessitate organized, sustained advocacy efforts (Wimberly, 2017).

They elected to call their group Black Clergy Working for Change, and elected Reverend Corey Hayes as their first president (Wimberly, 2017). The leaders of the group adopted a mission statement which noted their desire to work on behalf of lower income residents of the city:

[BCWC] is the primary, proactive, and principle-centered organization comprised mostly of African-American ministers and laity. Our mission is to provide leadership, advocacy,

and service to the homeless, helpless, and hopeless in our community. (Wimberly, 2017, p. 13)

As the mission statement illustrates, group leaders turned their attention to working on behalf of Atlanta's homeless populations, because many congregations in the city already had homeless missions (T. McDonald, personal communication, December 21, 2016). Since that time, the organization has helped lower income communities advocate for issues such as affordable housing construction and the expansion of welfare benefits (Newman, 1994). In addition, the organization has "evolved into an organization that provides grassroots education on legislative policies that threaten the stability of working class neighborhoods" (Pollard, 2005, p. 17). Pollard (2005) asserts that BCWC has developed a powerful political mobilization strategy, "aggressively work[ing] to mobilize the black community for local, state, and national elections, often to considerable effect" (p. 18).

BCWC views itself as an "extension of the Black church" (Wimberly, 2017, p. 14), and since its inception, it has welcomed members of various faiths and racial backgrounds, including White Christians and Black Muslims. As of this writing, more than 125 religious organizations representing more than 100,000 members were included in the membership of BCWC.

In addition to welcoming members of various faiths and racial backgrounds, BCWC leadership welcomes and encourages participation by individuals who are not clergy.

The organization has a number of committees, each focusing on a separate issue of interest. These committees include Clergy Training, Economic Development, Education, Health, Juvenile Justice, Membership, Political Issues, Public Safety, Religious Affairs, Veteran's Affairs, and Voter Registration/Education/Mobilization. Committees are led by a chairperson or

persons, and give updates at the weekly Monday morning forum, which is also central to BCWC's longevity and influence (Wimberly, 2017). Key to BCWC's participation in advocating against the adoption of Amendment One was the Education Committee. The purpose of this committee is to:

Research and educate the clergy and constituents of matters directly impacting students. Members of this committee monitor the policies and practices of school board and school systems that are not conducive to a proper learning environment for students. This committee also makes recommendations for the necessary actions that will improve the learning opportunities for students. (Wimberly, 2017, p. 82)

The Education Committee created a subcommittee devoted exclusively to the defeat of Amendment One. It was co-chaired by three individuals with extensive education experience, and two of them agreed to participate in the study.

The Monday Morning Forum is integral to BCWC's central identity and illustrates the organization's commitment to participatory democracy, where every member is given a voice and a vote. At this weekly community event, members discuss issues relevant to underserved and underrepresented populations of Atlanta. Outside groups are invited to sign up for a speaking slot on the agenda, and to share information that they feel would be beneficial to these communities. Every meeting opens with a welcome from the president, an opening prayer, and introductions from each person in attendance. Committee chairs give their executive reports, and then community presenters are allowed time to speak and answer questions. Finally, attendees gather in a circle to share announcements about upcoming events, and to have a closing prayer.

Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux (1999) state that BCWC has a history of petitioning

the school board for changes on behalf of underserved students, and also worked to remove ineffective board leaders from office through voter mobilization efforts. However, Henig et al (1999) also call into question some BCWC leaders' decisions not to challenge obstructionist board members, and give an example of the "precarious position" in which some Black clergy found themselves, when an ineffective board member found strong support among African American, working class parents. In this instance, the board member was able to garner endorsements from several powerful Black ministers. Some scholars have asserted that a lack of opportunity to access political power in the Black community may cause Black ministers to hesitate to unseat Black politicians.

### **Amendment One**

Amendment One, or the Georgia Authorization of the State Government to Intervene in Failing Local Schools, was a ballot initiative to amend the Georgia state constitution and allow the creation of an Opportunity School District. The ballot initiative was required in order to implement Senate Bill 133, which was the legislative bill to implement the Opportunity School District. SB 133 was introduced by Senate floor leader Butch Miller (R- Gainesville) in February 2015, and had both Democratic and Republican co-sponsors (Georgia General Assembly Legislation, n.d.). Specifically, SB133 would:

Provide for the establishment of an Opportunity School District, and to authorize the Opportunity School District to assume the supervision of public elementary and secondary schools that are qualifying; to provide for a superintendent for the district; to provide criteria; to provide for rating of schools; to provide for intervention models; to provide for opportunity schools seeking state charter school status; to provide for

successful opportunity schools to exit state supervision; to provide for funding; to provide for applicability; to provide for support services and flexibility for schools on warning, schools on probation, and qualifying schools that are not selected; to repeal a provision relating to appropriate levels of intervention for failing schools; to provide for conforming amendments; to provide for related matters; to provide for contingent effectiveness; to provide for automatic repeal under certain conditions; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes. (G.A. General Assembly, SB133, 2015-2016)

SB133 was passed and signed by the governor on April 21, 2015, and set to go into effect on January 1, 2017. However, because the bill called for constitutional changes in how education was governed in the state of Georgia, it required majority approval from Georgia voters before being enacted. Senate Resolution 287 was the corresponding legislation proposing an amendment to the Georgia Constitution. The resolution calling for a vote to amend the state constitution was passed and signed by the governor on May 23, 2015.

Amendment One was modeled after similar legislation passed in Louisiana and Tennessee, and allowed the state to temporarily take control of “chronically failing” schools (“Opportunity School District Proposal,” 2016). Under this bill, schools earning an “F” rating for a minimum of three consecutive years would be eligible for entry into the Opportunity School District (“OSD Frequently Asked Questions,” 2016).

In Georgia, school ratings are based on the College and Career Ready Performance Index, which considers “student achievement, student growth, and reducing the gap between the lowest performing 25% of students in a school and the state average” (“OSD FAQs,” 2016, p. 2). As of May 18, 2016, 6% of the state’s schools were eligible for state intervention under SB133,

having earned an “F” for each of the previous three years. According to the bill, the state could select up to 20 additional schools to add to OSD, and the OSD could serve no more than 100 total schools in any given year (“OSD FAQs,” 2016). In addition to school scores, state officials would consider “geographic clusters of schools, feeder patterns with multiple eligible schools, current turnaround efforts, availability of qualified partners, and community engagement and support” when selecting schools (“OSD FAQs,” 2016, p. 2). Parent, community, school leadership, and local education agency leadership input would all be considered, but final selections would be at the discretion of the superintendent of the OSD (“OSD FAQs,” 2016). Schools would remain under the purview of the OSD for a minimum of five years, or, if the school is converted into a charter, for the term of the initial charter. OSD traditional public schools earning above an F for three consecutive years would be removed from the OSD, while OSD charter schools would “no longer be subject to the oversight of the OSD but [would] remain under the authority of the State Charter Schools Commission” (“OSD FAQs,” 2016, p. 3).

The newly created Opportunity School District in Georgia would rest under the oversight of a superintendent appointed by the governor (“OSD FAQs,” 2016). The OSD superintendent would be responsible for selecting schools, determining the appropriate reform model for each OSD school, hiring school leaders, convening governing boards, setting achievement goals for OSD schools, and holding school leaders accountable. Further, the OSD superintendent would report directly to the governor.

Schools selected for inclusion in OSD would undergo one of four reform models: direct management, shared governance, closure, or charter (“OSD FAQs,” 2016). Direct governance

mandates that the OSD superintendent would oversee the school, while the shared governance model would involve the OSD superintendent “enter[ing] into a contract with the LEA operating the school directing changes that must be made at the school” (“OSD FAQs,” 2016, p. 3). The closure model would result in closing under-enrolled, failing schools, and reassigning students to high achieving schools in the district, depending on capacity (“OSD FAQs,” 2016). To be recognized as a “highest performing” school in Georgia, schools must earn a College and Career Ready Performance Index single score minimum of at least 80 and a three-year average CCRPI Achievement Gap Score at or above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile, and a three-year average achievement score at or above the 93<sup>rd</sup> percentile (The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2015). Under the charter reform model, the OSD would collaborate with the State Charter School Commission to convert the school into a public charter school. The OSD superintendent would create a governing board for each OSD school selected for charter conversion, and would assist the board with developing a high quality charter application. The State Charter School Commission would “select education service providers including independent consultants, education management organizations, charter management organizations, and other support organizations” to support the operation of each OSD charter school (“OSD FAQs,” 2016, p. 9). Moreover, the Commission would establish a separate application cycle for OSD schools seeking charter status, and would provide regular reporting of OSD charter school achievement data to the OSD superintendent.

Supporters of the OSD initiative maintained that improving persistently failing schools was the state’s moral obligation, and that providing students with higher quality schools would “break the cycle of poverty, [...] interrupt the cycle of dysfunctional families, [...] and give

[students] a great beacon of hope” (“OSD FAQs,” 2016, p. 11). The coalition of support for the initiative included the governor, national school choice advocacy organizations, both the Georgia Chamber of Commerce and Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and educational advocacy groups such as StudentsFirst Georgia and 50CAN.

Opponents worried that the amendment was “an avenue to expand charter schools, [...] and to seize local control and tax dollars from districts” (Superville, 2016, n.p.). Moreover, they expressed concern that the wording of the ballot question was intentionally misleading to voters. The coalition of opposition to the initiative included teachers’ unions, the Georgia School Boards’ Association, the Georgia PTA, the state NAACP, and some conservative Republicans (Superville, 2016).

Amendment One was placed on the Georgia ballot in the November 2016 election, and the language of the proposed amendment read, “Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended to allow the state to intervene in chronically failing public schools in order to improve student performance?” Ultimately, the ballot initiative was defeated 59.91% to 40.09% in a November 8, 2016 election. Black voters were credited as a “major force” in the defeat of Amendment One, as they “voted overwhelmingly in 2012 to let the state, and not just school districts, create charter schools” (Tagami, 2016, n.p.). However, in the November 2016 election, almost 70% of Black voters voted against the OSD amendment (Tagami, 2016).

This study was designed to understand why the amendment was defeated and the role a coalition of Black clergy played in the vote’s outcome. Before it does so, it sets forth a framework that guides the study’s data collection and analysis.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Black Churches, Black Clergy, and Political Mobilization**

Forming coalitions is one tactic Harris (2005) describes Black activist clergy utilizing in pursuing political activism. These coalitions are “formed either with other Black churches, with churches of other racial makeups, or with community or political organizations” (p. xiii). By engaging the networks and resources available within and among their churches and surrounding communities, Black clergy capitalize on their collective ability to participate in urban politics and influence change for low income communities and communities of color. Calhoun-Brown (1996) asserts that resource mobilization literature has focused on “the network, money, facilities, and audience that institutions like churches can bring to bear on the political process” (p. 939). Harris (2005) emphasizes that coalition building by Black clergy can help overcome a lack of financial resources compared to the more powerful, well-funded entities that may also be attempting to leverage political power. This study is centered around one coalition of activist Black clergy and community members, and how they pursued political activism to oppose the potential expansion of charter schools in their state.

Scholars are mixed on the extent to which they believe the Black church has the potential or has even established a history of leading political mobilization for the African American community. Some assert that the Black church has traditionally been a nexus of political, social, and religious strength within the Black community (Calhoun-Brown, 1996), while others maintain that the church has held little influence compared to different organizations such as student-led initiatives and business-related coalitions (Reed, 1986). Childs (1980) delineates multiple perspectives on the political role of the Black church, including the activist church, the

pacificationist church, the politicized church turned pacificationist, the Black church recovering an activist momentum, and the Black church moving towards activism in urban environments. Moreover, he—and others, such as McDaniel (2008)—maintains that because variations among Black churches are so wide, all of these perspectives and assertions on the role of Black churches in political mobilization can be true. While scholars appear to disagree on the extent to which the Black church is the singular most important unit of political mobilization within the Black community, popular perception—as evidenced by political parties and candidates courting Black clergy and their congregations—remains that this institution is key to gaining support from a sizeable proportion from this demographic. The assumption that Black churches are a “principal focal point for political activity, both electoral and otherwise” is strengthened because of a lack of other viable institutions through which the African American community can assert influence (Calhoun-Brown, 1996, p. 936). Still, the role of Black churches in contemporary mobilization efforts has come increasingly into question (Reed, 1986).

There appears to be consensus that not all Black churches are highly involved in political mobilization. Research suggests that the minister, congregation, current political climate, and church itself all impact the extent to which clergy and their congregations engage in political mobilization (Calhoun-Brown, 1996; Harris, 2005; McDaniel, 2008). McDaniel (2008) maintains that “the process by which churches become politically active is quite dynamic, and heterogeneity exists both within and across churches. Not only does the number of churches that engage in politics vary, but so too does that level of political activity within a single church over time” (p. 5). He suggests that politically active churches must meet four conditions: the pastor must have an interest in involving the church in politics, the congregation must be receptive to a

politically active church; the church itself must be free to engage in political matters; the current political climate must necessitate and allow political action. Agreement among these factors must be negotiated, and because none of these factors are stable over time, McDaniel (2008) asserts that the level of political activism of churches remains in constant flux.

Harris (2005) agrees that not all Black churches are politically active, arguing instead that the majority of them are not. However, he claims that “an activist cadre of clergy and congregations mobilizing urban Black communities for social change has been constant from the antebellum period to Reconstruction and then on to the modern civil rights movement” (p. ix). (This assertion is similar to critics’ claims that the Black church has not been consistently engaged in activism, but has instead gone through periods of activism and relative latency.) This coalition of clergy and congregations have been “valuable political assets for both Black communities and urban political elites who rely strongly on the resources of activist clergy and churches in their pursuit of electoral goals and policy initiatives that affect Black communities” (p. ix). Harris (2005) describes the many focal points of Black clergy and community activism, including social and economic development and political empowerment. He asserts that activist Black clergy and congregations focusing on political empowerment “employ tactics that challenge local and state governments” on myriad issues, including public schools (p. xi).

### **Research Question**

Through an in-depth case study approach, this study will answer the following question: How did a coalition of Black clergy in Georgia mobilize politically to oppose the potential expansion of the charter school movement? Findings from this study will inform theory on how coalitions of Black clergy, congregations, and communities can work collaboratively to pursue

political mobilization in education reform.

### **Research Design and Methods**

**Case study method.** Given that this study will investigate how a coalition of Black clergy opposed legislation that would have allowed the expansion of charter schools, I will use an in-depth case study approach. Case study methods are often used when attempting to seek “deep, contextualized understandings” about a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, 19). Moreover, case study research investigates the case itself, but also the historical, physical, economic, and/or political contexts surrounding the case (Stake, 2005). In examining how this coalition became actively involved in the charter school movement, an in-depth look at all of these contexts will be necessary.

**Participants and recruitment.** The subject for this case study was the process through which a single organization, given the pseudonym “Black Clergy Working for Change,” pursued political mobilization in order to defeat legislation that would have allowed for the expansion of the charter school movement. The organization was first identified through research on Black clergy and their involvement in education reform. After reading about the education reform activities in which the organization was involved, the researcher conducted an Internet search to learn more about the organization and its history. After contacting the chair of the Education Committee, the researcher was allowed to recruit individual participants for the study.

As a result of recruitment efforts, a total of ten participants agreed to participate in the study. Three were members of the clergy, and seven were congregants and community advocates. Four participants were interviewed twice—three at their own request, and one at the researcher’s request--and six were interviewed once. With the exception of one participant, all

interviews were conducted via telephone. Below is a brief description of each participant in the study. All were given pseudonyms.

Reverend Timothy Mackins was a founding member and former president of the organization, and considered himself the catalyst for Black Clergy Working for Change (BCWC). A highly respected civil rights activist and community advocate, Reverend Mackins was revered for his community organizing skills, and served as a plaintiff in a joint action lawsuit against the sponsors of Amendment One on the grounds that the language was intentionally misleading to voters. He was interviewed once and delivered a sermon at the Opportunity School District Defeat Celebration Service that was recorded and transcribed for data collection.

Reverend Denise Dobbins was a Catholic priest. She was co-chair of the Education Committee and highly involved in mobilization efforts against Amendment One. She had decades of experience as a public school educator, and was a vocal opponent of charter schools. Reverend Dobbins was interviewed twice and shared a published history of the organization for the researcher's data collection efforts. The history was written by the organization's historian and published in 2017.

Mr. Tinsley Tompkins was a retired educator. He had a history of community activism and education reform advocacy, most recently advocating for culturally relevant pedagogy. He was a co-chair of the OSD subcommittee and highly involved in BCWC's work mobilizing opposition to Amendment One. He was interviewed twice for this study, and shared a detailed history of the committee's work in opposing Amendment One for the researcher's data collection.

Reverend Vernon Stevens was a member of the Education Committee and traveled the state mobilizing opposition to Amendment One. He was interviewed once.

Mrs. Annie Burns was a local business owner and had been involved with BCWC since its inception. She served on the board of directors for BCWC, and chaired the economic development committee. She was involved in efforts to defeat Amendment One, and she was interviewed once for this study.

Ms. Millicent McMillian was a community advocate and former school district employee who had been involved with BCWC for 18 years. She initially joined the organization after advocating at the state capitol for foster children, and being advised that BCWC would be a powerful ally for her and the children for whom she was advocating. She was interviewed once.

Mrs. April Lee Smith was a community advocate who joined BCWC five years ago. She was a member of a prominent local congregation and was involved with efforts to defeat Amendment One. She was interviewed once.

Mr. Jacob Paul was a local community advocate who was first exposed to BCWC by several of his clients who were founders of the organization. He joined BCWC six years ago, and while he was not a member of any particular committee, he saw his role as “filling in” wherever he saw a need. His primary method of activism was promoting the work of BCWC in the community. He was interviewed twice.

Mr. Thomas Stone was a community advocate who volunteered in a community-based charter school. He joined BCWC because he had a close family member who was involved in its founding. He supported some charter schools but opposed Amendment One. He was interviewed once.

**Data collection and analysis.** The first round of data collection included attending a weekly meeting held by the organization. During this meeting, I collected documents passed out to meeting participants—such as the meeting agenda, and announcements on upcoming events—and took freehand fieldnotes. Semi-structured participant interviews began after the meeting, with Education Committee co-chairs being the first individuals interviewed. A purposive sampling strategy was used for the identification of initial participants, as this yielded “information rich” cases with a depth of knowledge and insight about the phenomenon being studied (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Snowball sampling was employed to identify three additional participants with in-depth knowledge of how the organization came to oppose Amendment One (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The semi-structured interview format allowed participants the opportunity to speak freely about how the organization came to be involved in opposing Amendment One, and their role in that involvement. However, it also allowed the researcher to ask specific questions derived from the literature and previous research on Black church involvement in the charter school movement. A copy of the interview protocol is included in Appendix D. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

A second observation was conducted at the organization’s OSD Defeat Celebration Service. Again, relevant documents such as the meeting agenda, and upcoming legislative agenda, and a newspaper article—located via an internet search on “Amendment 1” and “defeat”—on how the Black vote helped defeat the amendment were collected for inclusion in data analysis, and freehand field notes were taken. The entire service was recorded, and relevant speaking portions were transcribed. Additional newspaper articles used in data analysis were

located using an internet search with the organization's name and "Amendment 1".

Interview and observation data were supplemented with document analysis, as this often helps the researcher develop a deeper understanding of the organization and phenomenon being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additional sources of data included meeting agendas, newspaper articles related to the organization's opposition to Amendment One, the organization's published history and mission statement, a history of the Education Committee's activities related to Amendment One, published articles and book chapters on BCWC, the text of Amendment One and related pieces of legislation (located on the website of the Georgia General Assembly), and a sermon delivered during the OSD Defeat Celebration worship service. In addition, videorecordings of political rallies in opposition to Amendment One were included in data collection and analysis efforts. To keep data organized, an Excel spreadsheet was created as a log, and the log served as an easily accessible way to identify which data had been gathered, the type of data, and the time and location of data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In addition, the researcher journaled on emerging themes, patterns, and ideas arising from data collection, additional participants that were identified, and modifications that were made to the research design (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). A document summary form was completed on each document collected, and documents themselves were scanned and uploaded into Dedoose for analysis.

Data analysis was an inductive process, as codes were generated and discovered from within the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In addition, the constant comparative method of data analysis calls for analysis to happen concurrently with data collection, as the findings are used to focus and refine both processes (Bluff, 2006). During the first round of data analysis, the

researcher utilized open coding and looked for emergent patterns, clusters, or groupings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As emergent codes on the processes by which the organization used political mobilization to defeat Amendment One were identified, thematic memos were written defining these key concepts.

Several participants reached out following their interview to share additional information. This provided an opportunity for the researcher to gather additional information about emerging ideas and themes arising from the first round of interviews (Stake, 2005). Once all the data had gone through an initial round of coding and all themes and patterns had been identified, the researcher conducted a second round of coding with the complete coding framework.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) emphasize that analyzing data for process is a complex task. They define process as “ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal” (p. 96). In data, process is often represented by “sequences of action/interaction/emotions changing in response to sets of circumstances, events, or situations” (p. 98). As the researcher moved from analyzing concrete events, situations, and individuals mentioned in the data to broader, more abstract theory about the process taking place, it was necessary to ask certain questions of the data, including how participants defined problems and handle them, the structural conditions leading to specific problems, what conditions connected sequences of events, and how the consequences of one interaction led into the next (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After the second round of coding was complete, the researcher wrote theoretical memos asking these questions of the data to build theory around the process of political mobilization in opposition to Amendment One.

## **Findings**

In this section, findings about the history of the Black Clergy Working for Change (BCWC) are outlined, along with their previous political mobilization and education reform efforts. Then, findings regarding the steps the group took to build political opposition to Amendment One are each described in detail.

### **History of BCWC**

The group of clergy worked with the mayor at the time, Maynard Jackson, to make sure the community was involved in solving the murders and assisting the families of the victims (T. McDonald, personal communication, December 21, 2016). The pastors put on searches, met with families, raised funds, and buried children. When the alleged culprit was eventually captured, the idea came to dissolve BCWC, but members agreed that the organization should remain in existence because there was no similar organization of Black pastors in the city.

Pastor Mackins, a former president of the organization, asserted that the strength of BCWC was this weekly gathering.

I think the strength of [BCWC] is the Monday morning forum that is open to all. You get business people, elected officials, institutions, banks, and utility companies. Whoever is trying to do something in the community and things there might be opposition from the faith community, they will come to BCWC. We had Trump representatives to come, and we've had [the Republican] governor's reps to come. We're a non-partisan organization, but we are prophetic and progressive. So when you come, you better have your stuff together because you will be challenged. If you come representing interests that are contrary to what we feel is biblical or moral, you will be dealt with forthrightly by

BCWC.

The organization has a long history with education reform. Reverend Mackins asserted that because of the organization's focus on homelessness, they began to address issues dealing with homeless students and the services being provided—or the lack thereof—by the school district. “I’ve probably gotten arrested and committed more civil disobedience acts in school board meetings than any other thing I’ve been involved in,” he maintained.

According to a former president, “[BCWC] celebrates lay participation because that’s the people, the power, the vote, and our strength. We make sure we lift up the concerns of our members, not just of the [clergy]. [Our] strength is [our] celebration of clergy and laity working together.”

However, the data here suggest that BCWC leaders see themselves as entirely altruistic.

Because [BCWC] is a faith institution, we seek to do the right thing, to have integrity, to be morally right. The key to it is there’s not a whole lot of self-interest in [BCWC]. It’s always about serving the people. Ain’t nobody trying to build no kingdom in [BCWC], not the president, none of the officers.

### **Steps in BCWC’s Political Mobilization Against Amendment One**

The data reveal that BCWC’s political mobilization strategy to defeat Amendment One included several deliberate, carefully planned steps, such as data mining, coalition building, resource employment, and celebration, debriefing, and re-engagement. Each aspect of the strategy took BCWC’s organizational strengths and challenges into consideration, and fully utilized their strengths to coalesce a powerful, statewide force to defeat the OSD initiative. Further, throughout each step the data reveal careful self-assessment and reflection on the part of OSD Defeat subcommittee members and the BCWC general body. Next each step is defined, and

the manner in which it was employed to assist in BCWC's political mobilization is described in detail.

**Data mining and problem identification.** The first step OSD subcommittee members took was conducting research on the merits of the OSD initiative and gathering data on the measure of success it found in other contexts. Committee members recognized that the African American community was split in their support of the measure because many of them supported charter schools, so they felt it was important that “everybody look at the impact” of the bill. OSD supporters touted success of similar legislation in states such as Louisiana, Tennessee, so Reverend Dobbins, who served as a “data miner” for BCWC, included these states in her analysis.

I'm one of the data collectors. I presented [to the organization] an intact study of what happens when charters are brought into a state. I looked at the entire state of Louisiana, Tennessee, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio, my own state, because they were doing charters long before anybody else, and they had been working to pull money out of the public school system because they wanted change. [...] and the schools fail. Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee, and Wisconsin spent [...] one billion dollars last year on schools that failed.

As a member of the OSD subcommittee, Reverend Dobbins and her team began to study the issues surrounding OSD more than a year before the November 2016 election. They were wary about the initiative because a school choice measure proposed in 2012 was “shoved through the legislature,” leaving many citizens feeling disempowered and disenfranchised. The team was determined to build a more effective oppositional response to the OSD initiative.

In addition to presenting evidence on charter effectiveness, Reverend Dobbins used her role as a data miner and fact finder to help the organization identify the root cause of problems they saw in public education. The consensus among participants was that the problem with traditional public schools was not that they were failing, but that they were under-resourced, staffed with inexperienced teachers, and burdened students and teachers with an oppressive accountability structure. Millicent McMillian, a retired bus driver and member of BCWC for 18 years, decried the differences in public school funding she observed during her employment with the local education agency. “[Traditional] public schools can work if you put the right schools in the school system and get the right funding. A school [on the Black side of town] doesn’t get the same treatment/equipment as a school on [the White side].” Tinsley Tompkins, co-chair of the OSD Defeat subcommittee concurred, asserting that poverty was a major issue in public education and that children would not be fully served by the district until government leaders turned a serious eye towards addressing poverty.

Another commonly cited criticism of the OSD initiative among BCWC members and coalition partners was that it stripped local control of schools from communities, and that it focused its efforts on schools in low income communities of color. At a rally on the capitol grounds organized by Mr. Tompkins, the president of one of the state teachers’ unions shared these concerns. “There will be no local control over OSD schools, and this bill will take the first 100 schools all from poor, African American communities. [...] The public needs to know that they will have no say so over these schools once they are taken—there’s no transparency.” Reverend Dobbins expressed similar concerns, but took them a step further in questioning whether the OSD was a deliberate attempt to wrest control of schools in inner-city

neighborhoods that were ripe for gentrification.

In every place I studied, it was really interesting. The chamber of commerce had a map on their website, and they had targeted areas for development. Those areas were where all the [targeted OSD] schools were. I thought, ‘well isn’t this interesting...that’s just gentrification.’ They’re gonna take over all those schools, gentrify the area, and push out all the poor Blacks.

Once anti-OSD subcommittee leaders completed the data mining process and presented their findings to the BCWC general body, members began working on the next step, employing their own resources—primarily social capital and talent—to mobilize their congregations and communities against Amendment One.

**Resource employment.** A key step in BCWC’s political mobilization against Amendment One was utilizing the resources of every single willing member of the organization, and recognizing that each member had a skill, talent, or network that could be used in the defeat of the OSD initiative. Ms. McMillian, a retired bus driver, explained how her background helped her spread information about Amendment One, even though some individuals—not necessarily within BCWC—may have been quick to disregard her potential as a political mobilizer because she did not appear to have the proper connections or social networks.

I was a bus driver for the school, and I had insight about schools, teachers, and parents. Bus drivers play a big part of the children’s lives, we see the parents, deal with the teachers, deal with the child. Lots of people take bus drivers for granted. They don’t understand we go to all different districts, all over the county, and that’s how we get information. And that’s how you can reach the community by the bus driver. [...] When

CBC gives information, I give it to the church and give it to the community. I don't go to one community; I go to all different ones. I go to the ones that people don't want to go to. While some may have dismissed Ms. McMillian because of her previous employment as a bus driver in favor for members with seemingly larger and more impactful networks, Ms. McMillian's background was welcomed to CBC, and her skills were put to work in defeating Amendment One. She and another participant, Mrs. April Lee Smith (the subcommittee chair of Parental Involvement and a BCWC liaison to the state Parent-Teacher Association) were asked to issue a position statement to oppose and commit to defeating the governor's OSD plan.

Mrs. Annie Burns was another member of BCWC who used her networks and personal resources to advocate for the defeat of Amendment One. Mrs. Burns had been a member of BCWC since its inception, and she and her husband owned a prominent local florist shop. In addition, her family had a longstanding history at her church and were among its founders. She held considerable influence among church leadership and spoke at length about presenting to seniors at her church and being invited into a meeting of senior denomination leaders to discuss the OSD initiative.

Specific to the amendment, I help make presentations in the community. One I gave in [a nearby county] with a state senator and local county commissioner, where I participated with them to present the pros and cons of Amendment One. Then I spoke to senior citizen groups at my church and in the general community to explain Amendment One and give them a way to remember how to vote on all the amendments that were on the ballot. So I became more of a resource for the minister in my church who came and asked me to explain to him what the amendment meant, so he could talk to the congregation. [...] I

was also invited into a meeting of the national convention, with bishops from several denominations. The meeting was called because of Amendment One and I was asked to come. We asked churches and communities to vote no, but the next step was how to take that vote and turn it into an economic engine for creating opportunities for students.

Economic development was Mrs. Burns' passion, and she used the influence she had cultivated over years as a business owner, lifelong church member, and community advocate to not only speak out against Amendment One, but to foster thinking about how the momentum gathered as a result of the anti-OSD political mobilization could be used to further economic opportunities for underserved students.

Finally, Mr. Tompkins was the host of a public broadcast radio and television station, and he used his talents to emcee political rallies on the state capitol, and to broadcast television interviews with stakeholders also advocating for the defeat of the OSD initiative. These are just a few examples of BCWC members from widely varied backgrounds all tapping into their personal networks and resources to help BCWC mobilize the community against the OSD. In addition to using personal network and resources, building coalitions was another key strategy BCWC employed as they mobilized in opposition to Amendment One.

**Coalition building.** Engaging a coalition of actors both within BCWC and across the state was critical to the defeat of Amendment One. Almost immediately upon deciding to mobilize the community against the OSD initiative, Education Committee members were working with other committees within BCWC such as the Political Issues and State Legislative committees to plan events and create a plan of action. Minutes from subcommittee meetings note that committee members encouraged the engagement of organizations across the state to defeat

the OSD legislation. BCWC members acknowledged that they were fighting powerful, wealthy, well-organized government and corporate interests, but asserted that as long as they worked together and stayed focused, they could ultimately defeat the bill.

Pastor Mackins, a former president of BCWC, acknowledged the powerful lobbies they were fighting against in a sermon entitled “Here Come the Grasshoppers.” In the sermon, BCWC was compared to grasshoppers charged with reclaiming a “promised land” that had been overrun with giants, or powerful corporate interests, state government, and wealthy supporters lobbying for the passage of the OSD amendment. In one particular portion of the sermon, Pastor Mackins described the qualities of the “giants” and then outlined the characteristics of the “grasshoppers” who were sent to defeat them.

The giant is always taking something apart. Always destroy[ing] something. They’re stepping on stuff, like they step on poor people, they step on agitators, they step on Black youth, they step on people who don’t have a voice. Brother [Nathan] Deal (the governor) thought he was a giant. He felt that if he could just get that bill on the ballot, that referendum, he could get the money, and then he could take over our schools and hand out money to his friends, patrons, and supporters. But he did not know there were some grasshoppers throughout the state of Georgia. Small little insects. They come in all colors, all shades. They have one agenda: To eat grass. They are very focused, very intentional. Giants are all over the place. [The grasshoppers] were outnumbered. Sometimes we think that just because there are more of them, they gone win. But God’s arithmetic is a little bit different than man’s arithmetic. Grasshoppers [leave] their egos at the door. Like the plague of locusts that God sent to Pharaoh’s kingdom. When they got

organized, they said ‘we got one agenda, and that’s to bring Pharaoh’s kingdom down. To eat everything in sight. It ain’t about my organization, my territory, my degrees, my money- it’s about bringing Pharaoh to his knees. That’s what I know about our defeat of OSD. We left it all outside and we came together. Organized grasshoppers.

By acknowledging that “grasshoppers” were less powerful but well-coordinated coalitions of opposition to the referendum, Pastor Mackins emphasized the necessity of working collaboratively, with partners of different races, denominations, and organizational structures in order to reach their collective goal of defeating OSD.

[Jesus has got] light grasshoppers, and white grasshoppers, and CME grasshoppers, and AME grasshoppers and Seventh Day Adventist grasshoppers. He’s got the NAACP grasshoppers, he’s got the National of Islam grasshoppers. [...] When they get together, what a time, what a time, what a time!

This sermon illustrated the importance of coalition building in the defeat of the OSD Amendment. BCWC started engaging external coalitions by tapping into networks present among members of the Anti-OSD subcommittee. For example, Mr. Tompkins was a lifelong member of the national teachers’ union, so he worked to coordinate two separate political rallies for teachers at the Georgia Capitol. The goal of the rally was to bring together the three separate teachers’ unions in the state of Georgia, along with community stakeholders such as the state NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Action Network, Moral Monday Georgia, Black Lives Matter, and People TV. In addition to community advocates and stakeholders, candidates for political office in opposition to OSD were also on the agenda at the rally and spoke at length about why the initiative would harm the public school system.

Not only did BCWC initiate coalition building, but they also participated in statewide coalitions in order to defeat OSD. Writing and publishing joint editorials, co-sponsoring forums and community meetings, and hosting cross-organizational panels on public television networks were all coalition building strategies employed by BCWC. Reverend Dobbins shared that BCWC was asked to join another coalition called Keep Georgia Schools Local (KGSL). KGSL was a coalition of more than 60 organizations, and was funded by “many organizations that could see what was coming” in terms of OSD legislation. Reverend Dobbins noted another anti-OSD coalition started by parents, attorneys, and lobbyists that was also powerful in attracting major funding and drawing statewide attention to advocacy efforts to defeat the bill. Joining these coalitions helped BCWC’s political mobilization strategy by providing funds for them to travel across the state.

I was gone two, three times a week to talk to people all across the city and state. We went all over. Because we were able to travel, we were able to convince people [all over the state] to say no. Out of 159 counties in Georgia, 152 voted [OSD] down.

Pastor Mackins also emphasized the economic support that came as a result of forming coalitions with external organizations, and the role that played in helping BCWC defeat Amendment One.

We got a lot of financial support from the [national teachers’ unions] and we worked the legislative and spiritual leg of it. That’s how we beat the governor with all of his money, expertise, and contacts. It’s not that often that the citizens get to beat the governor in a campaign, but when you bring those three elements together you have a better chance of being successful.

Mrs. Annie Burns, chair of the Economic Development committee of BCWC, also emphasized

the importance of BCWC engaging various coalitions in order to mobilize communities across the state in opposition to OSD. “We coalesced all of these different groups to come up with a common message, and then all of us went out like soldiers in the streets, in churches and communities, to make sure they understood the information that we were saying.” Similarly, Mr. Paul, who was not a member of any particular BCWC committee, stated,

The city has become so diversified and there are so many factions in the city, the key is getting them to work together. Like on the [OSD amendment]. There were members of BCWC and other organizations that traveled across the state to defeat that. It’s just impossible to single out an organization. The NAACP and a lot of organizations work together to make these things happen.

This hearkens back to an earlier statement made by Pastor Mackins that BCWC was not concerned with always initiating coalitions or receiving credit for the work they did bring different groups together. As long as the ultimate goal of defeating OSD was reached, organization members and leaders were satisfied that they had fulfilled their moral obligation.

**Celebration, debriefing, and re-engagement.** The final stage of political mobilization was bringing the community together for a celebration of the defeat of OSD, and to debrief within the group and across various coalitions exactly how successful they had been in reaching their goal. Three weeks after the defeat of Amendment One, Education Committee members met with other coalitions that joined them in the fight against OSD, and they began compiling a list of legislative priorities. The goal of the meeting was to maintain the momentum generated by the fight against Amendment One and to brainstorm ways to expand the lobbyist base. Each church and organization was asked to call and write key committee members in the state legislature

Education and Budget committees to discuss their concerns for the upcoming year. Group members suggested that press conferences be scheduled to unveil the organization's legislative agenda, and agreed to develop materials to handout at upcoming meetings with relevant information.

At the December weekly meeting of BCWC, members of the Education Committee were each presented with a certificate and small token of appreciation for the hard work they put into helping defeat Amendment One. In addition, the Education Committee chair read a list of each activity that members took part in to mobilize opposition to the bill. The following week, a celebration worship service was held in lieu of a weekly meeting, and members from various coalitions including the state teachers' union and a local advocacy group were all invited to attend. Several BCWC current and former leaders were in attendance, and Reverend Mackins delivered a powerful sermon on the work BCWC and their partner organizations put in to defeat the OSD. Each attendee at the worship service was given a handout with a recommended agenda for the upcoming legislative year, in an attempt to maintain the momentum that brought defeat to Amendment One.

Several speakers reiterated that the work of BCWC was not over simply because the referendum had been defeated. They predicted that the OSD would be reintroduced in the near future, perhaps with slight changes or tweaks to the initiative itself. Reverend Dobbins indicated that in the months following the celebration service, state legislators had, in fact, proposed legislation that was crafted in response to the defeat of Amendment One. "We have a problem because the governor brought [the OSD initiative] back in [a new bill] and we only have 40 legislative days to deal with the issues surrounding it. So, if we can't defeat the bill, we're trying

to minimize the impact.”

In addition to these steps, the data revealed constant self-assessment and evaluation on the part of BCWC members, to ensure that they were maximizing their impact in order to defeat the OSD. In at least two instances, meeting minutes of the Education Committee indicate that members expressed concern that BCWC could be more active in opposing Amendment One and sharing with the community how it would affect children of color. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, these members also suggested additional methods of engagement, such as attending clergy luncheons across the state, putting inserts in church bulletins, collaborating and organizing as a group, and issuing a position statement from BCWC itself speaking out against OSD on television and radio. A closer look at the data reveals that there were three separate instances where an Education Committee member challenged the group on whether or not it was maximizing the use of its resources, and providing suggestions for additional avenues for political mobilization. Each instance, this conversation was initiated by the same committee member, who was an extremely vocal advocate for low income communities of color at the weekly forum the researcher attended. Further research is necessary to determine if this is a quality indicative of BCWC as a whole, or if this is a personality characteristic of this one particular community advocate.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study expand upon previous research indicating that one type of involvement by Black churches active in the charter school movement is political mobilization (Allen, 2017), as well as the broader literature on political mobilization by Black clergy and the Black church (Reed, 1986; Calhoun-Brown, 1996; Childs, 1980; McDaniel, 2008; Savage,

2008).

Allen (2017) begins to explore Black church participation in the charter movement, and explicitly outlines political participation as one type of behavior. She cites Calhoun-Brown (1996) who describes political mobilization as “contacting public officials or agencies, signing petitions, attending protest meetings or demonstrations, picketing, boycotting, working for candidates, talking to people to influence their votes, attending rallies, speeches, or dinners in support of a candidate and making financial contributions and/or working for candidates, parties, or issues” (p. 929). The findings of this study indicate that political mobilization on the part of Black clergy coalitions engaging in the movement may be broader than Allen theorizes, as coalition building was a significant aspect of BCWC’s political mobilization to defeat Amendment One. Allen (2017) theorizes coalition building as standing separately from political mobilization, however, it is unclear exactly how and why she views this involvement separate from political mobilization. Moreover, scholars such as Harris (2005) explicitly categorize coalition building as a part of political mobilization. The findings from this study support Harris’ (2005) findings. It may be too early to determine if these findings negate Allen (2017), or if they simply illustrate that the four categories she suggests are fluid and overlapping.

The findings of this study also extend the literature on Black clergy, the Black church, and political mobilization by illustrating how a coalition of clergy, laity, and community advocates joined forces to defeat a piece of controversial legislation. As McDaniel (2008) asserts, a number of forces must align in order for Black churches to become politically active. If one or more aspect fails to align, chances are high that church will not become politically active, potentially leaving clergy or laity seeking an additional outlet through which to influence change.

For example, Mr. Tompkins expressed that his church leadership appeared disinterested in engaging in the OSD debate when he approached them about participation. As a longtime educator and reform advocate, he was dissatisfied with this response and surmised that the church leadership likely did not want to take a visible role criticizing the government. Reed (1986) and McDaniel (2008), among others, assert that not all churches will become activist churches, and that at various times throughout history, Black clergy were placed in precarious positions regarding whether and how to take public stances in political issues. BCWC gave Mr. Tompkins a platform through which to continue his educational advocacy work, and speak out on behalf of underserved children across the state of Georgia.

Reed (1986) criticizes scholars who assert that the Black church is the central unit of political mobilization, as he cites research that just over 50% of Black voters in Chicago belonged to a church, and only 25% regularly attended service. He questions how the other half of the African American community finds representation if the church is the primary leader or organizer of African American politics. This case study on a coalition of Black clergy, laity, and community leaders appears to begin to speak to his concern, as BCWC welcomes any and all interested individuals, whether or not they are affiliated with a church. Through BCWB, individuals in this category, such as Mr. Paul, gain access to awareness about political issues through the weekly forum, and are given a space in which to serve as political mobilizers in an organization with ties to several different powerful coalitions across the state. Moreover, when political candidates and parties attend the Monday morning forum, they are addressing a wide swath of individuals, who may or may not be affiliated with a church. This is just one strength of an organization such as BCWC, which has several aspects of the Black political church

experience, such as being led by Black ministers who are often highly active in political and community mobilization, while simultaneously welcoming participation from clergy, laity, and community advocates. The idea of a singular group identity—such as membership in a particular denomination—that may be more commonplace at a historically African American church, may be less common at BCWC.

Finally, this work begins to answer some of the criticisms leveled at Black churches for their lack of political mobilization and influence due to their largely independent, decentralized structures (Reed, 1986; Savage, 2008). One, this coalition of Black clergy, laity, and community advocates stretched across more than 125 congregations, bringing unity and a singular vision to fruition in Georgia. Two, the leaders of BCWC never felt led to defeat Amendment One as a singular, isolated entity. Savage (2008) cites Mays (1969) who asserts that Black churches do not have the financial wherewithal to assume the responsibility of meeting the social and economic needs of the Black community. Through this case study, we see a coalition of stakeholders who recognize and utilize their strengths, and engage external coalitions to shore up their weaknesses, one being financial resources.

### **Implications**

This study holds several implications for clergy, political mobilizers, community advocates, and scholars. One, it illustrates the steps taken by a coalition of Black clergy that was successful in helping to defeat charter-related legislation. This may be taken as a blueprint for future political mobilization efforts, especially in contexts where churches are spread out or only loosely connected. The forging of coalitions across congregations and other types of advocacy organizations can be highly valuable in mobilizing congregations and communities around a

particular issue. Two, it demonstrates the possible outcomes of clergy, laity, and community advocates working together even when the extant literature asserts that the Black church is largely impotent as it relates to political mobilization. This case illustrates that political mobilization on the part of Black churches is still possible, even when all of the essential aspects outlined by McDaniel (2008) are not present in a single church.

For policymakers, these findings appear to support the notion that considerable political power continues to rest with the Black church. To be sure, the success of the anti-OSD efforts were successful only because of joint efforts between a variety of organizations. However, throughout the study, participants emphasized that it was the Black vote that brought OSD's defeat. This is significant, because just years prior, African Americans in Georgia overwhelmingly voted in support of a legislative initiative supporting charter schools.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The conclusions that could be drawn from this study were limited by research design and timeline. One, more accurate assessments of the strategies employed by participants could have been taken, had interviews and observations been conducted for the entire length of the political mobilization activity, as opposed to after the activity was largely completed. In addition, regular attendance at BCWC weekly forums and Education Committee meetings would have likely helped the researcher build greater rapport and gain access to a larger number of participants. Future research should also include interviews with organizations partnered with BCWC, to gain greater insight on their motivations for engaging in partnerships with a coalition of Black clergy, laity, and community advocates.

Finally, future empirical research should be conducted with voters themselves, to

determine what drove their voting decision, and how impactful was any messaging they received either directly or indirectly from Black church-related organizations such as BCWC.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, this study examines the political mobilization strategies employed by a coalition of Black clergy, laity, and community advocates in defeating legislation that provided for the expansion of charter schools. Key strategies identified included data mining and problem identification, resource employment, coalition building, and celebration, debriefing, and re-engagement.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL- ARTICLE 1 AND ARTICLE 2

#### Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your role at your church?
2. Can you speak briefly about the governance structure of your church (or denomination, if applicable)?
3. How do you see the role of the church in the lives of its members? In the community more broadly? Examples?
4. How do you think others see the church?
5. How do you think your church can best serve children?
6. What educational activities/ministries has the church provided?
7. What was your role in providing these services?
8. What are your personal convictions about charter schools and school choice? Has this always been your stance?
9. How exactly has your church been involved in the charter school movement?
  - a. Who initiated this involvement?
10. How does your perspective on charter schools align with the involvement your church has had in the charter movement? How does it differ?
11. What motivated the church (or you) to become involved in the charter school movement?
12. What has been your particular role in the church's charter involvement?
13. Why do you think this is important?
14. How has your church's involvement shifted or changed over the past five years? 10 years?
15. Are there other individuals at the church who were/are closely involved with your church's charter school involvement?
16. Did you work with any other churches in this endeavor?
17. Can you talk about any legal implications of the church's involvement? I.e., are there laws in your state that dictated how the church could and could not be involved in the charter movement? How did you navigate those restrictions?
18. Can you talk about how you mobilized your congregation to support your involvement in the movement?
19. Have any conflicts arisen (either personally, or within the congregation) related to your decision to have the church involved in the charter school movement?
20. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your church's involvement in the charter school movement?
21. Are there any other churches or pastors involved with charter schools- either for or against- that you think might be open to speaking with me about how and why they've chosen to participate in the charter school movement?

**APPENDIX B. EXISTING SCHOOL CHOICE DISCOURSES**

| <b>Support for Charter Schools</b>  | <b>Opposition to Charter Schools</b>   |
|---|--|
| <p>Frustration with Public Schools<br/> <i>-uncaring teachers, high turnover, students not challenged, overcrowded classrooms</i></p>   | <p>Increased Segregation<br/> <i>-not all students have equal access, most underserved students left behind</i></p>                                    |
| <p>Desire for Community Control<br/> <i>-parents desire greater control over curriculum, staff, how funds are spent</i></p>   | <p>Undermines Public Education<br/> <i>-drains resources from public schools</i></p>   |
| <p>Choice as a Civil Right<br/> <i>-the ability to choose where children are educated is a right, not a privilege</i><br/> <i>-all children deserve a high quality education</i></p>                                    | <p>Privatization/Corporatization<br/> <i>-public funds going to private entities</i></p>   |
| <p>-Reclamation of Black Education<br/> <i>-attempting to <u>regain</u> control of Black education; importance of agency. May speak of earlier decades when AAs had greater voice in how children were educated</i></p> | <p>Disconnectedness from Communities of Color<br/> <i>-Ed reformers have no relationship with the communities in which they teach/open schools</i></p> |
|   | <p>Other</p>   |

**APPENDIX C. CHURCH PROFILE/ANALYTIC MEMO TEMPLATE**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Church Name/Pseudonym</b>                         |  |
| <b>Denomination</b>                                  |  |
| <b>City, State</b>                                   |  |
| <b>Year of Founding</b>                              |  |
| <b>Size of Congregation</b>                          |  |
| <b>General Educational Activities</b>                |  |
| <b>Type of Charter Movement Involvement</b>          |  |
| <b>Year of Earliest Charter Movement Involvement</b> |  |
| <b>Participants Interviewed</b>                      |  |

#### **APPENDIX D. ARTICLE 3 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Can you tell me about your role with CBC?
  - a. How long have you been a member? On which committees do you serve?
2. Can you tell me about your role at your church? In your community?
3. What do you see as the role of the church in the lives of its members? In the community at large?
  - a. Does your church sponsor any education-related ministries, or services for children?
  - b. What is your role in providing these services?
4. What do you see as the role of CBC (in general)? Specifically in ed reform?
5. Can you talk to me about why CBC was started?
6. Can you talk about CBC's reputation in the community?
  - a. If ~prominent, then ask: How did CBC gain such prominence in the Atlanta area and the state at large?
  - b. If ~not prominent, then ask: Why or how do you think CBC came to have this reputation?
7. How do you think CBC can best serve children?
8. Can you talk to me about your own feelings towards Amendment 1?
9. Can you share with me your thoughts on charter schools in general? Has this always been your stance?
10. Can you tell me how you participated in the efforts to defeat Amendment 1? Why did you think it was necessary to become involved?
  - a. Did you share this information with your church?
  - b. Did your church sponsor any activities to defeat the amendment?
11. Why do you think it was necessary for CBC to get involved in the campaign against Amendment 1?
12. Any conflict in CBC from members who supported Amendment 1?
13. What role do you think CBC played in the defeat of Amendment 1?
14. There has been a lot of conversation in CBC about "what's next" now that Amendment 1 has been defeated. Where do you see their education reform activism going from here?

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