PUBLIC OPTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF PARENTAL CHOICE
AT ONE CHARTER SCHOOL IN CLEVELAND, OHIO

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Abstract
Charter schools in Ohio were created to provide an alternative educational opportunity to many urban students seeking a better education. In recent years, students from suburban schools have also been leaving their districts to attend charter schools. If we were to better understand the experiences of families who have made this choice, then we might be better able to support students and families in both contexts. Therefore the purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to understand the motivating factors of suburban parents that have made the choice to send their children to urban charter schools. The theoretical framework for this study is parent engagement. Using an IPA approach, this study sought to delve into the lived experiences of parents who opted out of a traditional, successful suburban public school district for a specific inner city charter school, Sunrise Academy, a pseudonym. The overarching research question was “Why do some suburban parents opt out of their neighborhood public schools for charter schools?” The findings from this study indicate that parents are looking at more than the convenience of a neighborhood public school. Parents seek to be part of the learning team that includes the student and teacher. They are looking for a sense of school safety in the learning environment. Parents’ perceptions of suburban public schools reflect a concern that the public school teachers are not able to provide the same kind of unique one-to-one attention as teachers in a charter school. This study has implications for inner-ring suburban districts that are losing students to charter schools.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

An increase in public school options including vouchers, charter schools, open enrollment, and online learning has helped to shape a new form of public education delivery in America to the extent that many public schools no longer look or operate as they did just a few decades ago (Ramey, 2013). According to the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, the fastest growing alternative to the traditional public school is the charter school (Miron & Applegate, 2009). These publicly funded, privately operated schools were first created in 1991 in Minnesota to provide tuition-free options for families seeking alternatives to local failing schools (Bloomberg, Nathan, & Berman, 2009). Other states soon followed Minnesota, with charter schools springing up across the country. By the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, over two million students were attending publicly funded charter schools in the United States (Armario, 2011).

Charter schools are most often found in urban communities, though each state regulates where they may locate. In Ohio, charter schools were originally limited to eight large urban areas of the state, though now are permitted in any district deemed “challenged” by the Ohio Department of Education. Charter schools operate free of many of the constraints of traditional public schools, offering flexibility in curriculum design, extended school days, and different methods of governance. This freedom is exchanged for increased accountability to local and state school authorities.

The topic of study. Echoing national trends, many of those leaving their home district in Ohio are choosing charter schools, a growing metamorphosis of public education. In fact, 15% of all Ohio students aged 6-16 do not attend traditional public schools (Baker,
While much is known about the reasons parents flee failing schools via school choice (Convertino, 2011; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007; Lozier, Rotherham & Bellwether, 2011; Rabovsky, 2011), little is known about why parents in successful districts also choose charter schools. A successful school, as defined in this study, meets or exceeds the Ohio state standards in the areas of academic achievement as measured by standardized tests, graduation, and attendance rates. Charter schools are drawing students from a larger geographic area than the immediate neighborhood around the schools, and from public school districts that look very similar on paper to the charter schools (Deuink, 2007). The data suggest that parents are seeking options in educational programs beyond the traditional public school. This raises the question of why some suburban parents opt out of their neighborhood public schools in favor of charter schools.

**Research problem.** The purpose of this study is to learn more about parents’ motivations in choosing nontraditional schools over their successful local public school districts. The number of students attending charter schools currently represents 4% of the entire student population across the nation — up 80% since 2009 (CREDO, 2013). Understanding *why* is especially critical for schools and districts that are at the tipping point, where full enrollment is vital to a healthy school community. Since charter schools typically have no funding stream of their own, they are paid for instead by a deduction from public schools budgets. The Richmond Heights school district in suburban Cleveland, Ohio recently eliminated four teaching positions, in part due to an exodus in students from the public schools to charter schools (Cass, 2014). Still, the issue is not just about money. More and more, suburban parents are also engaging in school choice options, indicating that the
traditional one-size-fits-all neighborhood school may no longer be viable. Learning why parents choose charter schools may inform decisions about effective schools of choice.

**Justification for the research problem.** Recent studies on the topic of parental motivation in selection of a school setting suggest that choice takes on many forms (Hanushek et al.; Rabovsky, 2011; Convertino, 2011). Parents seek out charter schools for many and various reasons, both academic and social-emotional. Hanushek et al. (2007) concluded that the efficacy of charter schools is difficult to gauge due to the lack of long-term data analysis. It is important to note that this study was conducted in 2006, and current research may reveal different findings, but the scope and depth of the present study adds to its current relevance.

A more recent study of student mobility in Ohio revealed a significant amount of “churn” in enrollment throughout the school year (Smith, 2012). This 2012 study conducted by the Fordham Foundation examined student mobility rates using data provided by the Education Management Information System (EMIS) database over a two-year period. The analysis revealed two noteworthy findings: First, student mobility was evident in both rural and urban communities. And second, it was also present in suburban schools and online schools. An in-depth analysis of the six largest urban areas of the state of Ohio showed more mobility compared to other areas of the state. For example, during one three-year period, schools in Cleveland, Ohio lost nearly half of each building’s students and also accepted new students throughout the year (2012). Many of those moving from one school to another are choosing charter schools.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** Although there is considerable evidence of widespread churn in the public school system in Ohio, more investigation is needed to understand why suburban parents are making the decision to transfer their children from the neighborhood
public school—even when their schools are academically successful. This study will focus on parents at Sunrise Academy, a pseudonym, which is a charter high school located in Cleveland, Ohio. Sunrise draws about 20% of its students from Cleveland suburbs. Learning more about why parents select Sunrise Academy will help add to the charter school debate, filling in some of the gaps in understanding the reasons behind the phenomenon of parents opting out of suburban public schools in favor of urban charter schools.

**Relating the discussion to audiences.** This study is likely to serve three audiences: charter school administrators, traditional public school administrators, and parents. Understanding why families prefer to bypass suburban public school systems in favor of other options may help to develop and better align public education options with twenty-first century needs. This proposed study has implications for both practice and policy. It expands the school choice dialogue to include those who have experienced genuine choice in the selection of a school, rather than having to settle for a school of last resort. Conducting this study at Sunrise Academy in Cleveland, Ohio will also likely reveal new information about parents’ perspectives on the school’s current programs and may inform future programming. At the very least, this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding how and why parents choose a school for their child.

**Significance of Research Problem**

It is important to learn why suburban parents select charter schools because these *schools of choice*—alternatives to traditional public schools—are growing in number and enrollment (CREDO, 2013) and are supported by public tax dollars. This information can influence changes in practices and models in communities struggling with declining
enrollment. This study seeks to address only the topic of charter schools in the evolutionary scope of the school choice debate, though options in education have always existed in the form of private or parochial schools, or relocation.

On one side, Erickson (2011) argues that school choice is really a misnomer, claiming that charter schools still primarily serve students from poor, urban areas. She refers to this phenomenon as the “suburban veto,” arguing that they are not relevant to the suburban communities because they are not welcome there (p. 44). Yet the data depicts that the growth in charter school enrollment pulls from much larger areas, including suburban communities (Deuink, 2007). Little is really known about why this is happening. It may be true that there is not a need for charter schools in the suburbs; still, students are flowing to these urban charter schools from suburbs.

The difficulty in delivering outstanding public education is not unique to Cleveland. This research is relevant because it confirms the complex and shifting nature of public schools and school choice, while also acknowledging the disparity among the options. It is important to understand that this is a relatively new issue, as charter school options were not available in Ohio until 1999.

**Positionality Statement**

I worked as a teacher and administrator at a successful public charter high school in Cleveland, Ohio for seven years, beginning in 2008. I have been both amazed and inspired by the students’ achievements because I know many face adversity at home. The student body is composed of 500 students; 80% are African American, 10% are of Hispanic backgrounds, and 10% are White. Eighty percent of the students come from low-income households. Every
day I saw students struggling to raise ACT and SAT scores. Students living in our affluent suburban school districts are provided with more, and better, resources than those in poor districts, including the one in which I worked. I wonder where public education went so far astray from the mark held by education visionaries who worked to create a system to prepare all students to become productive members of society.

When I first I began teaching I asked a question one day in class and one student who rarely participated raised his hand and gave the answer I wanted. “Perfect” I barked. Immediately, he sat up straight, knuckle bumped the kids around him and smiled from ear to ear. That was the first time I realized how much power I had as a classroom teacher. As quickly as I puffed him up I realized that I could also just as quickly destroy him.

Over the past few years, progressively more of the students attending the charter school in which I worked came from the suburbs. Most of these students live in inner ring suburbs of Cleveland, areas hit hard by a downturn in Cleveland’s economy and subsequent failure of the passage of school levies. Yet, interestingly, the school also draws students from successful nearby suburban districts. I question the reasons so many families choose this school when, at least on paper, their home schools are rated nearly identically.

As parents of four children and a strong supporters of public schools, my husband and I moved our family to the exurbs of Cleveland in hopes of finding the best fit for each of the unique learning styles and special needs of our own four children. For our family, school choice meant moving away from our urban neighborhood and putting our children in a suburban public school system. While we only moved 10 miles away, it was a completely different world, and our family missed being able to walk to the library, grocery store, and school. I felt disconnected from the community, but moving was our only choice. It was the
best option available in the early 1990s. I later watched with sadness as my son’s previous school shut down due to decreased district enrollment.

I came into the education profession through the back door, earning my license via the Ohio Department of Education’s alternative path following eight years coaching Speech and Debate at my own children’s school, located in an affluent community in suburban Cleveland, Ohio. While coaching part-time and working full time as Executive Director of a non-profit community organization, I found myself more and more looking forward to the time I spent teaching and coaching. I also became keenly aware of the lack of participation by inner city students in forensics in Cleveland. I was hired by a charter high school in Cleveland and with support from my administration, and many hardworking teenagers, I built a strong debate team to compete head-to-head with students from all over the state.

Any bias I may hold with regard to this particular research topic rests in my own frustration with the unequal access to excellent public education. Innovation and creativity in teaching methods is sometimes outweighed by the bureaucratic demands of the long entrenched remnants of past, and often failed, efforts. The current public dialogue about education includes common core standards and preparing youth for global citizenship, yet the provincial attitude toward educational excellence still relies on zip codes.

Central Research Question

This study seeks to delve into the experiences of parents who opted out of a successful traditional suburban public school district for a specific inner city charter school. The overarching research question is, “Why do some suburban parents opt out of their neighborhood public schools in favor of charter schools?”
Theoretical Framework – Parental Engagement

School choice has changed the face of public education, especially with regard to the growing attraction by parents to charter schools. Anfara and Mertz (2006) posit that the theoretical framework provides the building blocks upon which others may better understand the problem. Educators and historians may disagree about the birthdate of school choice, but most agree that the landmark court case, Brown v. Board of Education (1954), which declared school segregation unconstitutional, also created a discussion of public education unlike anything before (Mondale and Patton, 2001).

Smith and Meier (1995) discussed the theory of school choice, noting that a uniform description of what school choice really means may not exist. They wrote that the study of choice is best understood by identifying what is happening in the educational realm of reality, meaning that parents’ choices are limited by the actual available options. Their arguments generally support the parent engagement theories offered by early choice proponent Milton Friedman (1912–2006). These say that, ultimately, schools will react to market pressure. School choice is the rising tide that will “lift all boats” because the money follows the students and the schools will either improve to meet parents’ expectations and demands, or will be shut down. Detractors such as Gerald Bracey, as quoted in Smith and Meier (1995), argued that instead of promoting an improved market-driven system, choice will result in more racial and religious segregation as parents choose options other than the traditional public school. Smith and Meier (1995) argued that a Milwaukee experiment, which studied the voucher program for low-income students to attend private schools, became mired in a choice by definition and a choice in reality due to the limited options available for inner city parents. They discerned that, often, political concerns seem to overshadow any projected
educational outcomes, claiming that the issue of school choice is hampered by political infighting.

How Parents Make Educational Decisions for their Children

Smith and Meier (1995) discussed reasons why parents choose to send their children to private, rather than public, schools. Arguing against the theory that school choice will improve the quality of public schools by exposing them to market pressures, they concluded that parents’ desire for religious instruction and flight from minority students, rather than quality of education, best explain why parents chose private over public schools. They reached this conclusion by running a statistical analysis of income and private school enrollment in the 1073 largest U.S. cities and 473 largest school districts. However, newer data suggest that parents are not necessarily running away from, but rather heading toward, the best education for their children.

Parents who choose to enroll their children in charter schools are making a similar choice as parents who enroll their students in private schools, but at a lower cost. When Smith and Meier (1995) completed their research, charter schools were not nearly as common as they are now; parents with limited money chose Catholic parochial schools instead of charter schools. Charter schools are tuition free, unlike private schools or parochial schools. This suggests that one reason parents may choose charter schools over non-failing traditional public schools is that they believe that charter schools are making better use of tax money than their “home” traditional public schools.

School choice legislation and policies do not guarantee that all parents will have equal access to better schools. This tension results from the uneven methods used to implement
choice options in charter schools. Calsamiglia, Haeringer, and Klijn (2010) investigated how public school choice systems force parents to choose between the best schools for their children and schools they think their children have the best chance of securing a seat to attend. This is a clear snapshot of part of the problem with charter school enrollment practices. Again, it is important to note that each state has its own policy on charter schools. In Ohio, for example, parents can enroll their children directly in any nontraditional public school, space permitting.

Other parents choose specific schools based upon intangible aspects. Antrop-González (2006) interviewed students and teachers at a small nontraditional public high school in Chicago to explore why students chose to attend that particular high school. Among the key reasons students gave for their choice was high-quality, interpersonal relationships between students and teachers. Parents, however, want a rigorous curriculum for their children. Schneider, Marschall, Teske, and Roch (1998) surveyed parents to test the hypothesis that disadvantaged parents would choose less academically rigorous schools for their children than more advantaged parents. Yet, the surveys showed exactly the opposite: black parents, and less-educated white parents, also preferred academic rigor and discipline when choosing a school. The surveys also found that parents valued diversity in schools for their children, but did not care if their children were in the racial majority.

**School choice evolution.** Following World War II, public education in America became increasingly professionalized and bureaucratized (Reese, 2005). Standardized testing, including IQ tests, provided tools to segregate and group students based on the results of these early high-stakes testing methods. The emergence of the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s saw heightened attention to equal access in education. The Cold War era
and Americans’ fears of losing the space race helped to drive reforms in curriculum and began to shape education to address new challenges (Reese, 2005). The 1960s saw a rise of the middle class, who moved to the suburbs, creating their own homogenous public school districts under local control (Mondale & Patton, 2001).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a report detailing an American public school system falling behind its foreign counterparts in math, science, and technology. This set the stage for significant changes in teaching and learning strategies, as new options became widely available under new school choice policies (Sweetland, 2002). These public school choice options included the establishment of school vouchers, magnet schools, charter schools, and eventually online schools. These nontraditional public schools are often tailored to specific student populations such as gifted and talented students, students at risk of dropping out, and those who are interested in curriculum-specific classes in the arts or sciences.

Nobel laureate and American economist Milton Friedman argued that all schools should become privatized to promote healthy competition and school choice (Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2013). Friedman maintained staunch support for government issued school vouchers, a form of parental choice offering parents a small government subsidy for use at nonpublic schools. He argued that vouchers provided better options for many, though even Friedman observed that families of lower socioeconomic status were the least able to access meaningful choice options that would lead to upward mobility (Erickson, 2011). Others (Sutton & King, 2011; Gryphon, 2003) analyzed the history of publicly funded vouchers in the United States with regard to the legal issues supporting and limiting voucher programs. An important aspect of the legal underpinnings was the
requirement that government funds must benefit *families* rather than schools. In theory, this supports the emphasis on serving students by funding nontraditional public schools. Still, the controversial issue of school vouchers did not advance educational reform and may have contributed to the significant churn in student enrollment, as there are more students requesting vouchers than there are vouchers available (Pallas, 2010).

**School Choice and Charter Schools.** Plans for education reform produced over the past two decades in the United States have included the creation of public charter schools, first introduced in the state of Minnesota in 1992. In 1999, charter schools appeared on the Cleveland, Ohio landscape in an attempt to offer parents more options for their children’s public education. At first, charter schools were met with strong resistance. Many closed after a few fledgling years while others survived with varying degrees of success. Those families who could afford to move fled to suburbs seeking better schools. Those left behind included the poorest, neediest families. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), by the end of 2009, 35 percent of Cleveland residents lived below the poverty line.

Charter schools continued to grow rapidly in Cleveland and other cities across the United States. Turnamian (2011) argued that this expansion has not proven healthy for true educational reform, concluding that this rapid growth served to create more bureaucracy, not less, and strayed from the original intent of charter school legislation. Abdulkadiroğlu, Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, and Pathak (2011); Carlson, Lavery, and Witte (2012); Furgeson, Gill, Haimson, Killewald, McCullough, and Nichols-Barrer (2012); and Dillon (2010) identified specific gains among charter schools related to the management and culture of the schools. Upon closer examination, there appears to be some agreement in the field of study
that charter school gains correlated to specific practices that are not used in traditional public schools. These included strict discipline, time on task, and extended day programs.

**Synthesis of theoretical framework.** This chapter has provided an introduction to the changing face of public education and the evolution of charter schools. This particular research problem and analysis, viewed through the lens of parent engagement, is ripe for a qualitative investigation that will add information to the school choice discussion.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

In addition to addressing the academic literature about the effectiveness of charter schools, it is important to discuss parents’ perceptions of both charter schools and public schools in general, because perception may also influence school placement regardless of actual measures of outcomes. To understand how and why late 20th century school reformers developed charter schools, this literature review will explore the factors leading to their creation. This chapter will examine the role of teachers in charter schools and will discuss findings from other researchers about how charter school teachers may be different from traditional public school teachers. Also included in this chapter is a review of recent studies outlining the efficacy of charter schools compared to traditional public schools. The many ways that parents select a school are presented through pertinent literature. Lastly, this chapter will delve into what has already been learned about the evolution of charter schools and the industries created to support them.

This study seeks to address only the topic of charter schools in the evolutionary scope of the school choice debate, though options in education have existed in the form of private or parochial schools, or relocation. Charter schools are worthy of further study because they are supported by public tax dollars. They were created as independently operated public schools so there is no charge to parents. Funding comes from state tax dollars just as it does for traditional public schools. In addition to adhering to all of the same state and local rules and regulations, and meeting the same academic requirements as traditional public schools, charter schools have additional accountability to the school’s sponsors or authorizers.
Compulsory Education. Horace Mann, best known as the founder of American public schools, worked to build the country’s first statewide school system. He envisioned public education as a tool to perpetuate democratic ideals, funded by tax dollars (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Mann’s vision of education was aimed at creating uniformity among the schools within the state, while he also tried to achieve equality in education and opportunities for deserving students to rise to higher academic levels (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Mann was driven by the desire to find a workable solution to address the needs of the huge influx of new immigrants who represented a multitude of languages and ethnic backgrounds.

Philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859 –1952) is often identified as the father of progressive education because of his unique work to educate the child as a whole. He influenced the growth and development of public schools (Dewey, 2001). Dewey supported student-centered learning, though not at the expense of teacher effectiveness. Dewey sought to unify the goals and objectives of all stakeholders, especially teachers and administrators (Dewey, 2001). Dewey supported access to public education. For Dewey, this meant developing an educational curriculum that shifted away from traditional rote methods of teaching and learning (Dewey, 2001). Dewey and his followers prioritized academic study along with physical activity and enrichment activities (Lagemann, 1996).

The massive influx of immigrants to America in the mid- to late-nineteenth century introduced issues of ethnicity, class, and religion into America’s classrooms (Mondale & Patton, 2001). The tension between the freedom to teach and the constraints imposed by new administrative directives—including mandated testing, curriculum changes, and teacher evaluations based upon testing—led to increased bureaucracy (Reese, 2005).
Educational reform via charter schools. Current educational reforms, including charter school options, are frequently identified as beginning with *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The report, developed by the National Commission on Excellence in Education during the Reagan administration, pointed to a crisis of national proportion in public education in the United States. This report paved the way for the development of new standards of learning to make amends for the failure of public schools to prepare students to enter a competitive workforce. Under these standards, mastery was measured by students’ ability to score highly on state-mandated tests.

The shift to high-stakes testing in the United States has contributed to the measurement of successful educational outcomes based upon a narrow interpretation of academic test scores. As Lewis (1988) reflected on Reagan-era federal education policy initiatives, he commented that their lack of flexibility was hurting the effectiveness of public schools. The programs were not designed to best meet students’ needs. Federal programs that prescribe educational approaches in detail deny schools this flexibility. As a case in point, Chicago mayor Richard Daley publicly called for withdrawal from the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) funding allocation precisely because of this approach (Cavanagh, 2010). Charter schools are not excused from requirements to participate in state mandated testing and reporting, thus limiting the very innovation charter schools were created to achieve.

Teachers. Teachers at charter schools are typically nonunion and are paid less than traditional public school teachers, in part due to funding inequities in school budget formulas. Renzulli, Macpherson Parrott, and Beattie (2011) studied teacher satisfaction and teacher turnover in both traditional public schools and charter schools. They found that teachers in charter schools are more satisfied than those in traditional public schools because of
increased autonomy; however, they also found that charter schools have more teacher turnover than traditional public schools. This study also found that white teachers in predominantly nonwhite charter schools were more satisfied than white teachers in predominantly nonwhite traditional public schools. They concluded that charter schools provide an environment that promotes greater teacher satisfaction, but noted that teacher retention rates in charter schools ought to be improved.

**The Efficacy of Charter Schools as Instruments of School Reform**

The answer to the question of whether charter schools are as effective as traditional public schools depends upon whom is asked. Recent studies on charter school effectiveness (Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011; Ben-Porath, 2012; Davis & Raymond, 2012) reached different conclusions. The questions are nuanced so that while similar in intent, the methods and findings are quite dissimilar. This can be explained by the inconsistencies in policies guiding charter schools. For example, Loeb, Valant, and Kasman (2011) presented findings of a study showing only moderate gains in student achievement under school choice program options. Loeb et al. (2011) pointed to specific gains by some students attending charter schools, as evidenced by quantitative studies, but the researchers acknowledged lack of information on the long-term effectiveness of the schools. Ben-Porath (2012) disagreed. Following a study of voucher programs and charter schools as a means of school reform, she concluded that charter schools increase equal opportunity by allowing disadvantaged parents to choose better schools for their children, but charter schools also advance the free-market economic approach to improving education for all students by forcing traditional public schools to compete with charters for students.
Davis and Raymond (2012) used two different kinds of statistical methods to measure the impact of charter schools on student performance across 14 states. The first method, called Fixed Effects, compared each student’s performance in a traditional public school to the same student’s performance after he or she switched to a charter school. The second method, called Virtual Control Record, compared charter school students to traditional public school students with similar backgrounds. Davis and Raymond (2012) found that charter school students performed significantly better than public school students in reading when judged by the Virtual Control Record method. They also found more variation in charter school student performance than in traditional public school student performance. This suggests that there is a wider range of academic success among charter schools. Davis and Raymond (2012) acknowledged this conclusion as well, and determined that stricter policies are needed to reduce the number of low performing charter schools.

Peterson (2009) focused on the state of Arizona, which has welcomed charter schools throughout the state. They found that charter schools in Arizona significantly improved their students’ reading performance after two years compared to traditional public schools. Peterson also studied charter schools in Ohio, Florida, and Texas, and found that they performed better than traditional public schools under a sophisticated “value-added” measure of student progress. The value-added scores reflect a growth model that measures student achievement over a specific length of time to measure the learning growth throughout the year, and year-to-year growth in each individual student. Rather than relying solely on measurement of success through high-stakes testing, the value-added method informs the interpretation of the scores by providing benchmarks for stages of growth in learning.
Like others (Talbert & Goode, 2011; Abdulkadiroğlu et al. 2011), Peterson (2009) identified extended school days, Saturday academies, strong parental involvement, and well-defined curricula as charter school practices leading to better student achievement. He concluded that charter schools offer far greater promise than traditional public schools in overcoming student academic performance deficits. Peterson also noted that those charter schools that outperformed traditional public schools are not necessarily housed in state-of-the-art school buildings. “The type or condition of the school building, or where it is located, is not one of the characteristics of an outstanding school” (p. 383). He pointed to one highly successful charter school, located in the South Bronx, New York, that is built from a modular structure, surrounded by a barbed wire fence and located directly across the street from a homeless shelter (p. 383).

Zubrzycki (2012) reported findings from studies conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, the National Charter School Research Project, and the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) that pointed to mixed results among schools located in a sixteen-state region in 2009. This study revealed that only 17 percent of the schools evaluated performed better than the traditional public schools in their communities; but the study found that two subgroups did show significant progress: English language learners and low income students scored higher than students with similar demographics in local public schools (Zubrzycki, 2012, p. 59).

Not everyone finds charter schools viable. Peter Turnamian, currently an elementary school principal in New Jersey, founded and served 10 years as school director for the Greater Newark Charter School. Turnamian (2011) wrote of his change of thought over the decade spent directing a charter school. Originally a strong proponent of charter schools, Turnamian
described a failure of their sponsors and authorizers to close failing charter schools. Turnamian wrote that unbridled growth of charter schools hinders these schools’ original intent.

Beginning in 2009, Turnamian wrote, the federal government intervened in charter school expansion. This was spearheaded by the national initiative of the RTTT. Funds were made available to states, to pass along to both traditional school districts and charter schools that adopted the Common Core standards and agreed to promote Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education.

Turnamian (2011) claimed that even without evidence to support their claims of academic success, charter schools continued to grow unchecked. Turnamian stated, “Politicians are quick to help open new charter schools and create high levels of optimism (often in depressed communities), but they are reluctant to shut down these same charter schools when they clearly underperform” (p. 9). It is important to note that Turnamian’s experience was limited to one charter school, which he both founded and led.

**Race and Socioeconomic Status as School Choice Factors.** In studies that focused on race, the findings were varied. Welch, Combs, Sigelman, and Bledsoe (1997) analyzed a 1992 survey of Black and White Detroit-area residents. The authors found that race alone did not significantly impact residents’ opinions on how to improve their own public school district; Place of residence was far more important. City residents, regardless of their race, wanted more security, while suburban residents, regardless of their race, preferred more and better teachers to increased security. On the list for both groups were more discipline, a better school building, better teachers, more security, and more after-school programs. However,
the neighborhoods where the Whites lived tended to have better performing schools than the neighborhoods where Black families lived.

Race was also found to be a contributing factor in a study by Fowler-Finn (1993). Parents who chose to move their children from one public Massachusetts school district to another nearby under “school choice” cited school location, extra-curricular activities, and racial composition of the schools, rather than the quality of education in their home district. This supports the argument that parents are looking for something in a charter school not offered to families in their home districts.

Charter schools were identified as a promising alternative, particularly for African American students, in instances when the charter schools took full advantage of the greater flexibility than traditional public schools have to provide enhancements such as a longer school day, extended school year, and professional development for teachers (Talbert & Goode, 2011). Hill and Lake (2010) reflected on objections to charter schools raised by advocates for traditional public schools. Early critics argued that charter schools would hurt traditional public schools by attracting mainly wealthy, non-minority students, thereby leaving traditional public schools with an even higher percentage of low-income, minority students to educate. Hill and Lake (2010) noted a number of published studies to support their argument that charter schools in fact provide a superior educational alternative to their predominantly low-income and minority student body.

One of the difficulties in gauging charter schools and charter management organizations (CMO) is that each state determines its own regulations for charter operations. The same holds true for school funding matters. In an examination of charter school funding policies, Lozier, Rotherham, and Bellwether (2011) studied the effect of states’ charter school
funding policies and average school operating costs on the financial viability of a high-performing California charter school network. This study found that high-performing charter school networks needed significant charitable donations to maintain the quality of their operations in California. This was also true for other states examined in this study including Ohio. They found that public funding alone remains inadequate to fully support high-performing charter schools in the District of Columbia, New York, Massachusetts, and several other states. They concluded that high-performing charter schools have difficulty supporting their operations on public funding alone. Additionally, the study states, “While many policymakers see charter schools as one way to advance reform in their states, it is clear that some jurisdictions do a better job than others of creating the right conditions for charters and CMOs” (p. 9). This analysis does not take into account the funding inequities between urban high schools and their suburban counterparts, as all public schools are competing for an insufficient pool of funds.

Researchers Lamdin and Mintrom (1997) agreed, suggesting that the issue of whether people should have a choice is debated more than the results of choice. They posit that the value of each type of choice can be measured based on student outcomes, parental satisfaction, and cost of educating each student. They further argued that the results are precisely what should be analyzed.

Scholars disagree about whether or not charter schools are as innovative as they claim. Mathew Welch’s (2011) analysis and findings stem from a review of the Eight-Year Study (EYS), a program created by the Progressive Education Association (PEA) in the 1930s and early 1940s to spark creativity in teaching methods and strategies (p. 55). The EYS was
designed to improve college access for high school graduates through a relaxation of rules for college entrance examinations.

This is critical in understanding the role of charter schools as reform tools. Welch (2011) surmised that the reform efforts of the past would prominently influence the current discussions of education reform with regard to charter schools. He concluded that, among schools that voluntarily participated in the eight-year study and failed, the main reason for failure was that the school leaders did not take full advantage of the possibilities because they, as institutions, did not have the wherewithal to succeed. Welch pointed to the Aiken Commission (1930 - 1942), a project of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), led by Wilford Aiken. The purpose of this commission was to gauge the effects of innovative curriculum design changes at thirty high schools. Welch argued that schools that were successful “took stock of local community wants and needs, and they involved their whole staffs in collaborative discussions around the school models” (p. 62).

Using an institutional theory framework, Welch studied the concept of isomorphism, meaning that organizations tend to behave like other organizations with similar goals. Welch (2011) concluded that while charter schools do offer an option, they do not provide the kind of creative innovation necessary to affect education reform. Welch focused on charter legitimacy and described charter schools as a tool created to provide alternatives to failing public school districts. Welch wrote, “Many districts attempt to fix failing schools by converting them to charters in the hope that autonomy will spur improvement” (p. 55). He argued that, while charter schools operate with more flexibility and fewer constraints than traditional public schools, they are not immune to the politics and bureaucracy surrounding debate on school choice. He states, “Innovation can be an evolution, not necessarily a revolution” (p. 63). This
may well be true, but it still doesn’t answer the question of why parents are flocking to charter schools, not just away from poorly performing traditional schools.

**Authorizers and management structures: A cottage industry.** The charter school movement spawned the development and expansion of charter school authorizers, who sponsor the school and monitor compliance with state standards. These charter management organizations (CMOs) are structured as either non-profit or for-profit. They provide a wide range of services from staffing to curriculum. The literature is mixed regarding the role of these organizations in promoting meaningful educational reform through their relationship to charter school outcomes. Furgeson, et al. (2012) studied a variety of practices used by charter school management organizations across the United States. They found that charter schools with comprehensive behavior policies improved their students’ academic performance more than charter schools without comprehensive behavior policies. They also discovered that intensive coaching of new teachers correlated with improved performance by students. These researchers also found that charter schools recruiting new teachers from *Teach for America* and the similar *Teaching Fellows* program improved their students’ performance in mathematics.

Furgeson et al. (2012) studied CMOs and independent charter schools in four school districts, including three of the largest 20 school districts in the United States (p. 127). Charter schools affiliated with a CMO comprised about 17% of all charter schools in 2009 compared with 6% in 2000 (p. XXI). They found that charter schools that emphasized performance-based compensation along with intensive teacher coaching improved their students’ performance, while charter schools operating like traditional public schools did not. Using survey results from principals and teachers, they concluded that charter schools
improved their students’ academic performance by using comprehensive behavior policies, intensive teacher coaching, performance-based compensation, and recruitment of new teachers from *Teach for America* and the *Teaching Fellows* program. Furgeson et al. (2012) concluded that charter schools affiliated with CMOs were more effective than independent charter schools.

Other studies of structure and governance (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2012; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Dillon, 2010) uncovered slightly different answers to questions about the roles and responsibilities of school management organizations. Carlson, Lavery, and Witte (2012) studied the relationship between charter school authorizers and student achievement in Minnesota, which allows only local school boards, postsecondary institutions, nonprofit organizations, and the Minnesota Department of Education to act as charter school authorizers (p. 566). They found no significant difference in average student achievement based on the type of organization authorizing their charter schools. Further analysis revealed that nonprofit organizations tended to authorize both high- and low-performing charter schools, while school districts did not prove as successful as authorizers of charter schools. This study called for further investigation into charter school sponsors and authorizers with regard to student achievement. This research is important because it highlights the huge variation in structures and organization during the current metamorphosis that is taking place in public education. Carlson et al. agreed with Davis and Raymond (2012) that more safeguards are needed to ensure that nonprofit organizations authorize charter schools carefully and provide support to schools they authorize.

Abdulkadiroğlu et al. (2011); Carlson et al. (2012); Furgeson, et al. (2012); and Dillon (2010) identified specific gains among charter schools related to management and school
Upon closer examination, there appears to be some agreement that charter school gains correlate to specific practices that are not always used in traditional public schools. These researchers also identified the same practices: strict discipline, time on task, and extended day.

**School Reform in Cleveland.** Efforts to launch meaningful reform in Cleveland, Ohio have been blocked by many factors, including resistance from teachers’ unions, political infighting, and lack of new funding (Smith, 2012). The issue is complicated by Ohio’s method of funding public education. Property tax levies that are used to pay for public schools were declared unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court three times over the past two decades, yet the state has not yet determined another workable solution (Sweetland, 2014). According to Smith (2012), past educational reform plans in Cleveland have not proven as fruitful as anticipated. This includes passage of a state law in 1998 dissolving the elected school board and placing the mayor in charge of public education.

A national study of charter school funding (Batdorff, Maloney, May, Doyle, & Hassel, 2010) revealed that Ohio charter schools were receiving on average 21.4% less funding than traditional public schools. Despite this funding inequity, some public charter schools are able to thrive. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) issues an annual report card for each school, based on standardized test results and other factors including attendance and graduation rates. These tests, first administered in tenth grade, are a summative evaluation of student learning in five subject areas: math, reading, writing, citizenship, and science.

In Ohio, authorizers of high performing charter schools are allowed to open additional schools (Dillon, 2010). In Connecticut, where the state authorizes all charter schools, high performing charter schools are allowed to expand their enrollment. Dillon concluded that,
while both states may face potential problems with implementation of their cap exceptions in the future, both states have used their cap exemptions to increase opportunities for students to attend high performing charter schools. Dillon concluded that limited exemptions from state charter school caps, tied closely to student performance, should continue, and he points to Ohio as a model of accountability and balance. He noted that Ohio already has strict caps in place that are structured so that accountability measures are well established, including value-added performance scoring in state evaluations (p. 85). Dillon noted that Ohio’s strategy encouraged smart growth of successful charter schools.

In 1999, charter schools appeared on the Cleveland landscape in an attempt to offer parents more options for their children’s public education. Met with strong resistance, many closed after a few fledgling years while others survived to varying degrees of success. Alongside the development of these schools, many families who could afford to move fled to suburbs in search of better schools. Those that remained included the poorest and most needy families. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), by the end of 2009, 35 percent of Cleveland residents lived below the poverty line.

**Synthesis of Literature**

Welch (2011) and Zubrzycki (2012) concluded that the gains made by some charter school students are significant, especially for low-income and minority students. Renzulli, Macpherson, and Beattie (2011), and Lozier, Rotherham, and Bellwether (2011) disagree, stating that charter schools are only relevant in very limited situations. Both groups concurred that important knowledge gaps exist in the study of the effectiveness of charter schools. Those studies funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Booker, Sass, Gill, &
Zimmer, 2011; Furgeson, et al., 2012) and the study analysis of data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (Peterson, 2009) reveal strong support for charter schools as instruments of school reform based upon the results of standardized test scores.

For two decades, charter school expansion has increased in Cleveland and other cities and states across the United States. Turnamian (2011) wrote that the unbridled growth of charter schools hinders the intent of these schools, arguing that this expansion has not proven healthy for true educational reform. He concluded that this rapid growth serves to create more bureaucracy, not less, and strays from the original intent of charter school legislation. It is important to note that Turnamian’s experience was limited to one charter school, which he both founded and led.

Conclusion

Loeb, Valant, and Kasman (2011) presented findings of a recent study showing only moderate gains in student achievement under school choice program options. Citing a lack of qualitative research on the issue, these researchers did not dismiss the discussion of school choice entirely, however, and they encourage more study of long-term gains achieved by students. Loeb et al. (2011) pointed to specific gains by some students attending charter schools as evidenced by quantitative studies, but acknowledged lack of information on their long-term effectiveness.

One common thread in the literature reviewed here is a call for additional robust study, particularly of the unheard voices of parents as active participants in the school choice movement. Without additional rigorous examination of school choice from the perspective of
parents, the efficacy of charter schools to create meaningful and concrete transformative educational policies may become a missed opportunity.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

Charter schools are the fastest growing alternative to traditional public schools (Miron and Applegate, 2009). By the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, over two million students were attending publicly funded charter schools in the United States (Armario, 2011). Charter schools are growing in number in Ohio. However, little is known about why parents in successful suburban districts also choose charter schools. This raises the question, “Why do some suburban parents opt out of their neighborhood public schools in favor of charter schools?”

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to learn more about parents’ motivations in choosing a specific charter school, Sunrise Academy (a pseudonym), a charter high school in Cleveland, Ohio, with 500 pupils. This school continues to draw students from successful suburban school districts.

Research Design

Van deVen (2007) wrote that, in the case where the extant information is inconclusive, a qualitative study would likely generate inductive conclusions. I created a qualitative research project to explore the complicated issue of school choice and the rationale behind parents’ selection of a particular school outside of the traditional suburban public school system. This topic is uniquely suited to this qualitative method of investigation because the findings were discovered from the rich, descriptive details provided by the parents.
participating in the study. A close examination of the reasons parents living in successful school districts choose charter schools may lead to meaningful educational change by providing a better understanding of what parents seek in public education for their children.

Ponterotto (2005) noted a paradigm shift in contemporary research toward a wider use of qualitative research methods. As discussed in chapter two, quantitative educational research is abundant and provided valuable data on enrollment patterns and trends. The quantitative data is not irrelevant, but it does not help answer the question of why. Far less is known about the parents’ motivations in the decision-making process. This particular topic is especially suited to use of qualitative inquiry as a means of learning more about how parents engage in school choice. Merriam (2009) noted that highly structured interviews do not afford a true participant perspective, but they simply “get reactions to the investigator’s preconceived notions of the world” (p. 74). Drawing on the parents’ shared experiences, these findings resulted from an analysis of in-depth, face-to-face interviews which allowed me, as the researcher, to learn more about the factors that contributed to their selection of Sunrise Academy.

For this particular study, I used many open-ended questions, letting the participants describe their journey to find the best educational program for their children. This study addressed both how and why parents choose charter schools over their successful home districts. The goal of the research was to delve into the thought processes of parents to gain a deeper understanding about how choices are made, using a semi-structured interview technique proposed by Merriam (2009). “In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions” (p. 90). Each interview was conducted in three phases: the introductory meeting, the interview,
and the follow up. This investigative process allowed for the inclusion of the unique voices of each participant.

**Research Tradition**

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study involved a method of investigation described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) as one strategy to gain an understanding of a particular shared experience. The roots of phenomenology can be traced back to philosophers Immanuel Kant and Fiedrich Hegel. Modern phenomenology is widely accepted as a creation of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938), who developed the idea of experience as the necessary component to understanding (Groenewald, 2004). IPA research builds on past qualitative approaches to a problem but extends the research method to include the researcher as an important component in interpreting the messages of the study participants as well as understanding how they themselves perceived the phenomenon (Smith, 2010).

**Participants**

Participants selected for this study were suburban parents living in successful home school districts who chose to send their high school children to Sunrise Academy, a charter high school located in Cleveland, Ohio. Parents invited to participate in this study were recruited from the pool of 52 current suburban students living in home districts with similar state report card data, reporting state benchmarks in student achievement, including attendance, graduation rates, and other factors. Participants were invited to join the study by letter, signed by me (Attachment A). The district superintendent issued a letter to the
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) stating that I would be conducting research interviews with parents of students attending or graduated from the academy. Creswell (2007) describes this type of selection as an example of purposeful sampling, in which participants are included because they can inform “an understanding of the research problem” (p. 125). Of the 500 students currently attending Sunrise Academy, 80% live in the city of Cleveland. Eighty percent of the students come from economically disadvantaged households based upon enrollment guidelines for the free and reduced lunch program. Approximately 80% of the students are African American, 10% are Hispanic, and 10% are white.

**Recruitment and Access**

As a member of the Sunrise Academy administration, I provided detailed information to both parents and the school board regarding the interview protocol, timelines, and assurance of confidentiality in all responses (Attachment B). This was completed through anonymous coding of results and removing identifying markers from the test. I interviewed a total of five parents. This supports Creswell’s (2007) claim that “qualitative research is not only to study a few individuals but also to collect extensive data” (p. 126).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Merriam (2009) describes the use of interviews in qualitative research as a means of rooting out relevant information when observations are not possible. In order to harvest rich descriptions from parents, they needed to trust me and to believe that any information revealed would be kept strictly confidential. The needs of the researcher must never take
precedence over potential negative effects of study participation. In this study, the rights of anonymity and privacy for participants outweigh the researcher’s need to know. The name of each of the specific suburbs as well as the names of the participants has been replaced with pseudonyms in an effort to maintain confidentiality. These pseudonyms were selected by me and based upon some syllabic similarities to the actual names of the participants or city. For example, a short male name such as Joe, Jim, Bob, etc. became Jeff. Likewise, the women interviewed were given similar pseudonyms; a Mary, Amy, or Kathy was changed to Terry or Jackie. This helped me visualize them as I reviewed the audio files and the transcribed interviews.

**Data Collection**

Seidman (2006) suggested that education research has not included the perspectives of the consumer, in this case suburban parents of students attending an inner city charter school. Seidman advocated for a series of three interviews as a way of presenting new ideas into the discussion of the problem, believing that they may offer “a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues” (p. 14). This study documented those parental voices, using the three-stage interview process discussed by Seidman (2006).

**Instruments.** These interviews were conducted at a location and time of the parent’s choice. The first interviews were conducted over the telephone and each lasted about 30 minutes. The second interview was done either at the school or at the participant’s home. This second interview was the longest, with each one taking about one hour. Data were collected through audio-recorded interviews that were then transcribed for coding and
analysis. Creswell (2007) wrote, “Equipment issues loom large as a problem in interviewing, and both recording equipment and transcribing equipment need to be organized in advance of the interview” (p. 140). This is an important aspect of preparing for the study, and one that cannot be overemphasized. Three of the final interviews were conducted over the telephone, while the other two were conducted in person at the school. The purpose of the third interview was to clarify questions that arose after reading the transcribed interviews.

**Procedures.** This topic is uniquely suited to this method of investigation because the findings emerged from the rich, descriptive details provided by the parents participating in the study. Drawing on their shared experiences through an IPA study, the findings revealed in chapter four resulted from an analysis of in-depth, face-to-face interviews to learn more about the factors that contribute to parents’ selection of Sunrise Academy for their children. This procedure worked well as I came to know my participants and was able to press them for additional information or elaboration on certain points.

**Data Storage**

The original interview files (MP3 files) were saved on the researcher’s private, password-protected computer. This is backed up to an online server, which is also accessed by password only. Clean copies of original data were stored on an external disk drive. Likewise, security measures and storage methods were developed for protecting the identity of the parents. All identification markers have been removed or replaced.
**Data Analysis**

This data analysis phase involved several stages, beginning with transcribing audio files and storing these on my password-protected, personal computer. All identification markers were removed or replaced with a pseudonym assigned to each participant. This document was then prepared for open coding, the first phase of data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994).

The organization of files was tedious, but the time invested in organizing and maintaining the records was a very necessary part of the immersion process into the transcripts. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) noted that observations and documentation must be accurately converted into a textual format to ensure correct interpretation, which can be challenging when interpreting a diverse set of evidence.

I began this process by coding similar themes in response to various questions and assigning meaning to the text. This process is described by Miles and Huberman (1994) as data reduction, a method of organizing the interview notes (p. 10). This process resulted in the creation of many different sectors of information.

The next stage in the process was sorting and coding the data. Miles and Huberman (1994), and Saldana (2009) each advocate the use of a color-coding strategy as a visual method of reading the date. A more complex coding system was created as the categories developed through axial coding and materialization of preliminary findings. One hallmark of IPA investigations is that the researcher is not aiming to prove a particular hypothesis. It is not possible to predict what these categories might be in advance of the analysis, though themes did emerge in discrete areas during the first round of analysis.
Construction of Themes

Smith (2009) describes the process of data interpretation as one that requires an immersion in the material from start to finish—not only at the conclusion of the interviews. I found this method useful as I began to color code significant passages of the transcripts to look for similarities and differences. I then extended this method in order to better present the participants’ lived experiences with school choice, repeating the process of separating the notable passages and themes until I felt secure that the material had reached the point of saturation. This process followed the method described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) as both iterative and inductive. They note that there is no single prescribed or preferred method for data analysis, and suggest several steps for data analysis beginning with the process known as bracketing.

Bracketing

The process of analysis began with bracketing, which means that the researcher first reflects upon his or her own perceptions about school choice to try to separate the data from any preconceived notions (Smith et al., 2009). Thus I began the process of analysis by ruminating on my own unique experiences with school choice, both personal and professional. My experiences with school choice and charter schools have been both positive and negative. Like the study participants, I also shopped for schools when the local public school was unable to meet our needs. When my children were beginning school in Ohio in the 1990s, we did not have charter school options. We thought moving was our best choice. When I look back now I am not sure whether we would have selected a charter school and stayed in our urban neighborhood, able to walk to stores, restaurants, the library, and parks if that choice
had been available. As I began to work in an urban charter school, created for the benefit of urban students, I witnessed a new paradox in school choice. I did not understand why students would leave schools that are close to home, have traditions like Homecoming, and score high in areas of graduation rates and test scores. Over a seven-year period beginning in 2008, I noticed that more suburban students were leaving home districts for this charter school in which I worked first as a teacher then as an administrator. These experiences drove my interest in studying why parents choose charter schools over their neighborhood public school. The fact that school choice was a big issue for my own family has convinced me of the importance of putting the research in this field into practice. More and more families are making this choice, changing the face of public education delivery in America. This study helps to shed some light on the reasons why this is occurring.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assign four criteria to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to strategies such as member- and peer-checking that can help establish confidence and internal validity. The third interview offered the opportunity to solidify the credibility of this study. Transferability refers to the thick, rich description that allows readers to apply findings to their own circumstances. Dependability means that the study can be replicated and others will likely report similar findings. Confirmability generally refers to the commitment on the part of the researchers to protect the integrity of the study through the use of unbiased study protocol (1985). I executed each of these four assurances throughout the different phases of the study from developing the tools to reporting on the results.
Limitations

It is important to bear in mind the inherent limitations of this proposed research study. The most obvious is that the scope of this particular study is limited to one charter high school. While the specific questions address the contributing factors in selecting a school, the fact remains that one school is highlighted in this study, thereby potentially limiting its ability to be generalized. Extrapolation beyond this sample may prove problematic in that the results may not generalize across the population. However, significant findings of this study unveiled some new information about why parents are moving toward charter schools and away from traditional public high schools.
Chapter Four: Findings and Themes

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of five suburban parents who have made the choice to send their children to an urban charter high school. The participants were selected from a pool of suburban parents living in non-failing home school districts as identified by state ratings. A successful home district for this investigation was measured by state rankings in academic achievement and academic improvement. This data is collected annually and published by the Ohio Department of Education in the form of annual state report cards. The Ohio Board of Education changed the school rating method beginning in 2014 and removed the letter grades, A-F, which had previously accompanied the school report cards. The Board also included a value-added component to school ratings that uses a formula to calculate school ratings by taking into account the socioeconomic factors of the student body. However, this only applied to students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

High school ratings in Ohio, at this time, do not yet include the value-added factor. While the overall letter grade has been dropped for the time being, the annual report cards gauge students’ progress in Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) passage rates, attendance rates, graduation rates, AP student counts, and other measures. This is especially noteworthy in that all parents interviewed for this study cited external ratings as a critical element in choosing a school.

The participants live in five different suburbs on Cleveland’s east side. Each identified themself as the primary contact with the school and in the selection process. Parents were interviewed three times over a three to four week timespan, at least once in person, and several times over the telephone for follow up, known as member checking (Creswell, 2007).
While all five participants were able to offer their personal recollections of how they experienced school choice, each offered unique and often personal reflections on why they made the decision to send their child to a charter school instead of the local public school district. As a result, each articulated experience helped to create a tapestry of parents’ stories woven with several common threads. Parents placed a high value on external school ratings. All five participants perceived that their home schools’ curriculum lacked strong parental involvement. Each described their perceptions of school safety and lack thereof in their home schools as an important motivating factor. The suburban parents participating in this study described their interactions with Sunrise Academy, placing a value on the Academy’s practices of strong parent-teacher relationships.

Careful analyses of the five interview transcripts revealed four superordinate themes, which directly address the research question: Why are suburban parents choosing an urban charter high school for their children? These identified themes are

1) Importance of external school ratings
2) Parents’ negative perceptions of public schools
3) School safety
4) Parents’ perceptions of Sunrise Academy

These themes illustrate the experiences each participant had with school choice in the selection of a secondary school for their children. They further illuminate how parents process available information about schools and the process of selecting a school. Verbatim responses are used throughout the findings and analysis to respect the voices of the participants.
Participants

The following section contains participant profiles and detailed information from parents about their experiences with school choice. While all participants fit the selection criteria of living in a non-failing school district as defined by the Ohio Department of Education annual rating indicators, their backgrounds and experiences were varied. Parents were open and frank in discussing their values and how they made educational choices for their children. The implications of these findings are discussed in detail in chapter five.

Jeff. Jeff is a married father of three in his forties. He is Eastern European and speaks with a heavy accent. He resides in a highly rated suburban school district. Each of his three children attends a different school: his elementary school aged daughter attends the local public school and his sons attend charter schools; one attends Sunrise Academy. Jeff is open and honest about why he has made these choices. He is also quick to mention that the decisions are made jointly with his wife, with limited input from the children. He is not convinced that Sunrise is the best choice for his son, and may pull him out and place him in his home school next year. Jeff is unique in that he is an educator at a sister school of Sunrise Academy and is intimately aware of the inner workings of the school. He holds a master’s degree in computer science and is currently working on his second master’s degree in education. Jeff used school web sites to research options to find a school for his children. He was also concerned about the school environment, citing it as a top priority. When asked specifically what he was searching for in public education, he stated

I expect, uhh, success. I check the websites. The school ranking. …Yeah, school success. And I need to find a school for my kids, to challenge them. Of course, because my oldest son is so smart. He’s really smart and he needs challenging. You
look at a safe environment, a rigorous curriculum, and challenging or extracurricular activities for your child to be successful. Okay. But hopefully I am expecting real, ah, challenge and after that challenge I want to see he’s doing something and this is going to be, maybe in these fifteen years, my son is going to be the first student [from his country] graduating from Sunrise. These schools are built for teaching, teaching these kids; not making money. We all want to make sure these kids learn, go to nice colleges, and be the future of this country. Ah, compare with the public schools, I just told you, my fifth grade; it was at that time at the fifth grade I asked the teacher, “Could you please set up any, like, tutoring, anything for my son because he needs help. He doesn’t understand you. He needs a lot of ESL.” They said, “No, sorry, we don’t have anything like that.” What would you ... what would I do with my son ... my kids. And they said, “No, we don’t have an answer for that question.” So it’s kind of real tough that public school—but this [is] my perspective, I guess, because my kids really needed help for language learning, but right now my daughter knows what’s going on and she’s ready for doing extra ... Extra, ah, success ... for instance I want her to participate in the spelling bee. She’s really good with spelling. It depends on your child. It depends [how] you actually as a parent—like, how do you track? How do you, ah, control your child? So, for me, I don’t need no private school. I don’t need no Catholic school for my kids because they know, my father is gonna come and ask me every night, check my homework and sit with me, do my homework if I need, and we sit like half an hour every night. This is the best I can [do], this silent reading. Whatever they want, they sit next to me and they read. We read all together.
When asked how Sunrise compares to his home high school, one that is ranked as excellent, Jeff elaborated.

The curriculum is [the] same but culture is total different. You can’t even compare the Kingstown Academy and the Cleary Middle School [the school in which he works]. I mean we have maybe five, six miles, but the schools total different. You can’t compare my school with Cleary Middle for example, ah, so ... Most of them they coming from suburban. Not, not the suburban Triangle kids but, ah, majority of the parents they got jobs. They work. But most of our [charter middle school where he works] parents are broken families and mother-base families. You never can see the fathers. But then Kingstown has any parent-teacher conference, any meetings with kids, parents they both come. As a parent, you know, you, you have kids too. And we always first look at our priority is safety. So safety is, of course, the main concern every time and, uh ... I believe in this school [Sunrise] and I believe in him. I really, ah, have a lot of expectations from school plus from him and we already gave him his target: Ohio, OSU, Ohio State University.

Still, Jeff is not convinced Sunrise has the academic rigor he seeks for his son. As an involved parent, Jeff seeks a robust educational program that focuses on curriculum over extracurricular activities.

For instance, for Sunrise Academy I can say my son is not being challenged in that school right now. He’s doing a lot of activities. Global stuff, but for language art, for math, he needs a lot of challenge there but he doesn’t get that. So if for maybe next year, if he has any, uh, honor class or what. AP classes, he’ll be in 11th grade. So he can take those. He could even take the PESOP [post secondary] classes.
Jeff’s youngest child, a daughter, remains in the local public school. Like the other parents, with the exception of Christine who only has one child, the other participants have at least one child attending Sunrise Academy and other children at various schools, both public and charter. When asked why he responded, he said

Last year my second son, before this school, he used to go to [the local public school] so they were, like, walking for the school bus. So close to my house. They were both walking to the school but the school was up to 5th grade and is done with the 5th grade. He has to go to 6th grade and I do not want to send him to the [public middle school] because he was going to be there alone and I wasn’t going to know what’s going on there. Right now, I know what’s going on in my school. I can see him, I can track his grades, I can track his behavior, everything. My daughter is going to be here next year hopefully, and she will be up to 5th grade. … Our school is kind of like a private school right now. Small, small numbers of students in the classrooms and uh, this is really good and I hope she’s going to get challenged in here because I can talk with teachers. I can have the meetings with them as a parent. I am [employed at this school] but I’m still a parent. They do not do this kind of stuff at [the public middle] school. I mean, I never heard anything like that like we do here, tutoring, extracurricular activities, no. I never heard about it. One day last year I went to ask about my son; would they give him any tutoring at least in a day. They said, the teacher told me like, uh, we don’t have anything like that in here. If you want him to get a tutoring you have to pay, or he has to come like at 7:30 and during that half an hour he can get his tutoring from us. This is kind of … ah … Public school you know they are … They mostly … are like this. No competition. Nothing like, ah, I don’t
know. It’s just because maybe I think is the, ah, unions, teachers unions, and I heard some teachers leave before the kids daily. [laughs]

Jeff, like the other parents, is a tireless advocate for his son, insisting that Sunrise teachers challenge his student.

You have to do something for my son. Otherwise I’m, I’m taking him out and they set this group up and he’s doing great job; Mr. Avery he is sitting with them, making them compete with each other and they solve the math questions together. They do lot of like fun activities, too. Last time they went to cultural center. They stayed there. They spend like three-and-a-half hours. He called me, he said Dad, my ... my ... I have a great headache right now. They ... They had a three-and-a-half hour test-based practice. So this is challenging. I really liked it and no one would do this, Sharon. No, I mean ... Would you do this for my son? Take him to somewhere and ... Teacher is spending his Saturday with the kids, like, five, six hours. You don’t pay anything to them. This is just volunteer job and he ... He has to listen to them. He has to be patient with them ... They, okay they are really good kids, but still they are kids.

**Terry.** Terry is an African American mother of two in her mid-forties. Both children attend charter schools. Her son is in 8th grade and her daughter is at Sunrise Academy in 10th grade. Terry is married and lives with her family in a Cleveland suburb. Terry earned her Ph.D. as an adult student. She comes from a family of educators—both parents were lifelong teachers. Her father served as a charter school principal and superintendent. Terry never considered her local school district for her children. She shopped for schools based upon test scores.

See, we were in Westtown. So the answer to that is no. There is nothing to look at. I mean, I know the numbers but you know... Well, the kids aren’t passing tests. There is
no culture capital whatsoever. That’s a problem all the way across the board, but it’s very significant. Kids in Westtown are not traveling, they are not taking trips. So, my—I home-schooled my son initially. My daughter did go to Leonard [a private girl’s school] for several years. She went there until, uh, third grade, including third grade, and then you know, with two children, you’re talking about fifty something thousand dollars a year and so at that point, I home-schooled.

Terry summed up her thoughts about the local public schools, having had experience as a classroom teacher.

They don’t have the culture capital to bring to the classroom. Behavior, another issue. I’ve been in the classrooms. I know, I taught, you know, in the inner city. I can go on and on, and so, no. Well, the public schools, they are losing money, in a sense. They are losing kids, they are losing money. So, anything that’s going to take away a dollar, they are going to be against, no matter what. So, that’s a fight that that’s just built into, um, what the public schools do.

She envisions a new form of public education in charter schools.

I think ideally, that—on paper, that [charter schools] sounds wonderful. This can be the new private school, but it’s free; But the reality is what charter schools do is save children. You get kids who are thrown out, kids who are attacked, beaten, you know, dealing with bullies. You can go on and on the number of reasons why, and they are not able to make it in their school, and what other choice do they have? It’s to go to a charter school.

Terry provides a description of how children of color need to learn to live in two worlds, African American children, minority children have to learn to live in two worlds.
The way we tend to talk at home with family and friends is different than what’s expected in the work place, and if they are not taught the more formal aspects of education, of business, it’s all the same thing, then they’re not going to get it. And it’s setting them up for failure. You know, if a teacher says, “Give me six to nine pages,” you write nine pages. You don’t do ten because they don’t like that. They don’t want to read extra. You do nine, all the way to the bottom. You don’t do the bare minimum. Well, who’s telling them that? See, my parents taught me those things. You sit in the front. …My parents never said, “Go to office hours and make up a question,” but I knew I needed to be visible and if you need two points out of a hundred, “She is always here. She sits in the front. She volunteers. She does her work. It’s always on time. She doesn’t miss days”. What’s two points? It’s called playing the game. That’s what we call it. The big—the one thing that I saw [while in her doctoral program] that my eyes were not open to is that many urban schools prepare kids for prison. That’s what my eyes were not open to until my doctoral program. The sit down, shut up, do your bell work. I am preparing you for the factory or for prison. My daughter went to [private girl’s school] and she questioned the principal. The principal brought this up in one of her talks, and she goes, “Well, this little girl,” she didn’t use her name, “wanted a cookie and I told her no. She has already had her cookies.” You know, they had a whole spread of food and she had already had dessert and that was it, and the principal said, “I told her to ask her mother, if she wanted more cookies,” and she went on, my daughter, and said, “My mother does not have this type of cookies at home,” so there was a discourse where somewhere else—you know, you’re about to go off—but they are allowed to debate and have a discussion about things. You know, they come
into the school. There is no bell work. You go to a center, you do what you want to do to get your [day] started. Where the children in the urban areas sit down and do bell work. Urban/suburban bordering on urban, sometimes some of the same mentalities are there too, but not to the same levels in inner city. Because the kids are herded in and everything is so test-driven. Now, that has moved into suburban areas, but you’ll see that those suburban areas have—have turned more—they’ve been becoming more and more urban-like with their population and the problems that they are taking on. So, if you go to a school that’s private or in a not-private and, say, in a more affluent area, you see many of the same things. The private school of, course, may have more money for visiting artists and all of that, but the mentality is not what you’ll see in an urban area, in either one. So, I didn’t—I didn't realize that. You know, when, uh, until I got to my doctoral program, you know, how pronounced it is and where the kids end up. They are not taught to question. They are not taught to manage. They are not taught to do certain things and those things that in some areas are accepted and allowed to debate, have discourse, “Let’s discuss,” are considered, “You’re acting up.” Because you know how cities go through cycles. You probably remember that from, you know, you got your Bachelor’s. You had the city cycle. Everybody moves downtown, that’s ritzy, ritzy, and then oh, we’re moving to the suburbs, and then second-tier suburbs, and now, we have urban revitalization starting and those, you know, fancy apartments that are right above these—with the cute restaurants, you know, for the preppy young business. So, so you’ve got the working back up in the middle of the city, but the suburbs, you know, are starting to turn. The first-tier suburbs. So, it’s a cycle that just keeps on going. They paralleled the economy,
because I’ve seen the mansions in Cleveland. So, my question is, it probably—the demise of the schools probably paralleled the demise of Cleveland.

So, when you have a socioeconomic base that is nonexistent and it goes downhill, your schools are going to follow and the rich kids are going to, uh, parents are going to take them and move away to the suburbs. So, you know, it’s a cycle of a city again. I mean you see that everywhere, but some recover and they keep having cycles, and some don’t. So, I would bet that it would parallel the time period. The steel mill shut—because that was Youngstown. The steel mill shut down and that was, yeah. And your tax base disappears.

Terry was blunt about her perceptions of the public schools and how they are not effective in preparing students for the real world, a world she views as bifurcated by race and class.

Terry, like Jeff, is also an educator and has firsthand experience in the classroom.

You can go to college and get some remedial classes but if no one imparts in you how to act and how to—I used to, I would correct my kids. I never let them talk slang in class and I would make them walk away from my desk, and I’d say, ”Go back to your seat. Walk back up here and let’s start over again.” Not even one word. Why?

Because they needed practice. So, my thing is, in the classrooms, if your child says, ‘Well, he ain’t…” stop him. And they’ll eventually see you’re doing it to everybody, you’re not embarrassing, but you’ve got to stop it because if mom says, “Ain’t got, don’t got, he be, she be,” this is the only place that will teach a child how to speak so that when they have that job interview, he doesn’t say, “He don’t got.” And that’s the difference between a corporate job, And looking like somebody from the hood. … But somebody has to teach them about the living in two worlds, and that will make a
difference in their success, because the education—you can catch up with some tutors. You can get some remediation as help. You can’t catch this stuff up after their whole life of saying it and nobody stopping it.

**Olivia.** Olivia is an African American mother of three daughters in her late thirties. One daughter recently graduated from Sunrise Academy, one is still in high school at Sunrise, and her youngest is in kindergarten at a different charter school. Olivia is married and attending graduate school to pursue a career change to healthcare. She and her husband currently both work for a large communications company. Her older children began school in their successfully rated home district in northeast Ohio before switching to a charter school. Like the others, Olivia relied on external information in her attempt to find an appropriate school for her children.

When you look at, on paper, the results that this school [Sunrise] is giving versus public schools then you have to question, “What are they doing better?” And they don’t have the union. They’re keeping their teachers. The teachers at public schools are nice, but they’re not as attractive as the teachers that I’ve found at Kingstown and here.

She and her husband initially considered relocation to the far suburbs.

… that was one of the things me and my husband had talked about also: first moving. Because where we live, if you go to the corner and turn, you’re in Harmon Heights. And a lot of people come to my house and go, “This is Triangle?” And I go, “Yes, we’re like right across the border because I like your tax bracket better.” But we were discussing that also, and maybe we should move to Strongsburg or maybe we should
move farther out so … I just happened to get that flyer from Kingstown [a charter] and I was like, “Wow.” And because of what my kids have done, the people that I work with has started sending their kids to charter schools. I looked on the web site and found that Sunrise has better ratings than public schools.

Olivia also did not have confidence in the local public schools, which she describes as lacking both rigor and high expectations for children.

I don’t think that they’re pushing beyond the potential that the children can do. Because to start someone off at a younger age with harder work, they are able to go ahead and keep up. It’s what’s expected of them; They’re able to go ahead and push. If you start someone in kindergarten, you know, with cookies and naps, not to say that that’s wrong, because I had cookies and naps, but without a structure for them to build upon, then they’re, by the time they get their age [her daughters’ age] and you want to correct a problem, it’s going to be harder. Almost, pretty much impossible. So it’s not really a give up. I want to say it’s more of a, I mean, a lazy approach sounds bad, but to not really put forth in all of your efforts to make sure that the children excel it’s, to try and do it later on, it’s going to be bad. Ivy and Jasper were both in Glenbrook [local public school] and I just saw that Jasper, her grades started to slip. And we’re talking about someone who, you know, once they were here they knew how to do calculus, derivatives, all these words that I’m just, “What?”... She was more focused on her friends and clothes and dancing, and once I pulled her out of that environment and put her into one that was more disciplined and structured, like Kingstown, she then took off. Which I’m glad that I got her in when I did. Like 5th grade is when,
because if we would have waited any longer, waiting till high school, I don’t think she
would have been able to keep up with the curriculum that you guys have.

Like the other participants, Olivia noted the importance of parental involvement, and
described her family’s strategies to push and encourage her children to excel.

I think it’s the culture. When, and it works both ways, with home and school. I mean
with parents you have to be involved with the situation and if parents are not like... My
sister, she wants to make sure, you know, my nephew’s okay. But she pretty much
leaves it up to me. Like I get him every other weekend. Everybody always wants to
know, “What are you doing with your girls that you’ve gotten three geniuses? How did
this happen?” I asked them what they wanted to be when they were younger, I take
them to the grocery store with me, I let them see how much stuff costs. “Well you said
you wanted this. You said you wanted to live here. You said you wanted to do this. Do
you know what it takes to do this? You can’t say ‘Okay, well, I’m just going to be rich
when I grow up.’ How are you going to do that? What are you going to [reach] for; I
want you to know what this entails.”

Olivia says finds her large public school unwelcoming.

Okay, Triangle High School is scary. I like the structure and the discipline of Sunrise.

There’s not, see at Triangle there’s metal detectors and there’s cops.

But when asked if she had looked at her neighborhood school in person, she said no.

Once I found Kingstown [a charter school], no. And the only reason why is because
the discipline structure that Kingstown has does carry over to Sunrise because it’s a
sister school. And a lot of their teachers that were there, you know, [are] new teachers
here, like Mr. Sage. And there’s a zero tolerance for, you know for fighting and for...
At public schools you know you guys may get detention for fighting, there you go. Here you’re expelled. I absolutely love it. It’s like zero tolerance, which is one of my, you know you’re here to learn, not to beat each other up because someone was on Facebook with someone’s boyfriend. I just sort of came up with that [laughs]. They [public school] don’t have security guards, they have actual police officers that have to be at the school because of the level of violence that is distributed here. Now for some odd reason, I mean you guys have children here also, but why is it that there are no metal detectors that are needed, and yet you guys haven’t had an incident? Where’s the difference there on the message that was sent from Triangle to here? That was one of the things that surprised me also. Because yeah, you guys, I mean I’ve walked through the halls. You guys have got some pretty big dudes, I mean taller than me. But that was one of the things that really made the difference for me. Because they do, they have, I mean you guys both have kids, both in the same age group. You know it’s predominantly, you know, minority students, which statistically people see as, you know, more fighting, more violence, more... But yet you guys don’t have that. So I’m not sure if, you know, when they come in, you know, you guys say, I don’t know, “creepy clowns are going to come and take you away” [laughs] but it’s fantastic. … Like Ms. Maria [Spanish teacher at Sunrise] is one of the sweetest people ever. She always talks to me, she knows that I do know some Spanish and she makes sure that I keep up on it. And that’s not even her job! She doesn’t have to do that! But she does. When Janet had an entrepreneur thing in the summertime, the teachers from this school came to support her. And they didn’t have to do that. They were off! Posting the kids on the wall who get the scholarship shows the letter grades, you know. [My
daughter] says, “I want to be up there fifteen times like Mary. I want to, you know, be accepted to all these colleges, they’re up there. I can’t wait for my picture to be up there.” And even though it’s something small, they see that and they feed off of it. So they strive to do better. I think we all work together on it. It’s little pieces, but if you surround yourself with, you know, with a wall, then water doesn’t get in to drown you. You have that entire fortress, and I believe with the parents that are involved, the correct school systems, then the kids can’t fail at what they’re wanting to do. If you have, you know, a loose board, you know sometimes you get someone that’s a little “iffy.” But for the most part, if you have that sound structure, you’re going to win. And I told my kids one hundred and ten percent, I will not be working at sixty years old. You’re going to win. [laughs] You’re going to win! If I have to make sure that every day, you’re going to win. But they do. They, they, to not win or to not strive for it, it just seems like a disappointment. And it’s not just my kids, it’s, you know, their friends, I see it too. They’re like, you know, we don’t, we don’t want to live in a crummy house or, you know, we want to make sure we build it up so that, you know, we can do better than our parents and our kids can do better than us so that by generations we’re built up and no one’s lacking. Which is the way it should be. You should want to do better than your parents, and I tell them that all the time. … It’s just your stepping-stone into, you know, above and beyond. There are some questions that people do ask because they’re a little “iffy,” but I compare you guys just like I compare my online schools. You know, people don’t think you guys are real schools and the online schools aren’t real schools, but when you ask me questions regarding anything related in my field, I can answer it. … I have three good examples for you—
[my daughters]. One hundred and ten percent. And they go, “Well I guess you’re right. I’ll go ahead and I’ll check it out.” It just seems like this school is equipping the children for what they need actually going forward. Now while you guys still have, you know, a lot of the regular structured classes that they do have, it just seems like it’s more life prepared. Like I loved home-ec; I did, but we made everything out of biscuits. I don’t know the last time I made whole meals out of biscuits, but...
[laughs] It’s, the kids, they just seem so, too smart, just so well rounded when it comes to real life events that they’ll need. But yeah, the curriculum that’s at this school, and it’s not easy work. Because children who have left this school and who’ve went to public school, actually, you know, like, if they left here when they were in 10th grade, actually have qualifications to be in their 12th grade.

Jackie. Jackie is an African American mother of three children: two boys and one girl. Her oldest son attends Sunrise Academy while the other two children attend other charter schools. She is in her late thirties and lives with her partner in suburban Cleveland. She attended Cleveland public schools, has completed her undergraduate degree, and plans to pursue a graduate degree in the future. She currently works as a nurse, often working three-day shifts of twelve hours per day. Jackie was very candid when discussing school ratings. For Jackie, the annual state report cards, which rate schools on state-mandated tests scores, graduation rates, and attendance rates, form a composite score.
I couldn't afford private school for everyone and so, but keeping in mind that I wanted them to have, you know, a great education, the schools, the charter schools, like Kingstown was a school that was rated excellent. You know? With distinction. And that was appealing to me, and I’m like, “Oh my gosh, they’re really a good school,
they’ve been rated excellent.” Where so many public schools were like, not rated excellent, if adequate, you know? And that was a huge turnoff.

Jackie also noted that she relied primarily on online research of the local schools in making her selections. When asked if she visited the public schools in person, she replied “no.”

I moved to Triangle in 2008, and of course I’m wondering what their school district’s like, and I wasn’t impressed. I didn’t visit. I just did online research and I didn’t see great reviews from other parents. Um, I didn’t see that they had an excellent rating, and it just kind of turned me off ... I can only speak about my perception. It seems to me in the schools like those, it seems to me, like, teachers are overwhelmed, for one. I don’t know if it’s the sizes of the classes or the amount of students, but they seem to be overwhelmed, which to me may affect their um, you know, their involvement. So, to what degree they get involved, you know? It seems like they may just do what’s necessary or the basics.”

Jackie has also shopped for schools for her children. Her concerns about her local public school reflected those of the other participants as well, especially with regard to students falling behind. She perceives her home school cannot offer assurance that the educational needs of her children are met.

And it seems like, you know, like if their homework isn’t done, it’s like, well, whatever. You know? And they would either be so overcrowded or someone’s kids may fall through the cracks, you know? But my experiences has been, you know, with the smaller, the charter schools, the teachers seem to be more involved, you know, because it seems like it’s smaller. They have their eyes on kids a little more. I get more involvement from them. I get um, you know, um ... We have more
conversations. If things are going wrong, I hear from them. I get emails. I can email them. I get responded to. I appreciate that, and I don’t feel confident that I would get that in public schools. I... I’m afraid to even try, because my perception is a lot of teachers don’t care. My perception is that um... Not that they don’t want to care, but like I said, maybe they’re overwhelmed. You know? I could be wrong. It’s just the way I perceive it, which is why I’ve held my children back from going. Um, I believe they really want to be better, want to do a great job, but there’s something that’s missing, you know? I don’t know why... Why aren’t their ratings excellent, just like other schools? That way, you know, I would feel comfortable sending my children there. Knowing that they’re going to, um, meet all the expectations that the state says they need to meet. Um, because, you know, my son who’s actually being tested … for being gifted. Well, I’m so happy about that, but if he was going to public school, like what… how would I even know about that? I mean, you know, I don’t know how they would handle that. Would they even, you know, give him any kind of specialized attention so that he could, you know, live up to his level? … Well, he’s in a school that’s rated excellent, so why not stay there? I liked the school, I liked, uh, the attention that they got; the classroom sizes were smaller. Um, especially initially at Kingstown Academy. I mean, they... The principal who was there was phenomenal at first. He was so in tune with what his students were doing. How well they were doing. He was wanting them to be successful and he did everything he possibly could, even outside of the academic aspect. I mean, they spent time with them, they took them places, they showed them things, they went on trips. And I’m like, “Why can’t we get that at Public School?” We don’t, so why would I want to just sent them there? You
know? That’s like selling my children short, in my opinion. So I would have loved to have them go to Oak Heights because I lived on Hollywood; I lived on Oak Heights Boulevard. Kingstown Academy is in Triangle. I was driving forty-five minutes. I don’t care which way you go. Freeway, street, whatever. Forty-five minutes to and from picking him up. I was a full time nurse. My mom did help me, you know, a lot of times. She lives on the east side. But I was exhausted, but I just couldn’t take them away from there, and so that’s how I wound up at [a different local charter school]. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I work two night shifts. Three twelve-hour shifts. Came up at 7:30 AM, going in at 7:30 PM or 7 PM, driving to Triangle back and forth, it was just too much so Blue Hill [local charter] opened, and they haven’t gotten a rating yet because they’re newer but… Still miss Kingstown Academy, but I still find that I think it’s better than public school. … That’s where he’s always been, is in those schools. Yeah. Yeah. So … Now, my mom still helps me, so during the week she helps… She takes him to school. She picks him up, and then after I’m done with working I go, you know, so it’s just a constant back and forth. Yeah, and then I manage the two smaller ones here, because Blue Hill is like, ten minutes away. I drive them. And things are going on, and you just never know what’s going to happen and I… I remember… I used to always drop them off and be nervous, and this is before the Sandy Hook thing happen. I was so… I used to always think about stuff like that, and then when it happened, I freaked out. I’m like “Oh my gosh.” I think every parent’s worst nightmare right there. And so of course. You drop them off you just, you know, say a little prayer, whatever spiritual thing it is you do and hope that it, you know … So yeah, and at Blue Hill, there’s always officers there. There’s always officers there.
I’ve wondered why ... They are there. Like, too much. But I can’t argue with that.
You know what I mean? It’s better. I feel better that they’re there. They’re inside
when I ring the doorbell. They’re the ones who open the door. Yeah, my concern is
more curriculum based and academics. I would have loved [to send her child to the
public school] ... Like I said, it’s right around the corner. Do you know how
convenient that would be? But now. I’ve got to go out of my way because I feel like
this school system [her local public school] is no better than Cleveland public school
which is really not great. So it’s... it’s a shame, you know? Because we are in the
suburbs. ... Also, the parents who go to these charter schools from somewhere, I mean,
obviously they care. Right? So they care and because they care ... They want their
kids to have a better education. So the teachers know that they care and they feel
maybe more involved, if they could get more involved, and they feel like, “Okay,
we’ve got parent involvement.” That’s a motivator for teachers as well.
And it’s kind of like a feedback thing, and you know, it’s... I don’t know why it can’t
happen here. I don’t know why, you know? But it’s... you know... it’s sad because...
you know, the Cleveland school system, I’m sure they want to take advantage of the
charter school system school too, and if we, suburban people could just stay in our
area, maybe more of them can maybe take advantage of that. But it’s a shame,
because we’re all fighting for a spot on the waiting list for these places. But it’s worth
investigating, and I’m just so glad that someone’s actually wondering what’s going on,
and maybe more eyes can you know, open and wonder. ... I can already see he has the
mind of an engineer. He’s very... He likes to build things. He likes robotics. He likes
mechanical things. He’s very good in math. He’s very good in science. Um, his test
scores are phenomenal. He’s always accelerated above average, and I don’t want him to be in a school where he, you know, doesn’t get that constant... They’re feeding that. You know? And he’d get into a high school even where he’s getting ready to go out into the world, and you know, he’s not excited, he’s not motivated. But he has all this potential. And you know, there’s so many kids that have so much potential. And nobody’s cared. Like I say, you’ve got these huge beautiful new schools here. I mean, I pay taxes to the city of Oak Heights. And I’ve got to drive forty-five minutes. No. There’s no excuse for that.

**Christine.** Christine is an African American mother of one child, currently a junior at Sunrise Academy. She is in her late forties, is married, and lives in suburban Cleveland. Christine’s father and uncle are also very involved in her son’s life. Christine, a Baptist, exclusively attended Catholic only schools when she grew up in Cleveland. She originally planned for her child to also enroll in a parochial school. Christine has an associate college degree and admits that school was not easy for her. She relied on tutors in order to graduate.

Well, for me, Justin has a Catholic school background, from first grade to eighth grade. I graduated Catholic High School. And I attended University of Cincinnati College, so I have an associate’s degree. Well, in kindergarten he went to Richly [a public school], which at that time was a half a day, and, um ... And, um, kindergarten just wasn’t ... I don’t know if it was the teacher, it could have been the teacher, I don’t know, it was just that, I’m, I’m like, “How is he doing? ‘Cause I’m pretty ... I think I’m pretty informed on, on things. Plus I worked with him at home, so some things I kind of ... Uh, it’s all right. I’m thinking to myself, I’m like, Uhh, a little more detail? How does he draw, does he nap?” I mean, I don’t understand, ‘cause it’s only half a
day. She really wasn’t informative, and my husband was like, “Oh, you just get so...” ‘cause I’m about education; I’m like this. So, uh, I’m like, “Nah, I’ll pull him. After kindergarten you’re going to Catholic school.” …Um, started off at the neighborhood Catholic school, and then they closed. Because I’m thinking he can ride his bike, you know, no big deal. But, uh, they were closing. The Lutheran school closed, I mean, so that was traumatic in it. Um, the school that he came from in seventh and eighth grade and, um, St. John James Academy, which he rode his bike to. And that’s in Oak Heights. They closed. The second, third ... dang, how did that go ... Seventh and eighth John Paul. Fifth and sixth ... It was like he did two years out of school, and it was so ... I was so upset. He did St. Martin of Tours ... Six, no, seventh and eighth, fifth and sixth St. Martin of Tours. In a, and before that he went to, um, [snaps fingers] oh what is the … because St. Teresa merged with this school in Medford and I didn’t like the principal. Ninth grade starts in high school and, um, honestly the high schools, they cost too much. ... I wanted him to go to St. Marks, ‘cause that’s real close to our house, they wanted 10 grand a year.... ’Cause I checked, you know, Sunrise when I was investigating. I was just, you know, doing some checking, and I was like, yeah. Yeah. And I’m like, 10 grand? And I told Justin, and we sat him down and I said, “You know, this is how much it cost to go there, so, meaning that that’s not including uniforms, and it’s not including extracurricular activities, and I said, “You won’t be driving. I can tell you that. You won’t have no car, you, you may be lucky if you take drivers ed!” [Laughs] So my husband, he was like, “That’s a little much. And that’s not including uniforms.” You know and I really wanted him to go there, but we ... I didn’t want to start and couldn’t finish. ... And we came here to visit ... Who told me
about here? Um, one of the ladies at work, she said, “Oh, why don’t you check the school out?” I think, if I didn’t investigate, talk to people, he wouldn’t be here. He would be at Oak Heights. But, I mean, you have to talk to people. You know, inquire, talk to coworkers, I mean, and that’s something I’ve always kind of done, just inquire about things, but, um, I knew Justin wouldn’t be able to get a scholarship to St. Marks. I knew that wasn’t going to happen, you know. He’s an average student.

School safety was one theme discussed by each participant. Christine described it as follows: Justin said, “Well, I can go to Oak Heights,” and I’m thinking, like, nahhh. Walked in there, and I’m thinking like huh-uh. I said, “No, Justin, it’d be a problem.” I said, “Some of the kids don’t have any manners.” And I said, “Not all kids are perfect, and I understand that,” but I said, “No.” Disrespectful kids. Huh-uh. No, no. Well, the school was just being built, because they have a brand new high school. And, um, I wasn’t, I didn’t tour the high school. I went to some meetings. I didn’t get a good vibe on it. And I know there’s gang activity. You know every school’s going to have a little ... Public school, they going to have a little thing, and, you know I’m watching on the neighborhood, and I was like ... Because if there’s a problem break out, I’m going to be mad. [Laughs] And Oak Heights High School’s right there. Justin could walk. It’d take two minutes to get to school. So, um ... Well, the teachers can only do so much, the schools only can do so much. A lot of it is home training, so I really don’t have a concrete answer because ... A lot of it was just disruption and, I mean, I don’t know, I mean most of it was just home, coming from the home. You can’t, you can’t teach and try to tell someone it’s rude to talk when someone’s talking, come on. So, uh, I don’t know. I think the teachers do as, as well as they can, um, because even
my dad ... I used to go to a public school and my dad pulled me. He said, “I didn’t like how you were acting. So you going to Catholic ...” The neighborhood kids, you know, so much because Oak is changed so much, it’s a lot of renters. So, it’s not a steady flow of, like, when I went to school, I mean, I still see the people I grew up with. I just saw a couple people around the neighborhood. So we went to school together, but Justin doesn’t have that, because it’s so much renters. Where we were home always.

Christine recalls how a coworker suggested she look at Sunrise.

Yes, and that was a big thing as well. And, uh, I said let’s go, but I didn’t want to put pressure on him. You know what I’m saying? We just laid it on the line but ... So I said let’s check it out, and he liked JROTC. The, the vibe of the school, like, even me and Justin, we like the colors. [Laughs] You walk into the ... It’s the colors. It’s bright, it’s cheery. People are nice… That was basically it. I was comfortable and I saw how he was acting. You know how some things ... I didn’t ask him twenty million questions; I just watched. You know, and I was picking him up after the activities. You know, so, he ... That, that spoke ... If there was an issue he would have told me. And then my dad was just like, “All that schooling in Catholic school, all the discipline, you’re gonna lose it all.” And I could tell, well Justin ... I mean, he’s growing up, but I could still see them, some manners.

She ranks her criteria for school selection.

Academics, then safety. Um, ‘cause I’m thinking, you know, you’re going to have bullying. They’re trying to do all this, which is great, ‘cause I was bullied and all this kind of stuff, but you ... It’s a confidence thing. You have to, you have to be confident,
comfortable in yourself. Sometimes you will have to fight, and that’s just how it is. So, and I’m, I’m not downplaying it, but, I’m thinking, if Justin would get bullied, he would tell me. He’s going to have to kick some butt. [Laughs] Not being, you know, but I’m thinking academics aside, but I’m thinking that it’s ... The school is high in academics, there’s not too much problems with bullying. I always told him, even, I always told Justin, “If I get a call about some nonsense, I’m coming up there and you ain’t gonna like it.” I said, “I don’t care where you at. High school, college, wherever. I get a call about nonsense, I’m coming up there and you won’t like it.” He was like, “Oh, no, no.” Cause I said, “I don’t care who around, I will smash you up,” [Laughs] Something’s going on with your school. I can’t pinpoint it, but here Justin, from what he tells me, they, they pay attention. Meaning that they know ... They’re paying attention. Meaning, okay Justin, you slacking. ‘Cause he even told me a couple times, he said, “Yeah, Mom, I fell asleep in class and she caught me.” Good, ‘cause if she would have called me, I would have been down there, for real, but, um ... As teenagers you don’t like it, but you know it’s good for you. Classrooms here aren’t big. Not like 20-something kids. He seems to do okay, looking at his report card. I don’t check his grades, he checks his grades, and the way I have the computer set up is ... He don’t have no TV in his room, he don’t have no computer in his room. Is set, the computer’s there, so when you’re sitting there, the person on the couch can see exactly what you’re doing. So I know what you’re doing. You could be slick, but I’m just saying, when you’re looking at your grades, so am I. And that’s what he needs. He seems to be happy. I asked him. I also talk with him about what his choices are and he... he loves where he is. He doesn’t want to go and um, I even asked if he was intimidated
by like, a bigger school or a public school, and he said he was not, but you know, it crossed my mind, wondering, because I did toy with the idea of letting him go to Oak Heights High School, but he just wanted to stay at Sunrise. So that’s where he’s comfortable.

Materialization of Superordinate Themes

In each instance the parents described the process and criteria they used to select a school. They tended to shop for schools that fit the needs of their children, rather than selecting a neighborhood based upon the schools ratings. Using direct quotes and passage summaries from the interview transcripts uncovered important information about how they perceive the education delivered at Sunrise Academy. The findings crystalized in to four thematic areas.

Parents’ School Selection Criteria: *First I look at the ratings*

Each of the five participants mentioned the significance of external ratings in making decisions about school placement. Parents interviewed for this study placed a significant value on school ratings as one important criterion for school selection. Parents looked for input on school placement from family members, coworkers, and other parents.

Parents’ Perceptions of Home District Teachers and Students: *Those kids have no manners*

As when they noted the importance of school ratings, all participants cited a perception of negative school culture and lack of academic rigor in their home school.
Parents’ perceptions about their home schools included their belief that the public school teachers were overwhelmed with large class sizes and unruly children.

School Safety: *Triangle High School is Scary*

Parents’ attitudes about their home districts portray a common notion that public school students are ill mannered and the schools unsafe. Participants noted their concerns about the public schools’ use of metal detectors and in-school police officers. They viewed these as evidence of actual safety issues in the buildings.

Perceptions of Sunrise Academy: *Creepy clowns are going to come and take you away*

Each of the five interviewees described the precise and specific reasons that they selected Sunrise Academy over a neighborhood public school. These coincided with the parents’ demands for academic rigor, safety, and parent involvement. Noting these aspects, one interviewee suggested jokingly that Sunrise teachers must scare the children into compliance with threats of creepy clowns.

Summary

While each participant brought unique perspectives and experiences to the study based on their individual life circumstances, there were many similarities among them as well. Again, using direct quotes and passage summaries from the interview transcripts, more is learned about how they perceive the education delivered at Sunrise Academy. Chapter four provided the findings of an IPA study through the data analysis of five interviews with suburban parents who have made the choice to send their child to an urban charter high school.
rather than their local public high school. These identified themes are explored and discussed in depth in chapter five. Further discussion of the themes will include ways in which they strengthen and support the current literature about parental choice, as well as how the findings from this study contribute to the existing literature.

The next chapter will also discuss further how this analysis both supports and digresses from some widely accepted norms about parental involvement in school choice and how those decisions are directly shaping a new form of public education delivery in Cleveland. Chapter five will include the significance of the findings, as well as implications the current study has for both charter school operators and public school districts. The results and findings of the study have led me to a deeper understanding of lived experiences of suburban parents who choose charter schools.
Chapter Five: Discussion of the Research Findings

The disparity among public school districts in northeast Ohio is an important educational issue and a critical human rights issue. Charter schools were created to give parents a tuition free alternative to their assigned home school. In Ohio, these were originally chartered to operate in the eight large urban areas of the state, including the city of Cleveland, where the local school district was failing to meet annual benchmarks. However, suburban parents are also engaging in the school choice discourse and choosing charter schools instead of their suburban school.

This qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) sought to better understand the lived experiences and perceptions of suburban parents who have chosen to bypass the traditional neighborhood public school in favor of an urban charter high school. Five suburban parents described, in detail, their selection criteria and why they made the decision to send their child to Sunrise Academy, a charter high school in Cleveland, Ohio. This study sought to address one research question: What are the factors that contribute to parents’ selection of Sunrise Academy?

The findings underscore that charter schools are a viable option for many families and not only those living in failing home districts. This chapter discusses the superordinate themes as they relate to current knowledge about parental involvement in school choice, with parental engagement as the theoretical framework. Included in this section is also a discussion of the significance of these findings and the implications for both charter school and public school programming. This study has implications for inner-ring suburban Cleveland public school districts that are losing students annually to charter schools. Finally,
I discuss the inherent limitations of the findings from this study, and possible areas for future research. The identified themes were:

1) Importance of External School Ratings

Above all else, parents perceived the school ratings as the single most important factor in determining which school their children would attend. Every one of the parents interviewed for this study searched the Internet for the Ohio Department of Education website for state report cards and test scores, and looked at specific criteria to rule out schools. Jackie’s experience echoed the other parents, “I moved to Triangle in 2008, and of course I’m wondering what their school district is like, and I wasn’t impressed. I didn’t visit. I just did online research and I didn’t see great reviews from other parents.” Parents paid close attention to a very complicated method that evaluates schools to include a value-added measure and is intended to hold schools accountable for growth from year to year rather than the performance of a particular group of students from one year to the next.

Yet, they clearly didn’t go by ratings because the schools in their own neighborhoods are rated equally with Sunrise Academy. Each of the home districts had about the same test scores and graduation rates. Without exception, parents said their children needed to be challenged; they needed to be in a strong, structured program, and they just did not trust that the public schools would be able to provide that for their children. Jeff stated, “I check the websites. The school ranking. … And I need to find a school for my kids, to challenge them.”

This tends to support Lamdin and Minstrom (1997), who argued that school choice options ought to be measured on both student outcomes and parents’ satisfaction. However, one issue with the school ratings is that measuring student outcomes is difficult even with standardized testing. Teachers view the test-driven culture as punitive, and the motivation for
students to pass the test so they can graduate from high school is not always enough to keep students engaged in the classroom. Another problem is that the report content changes from year to year based upon what the state board of education elects to count as a benchmark.

2) Parents’ Negative Perceptions of Public Schools

Parents’ perceptions of suburban public schools reflect a concern that the public school teachers are not able to provide the same kind of unique one-to-one attention as teachers at their charter school. Jackie explained her stance on the public schools stating, “I can only speak about my perception... I don’t know if it’s the sizes of the classes or the amount of students, but they seem to be overwhelmed, which to me may affect their um, you know, their involvement.”

This study illustrated parents’ frustration with the public schools, many of which are also failing year after year without closure. Another parent, exasperated with the long daily commute to and from the city, said, “Why can’t our schools [her local public school] be as good as Sunrise, and then we can get out of the way,” This comment is especially noteworthy because charter schools were never intended to provide options for suburban parents. They were created as options for parents living in failing inner city schools. The fact that Sunrise is drawing students away from the participants’ own suburban districts has an effect on both the suburban district and the school district where they’re sending their students.

Charter schools are often accused of robbing the best students from the public. This is a hard argument to counter because, while they are required to accept all students without regard to home district, no doubt they become a self-selecting school. Sunrise has a reputation for having a strong curriculum, strong discipline, ample parent involvement, and accessible
teachers. Students do not have a choice not to participate in their education at Sunrise, because they are part of the learning team.

The Sunrise parents interviewed for this study stated clearly that the charter schools are alternatives to suburban as well as inner city public schools. Parents did not feel that the public schools would provide their students with the individual attention that they need and deserve. Jeff’s comparison of public versus charter schools was concise, “Ah, compare with the public schools… it was at that time at the fifth grade I asked the teacher, ‘Could you please set up any, like, tutoring, anything for my son because he needs help. He doesn’t understand you. He needs a lot of ESL.’ They said, ‘No, sorry, we don’t have anything like that.’ Public school you know they are … They mostly … are like this. No competition.”

Parents stated repeatedly that public school teachers appear to be overwhelmed in the classroom. Olivia had this to say on the issue, “I don’t think that they’re pushing beyond the potential that the children can do. … I want to say it’s more of a, I mean, a lazy approach sounds bad, but to not really put forth in all of your efforts to make sure that the children excel it’s, to try and do it later on, it’s going to be bad.”

Interestingly, they did not visit the schools or sit in the classrooms, but concluded that the schools cannot handle them based on their own perceptions that the public schools are filled with unmanageable students. Parents had attended meetings either in the community or the schools and observed what they perceived as ill-mannered students and bad behavior.

3) School Safety

On the morning of April 20, 1999, millions of parents across America packed their children off to their neighborhood school. Within the next twenty four-hours those very same parents, along with teachers and administrators all across America, would begin to rethink
how public schools can best prevent gun violence, and how they must react, communicate, and inform the community in the event of a crisis. The Columbine massacre on that day exposed just how vulnerable suburban schools are to gun violence. Parents must believe that their child’s school is a safe learning environment.

Parents in this study had very strong feelings that public schools were not safe. They cited the use of metal detectors in public school buildings and the visibility of police in the buildings as indicators that schools are not safe places. Olivia’s comments about school safety reflect the dichotomy of school security strategies. “They [public school] don’t have security guards, they have actual police officers that have to be at the school because of the level of violence that is distributed here. Now for some odd reason, I mean you guys have children here also, but why is it that there are no metal detectors that are needed, and yet you guys haven’t had an incident?”

The literature about school safety (Lamdin, 1997; Welch, 1997) maintains that suburban residents prefer more and better teachers, academic rigor, and well-mannered, well-disciplined students to increased security, believing that school safety would follow from those initiatives. Olivia’s opinions reflect that, “At public schools you know you guys may get detention for fighting, there you go. Here you’re expelled. I absolutely love it. It’s like zero tolerance, which is one of my, you know you’re here to learn, not to beat each other up because someone was on Facebook with someone’s boyfriend.” This is especially interesting in light of the Sunrise parents’ perceptions about school safety. Each mentioned the fact that there are no metal detectors at Sunrise Academy. They view this as a signal that the school is safe and therefore does not need metal detectors.
However, these perceptions are not grounded in reality. There have been recent instances of violence in the school, teachers have been assaulted, students have been assaulted, and weapons and drugs have been discovered in the school. One of my own students handed me a bullet that he found in the gym, turning it over to me as if it were merely a discarded pencil. Specific threats have been made toward the school. In December 2014, a credible threat was made toward the school and reported to administrators by the Cleveland police. Rather than close the school down for the day, school authorities decided to keep it open. That day we did have police in the school patrolling. Parents, who were also police officers, patrolled the halls. It was a very tense, very uncomfortable situation for students and staff. We were just very lucky. That day could have just easily gone the other way, with disastrous consequences. This was likely the manifestation of the violent culture that we live in and the predisposition to violence in schools.

4) Parents’ Perceptions of Sunrise Academy

The findings from this study indicate that parents are looking at more than the convenience of a neighborhood public school. Parents seek to be active members of the learning team that includes the student and teacher. They presented very specific expectations from the school and were committed to participating in their child’s education as an authentic partner.

Parents selected Sunrise because they believed that a charter school can and does suit their demands for a free, robust education that incorporates the advantages of private schools. Jeff summed it up by saying, “I don’t want a Catholic school. I don’t want a private school.” Terry concurred, believing that Sunrise offers private school amenities, such as teaching students to think critically. She described public schools as preparing kids for prison. Parents
liked the extracurricular activities and the focus on hands-on activities inside and outside the classroom found at Sunrise Academy. Consider Olivia’s synopsis, “When you look at, on paper, the results that this school [Sunrise] is giving versus public schools then you have to question, ‘What are they doing better?’ And they don’t have the union. They’re keeping their teachers. The teachers at public schools are nice, but they’re not as attractive as the teachers that I’ve found at Kingstown and here.” Jackie views the parent-teacher relationship as the main reason she keeps her son at Sunrise, “…But my experiences has been, you know, with the smaller, the charter schools, the teachers seem to be more involved, you know, because it seems like it’s smaller. They have their eyes on kids a little more. I get more involvement from them. I get um, you know, um ... We have more conversations. If things are going wrong, I hear from them. I get emails. I can email them. I get responded to. I appreciate that, and I don’t feel confident that I would get that in public schools. I... I’m afraid to even try, because my perception is a lot of teachers don’t care.” Christine agreed that Sunrise teachers pay close attention to students, “Something’s going on with your school. I can’t pinpoint it, but here Justin, from what he tells me, they, they pay attention. Meaning that they know ... They’re paying attention. Meaning, okay Justin, you slacking. ‘Cause he even told me a couple times, he said, ‘Yeah, Mom, I fell asleep in class and she caught me.’ Good, ‘cause if she would have called me, I would have been down there, for real...” Teachers at Sunrise are perceived as competent professionals working tirelessly to help students succeed. All parents interviewed cited Sunrise’s high teacher quality.
Parent Engagement

The Sunrise parents in this study reflect the type of parent most school districts crave. Despite having their own busy work and personal schedules, they are actively engaged in their children’s education. Looking at their motivations through the theoretical lens of parent engagement, this study explored how they engaged in school choice. Upon delving into their authentic, day-to-day activities and interactions with teachers and administrators at the school, the Sunrise findings reveal a unique relationship between the parents and the school. Consider Olivia’s comments about the way she parents her children compared to public schools, “I think it’s the culture. When, and it works both ways, with home and school. I mean with parents you have to be involved with the situation and if parents are not like... My sister, she wants to make sure, you know, my nephew’s okay. But she pretty much leaves it up to me. Like I get him every other weekend. Everybody always wants to know, ‘What are you doing with your girls that you’ve gotten three geniuses? How did this happen?’” The findings in this study reflect a commitment on the part of the parents to actively participate in the learning process.

The empowerment of parents and the parent school relationship. Parents expressed that they do, in fact, feel that they are engaged in the learning process and not viewed as simply chair covers at parent meetings. Embedded within these intangible aspects of the organization’s culture are the educational philosophies of its founders, who held a very clear mission, which focused on creating high quality urban schools, free of charge. Parents in this study are looking for amenities typically expected in private schools such as more engaged teachers and a higher quality education. Based on their descriptions of their experiences with Sunrise, parents seem to be finding these things.
Although all Sunrise parents in this study shopped for schools, their choice was initially based upon on external school ratings. Once parents visited Sunrise, they described experiencing intangible aspects of the school that made them want to be a part of that community. Parents in the Sunrise study were seeking verifiable statistics. They wanted to know that there are benchmarks that their children must reach, and they want to know what those are so that they can help their students move on to the next one. Moreover, they are very willing to commit to a significant amount of time to guarantee their child's achievement and will not leave that entirely up to the schools.

Terry discussed the importance of teaching children “how to live in two worlds”, “You can go to college and get some remedial classes but if no one imparts in you how to act and how to—I used to, I would correct my kids. …So, my thing is, in the classrooms, if your child says, ‘Well, he ain’t...’ stop him. … because if mom says, ‘Ain’t got, don’t got, he be, she be,’ this is the only place that will teach a child how to speak so that when they have that job interview, he doesn’t say, “He don’t got.” And that’s the difference between a corporate job and looking like somebody from the hood. … ” Like the other participants, Terry believed that education is not static. Parents viewed their child’s education as process involving home and school.

**Unexpected findings.** While the parents offered unique insight into the process of engaging in school choice, they said little about the nonacademic aspects of traditional public high schools that don’t exist at Sunrise Academy. For example, none of the parents brought up high school football, homecoming, or school dances: things that were important to me many years ago, and were important aspects of my own children’s high school years more recently. Olivia added, “… the computer’s there, so when you’re sitting there, the person on
the couch can see exactly what you’re doing. So I know what you’re doing. You could be slick, but I’m just saying, when you’re looking at your grades, so am I. And that’s what he needs.” The way that teenagers socialize now is also very different from my own experiences in high school where Facebook, Twitter, cell phones, and other social media platforms did not yet exist. Parents in this study viewed themselves as the sentinels of rigorous academic programming. They are very closely watching how their children are socializing and with whom. Perhaps this is a signal that provincial attitudes about public education are shifting.

**Intellectual Goals and Implications**

This study was designed to offer insight into the complicated school choice debate from the parents’ perspective. One intellectual goal was to better understand the reasons suburban parents do not choose suburban schools. The second goal was to help determine what factors specifically contributed to parents’ selection of Sunrise. These findings will help enlighten school administrators, like me, who are in the business of recruiting and retaining students. The findings are noteworthy because they reflect new information from the unique voice of the parents. This data can and may influence practices that are perceived as critical to parents.

**Implications**

Participants in the Sunrise study represent a small but growing number of parents opting for something other than the neighborhood public school. As more charter schools materialize, both in urban areas and suburbs, it is vital that two things must occur: First, charter school leaders must exercise caution with regard to rapid growth or expansion and must stay focused on the mission for which they were chartered. Charter networks, including
the one in which Sunrise belongs, risk building the very same bureaucracy they initially sought to overcome.

A cookie-cutter model imposed on groups of charter schools may destroy the uniqueness of schools like Sunrise, which thrive on that uniqueness to succeed. Parents have stated that they are willing to pull their students from an inattentive school. Since charter schools are funded on a per pupil basis by each state, this could result in the eventual demise of the school. Turnamian (2011) changed his stance somewhat on his views about charter schools as tools for education reform, following his tenure as the founder of a charter school. He later came to believe that charter schools were spreading too quickly. This is a significant point and one that I agree with. Charter school expansion is happening very quickly in Ohio. Unrestrained, and in some cases unmonitored or carelessly monitored, growth has provided many opportunities for charter school opponents to cite examples of mismanaged charter schools with money going, not to the students, but flowing instead into the pockets of the charter school authorizers or managers and management companies.

This phenomenon of suburban parents opting for charter schools has ramifications for both charter schools and suburban schools. When students opt out of small suburban districts of several thousand, the district is left holding the bag because the schools have to educate whoever is left in that classroom, and do the best they can with the state money following the children to whatever charter school they've chosen. Parents didn't care. A suburban principal in this very situation stated to me, “I’m anxious to find out why I have to pay tuition for my students to go to your school.”

Organizational change in educational systems is slow despite an urgent need to revise and repair it. When looking closely at those rare schools where the outcomes defy the odds
we see a pattern of effective and creative leadership among staff, faculty, and administrators. In order for a school to be successful its educational leaders must first have a passion for teaching and learning.

**How this data can inform Sunrise’s programming.** Charter schools are not immune from bureaucracy, including the barrage of new testing requirements from the state of Ohio. Sunrise risks losing its distinctiveness because of state and federal mandates that result in restricted teaching time in the classroom, straying from the original intent of a charter school, which was to provide a different type of education for some students. They were never intended to replace traditional public schools entirely.

School leaders need the freedom to experiment with curriculum, teaching methods, and the ability to modify, that which does not work. School leaders require the capability to surround themselves with cream-of-the-crop teaching and administrative staff. Team strategies must be implemented reflecting an appreciation for diverse values of those concerned with the education of a child including teachers, parents or guardians, administrators, and others.

Organizational rituals serve to unify and promote shared values. The rituals observed by Sunrise parents, such as posting the students’ colleges acceptances on a wall, are built and become tradition. Posting the kids on the wall who get the scholarship shows the letter grades, you know. [My daughter] says, “I want to be up there fifteen times like Mary. I want to, you know, be accepted to all these colleges, they’re up there. I can’t wait for my picture to be up there.” These shape culture and inform what is said publicly and tacitly about the organization. Through programs initiated in the school, parents gain an understanding of the students’ individual learning styles and intelligence, and develop strategies to adapt these to
different situations and tasks. Parents in this study appreciated Sunrise’s efforts to instill in students lifelong learning skills, including self-assessment, goal-setting, critical thinking, information processing, problem solving, effective communication, collaboration and cooperation, self-discipline, and creative expression. These intangible aspects of Sunrise Academy were deemed vital components of education by parents.

Sunrise has an excellent public relations division and recently has been able to do what many strong suburban schools do, that is to market and showcase the students’ successes. This strategy supports the public perception of what type of school it is. Parents at Sunrise supported findings of other studies (Renzulli et al., 2011) that have found charter school teachers to be more satisfied than traditional public school teachers. That likely carries over into the relationships that they develop with students and parents. All parents in this study agreed that the teacher had a meaningful part of the triad and was a critical component of a successful education for their children, despite the fact that charter schools have more teacher turnover than traditional public schools. Parents in this study also mentioned specific teachers who have made extra efforts to help their students.

**Significance of Analysis Regarding Charter Schools**

The results of this research study provide scholar practitioners with an increased level of insight into how parents process information about schools. Prior studies on parent engagement in charter school options have yet to generate much qualitative, in depth research about the process. This study helps to build on the numerous quantitative data showing the growth of charter schools. By offering more than one perspective, in this case, the very important voices of the parents, it provides added depth and new dimensions to the study of
parent engagement. While it is troubling to note that there remains a wide gap between public education outcomes in the suburbs and in the urban communities, those inner-ring suburbs in the Cleveland area are already feeling the impact of charter schools on their operating budgets. There are plenty of examples of ways charter schools are working successfully. There are some serious conversations that must take place with regard to how school districts incorporate some of the components charter parents deem important in school selection.

**Local versus national charter school discussions.** As more charter schools materialize, both in urban areas and now in suburbs as well, it is vital that two things must occur: First, charter school leaders must exercise caution with regard to rapid growth or expansion and must stay focused on the mission for which they were chartered. Charter networks, including the one in which Sunrise belongs, risk building the very same bureaucracy they initially sought to overcome. A cookie-cutter model imposed on groups of charter schools may destroy the uniqueness of schools like Sunrise, which thrive on that uniqueness to succeed. Parents have stated that they are willing to pull their students from an inattentive school. Since charter schools are funded on a per pupil basis by each state, this could result in the eventual demise of the school. Charter school expansion is happening very quickly in Ohio. Unrestrained, and in some cases unmonitored or carelessly monitored, growth has provided many opportunities for charter school opponents to cite examples of mismanaged charter schools with money going, not to the students, but flowing instead into the pockets of the charter school authorizers or managers and management companies.
Limitations

This study contributes to a qualitative understanding of how suburban parents made the decision to select a charter high school rather than a traditional public high school for their children’s education; however, limitations in the study do exist. The most obvious limitation is that this study was targeted to enrollment at only one specific charter school, which also happened to be a high school. Parents were interviewed in depth only about their selection of a secondary school. Elementary and middle school parents may have different goals and selection criteria in school placement. Additionally, parents from a different charter school, which may be chartered specifically to address issues of learning differences for example, may report very different reasons for their school selection.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has the potential for expansion in a number of areas beyond the limitations outlined. Citing a lack of qualitative research on the issue, researchers (Loeb et al, 2011; Valant and Kasman, 2011) suggest further research is needed to analyze gains in student achievement under school choice program options. They also acknowledged a lack of information on their long-term effectiveness. Given that impetus, more long-term studies should address a specific group of tracked students from kindergarten to 12th grade. Future studies may consider such additional questions as:

1. What are the findings if this study is replicated with parents from the same public district?
2. What are the selection criteria for suburban elementary and middle school parents in selecting a charter school?
Conclusion

The findings from this study helped to give meaning to parents’ choice in public education. This analysis has focused on the lived experiences of five suburban parents who are vigorously involved in their children’s education. Parents exercised school choice options through active engagement in the process of both selecting and declining available options. This resulting information highlighted the emerging need for more and better relationships between home and school to support the parents’ momentum in supporting options that will benefit the child at the center.

My professional work experience in a very high poverty, high achieving charter school gives me reasons to be optimistic. Too often the bar is lowered to the point that high school students are handed over to colleges ill prepared in basic math and writing, and lacking proper study habits. At Sunrise, students achieved, not only in test scores, but also in many other ways. Most of the students will graduate, and the majority will go on to college.

The qualitative data detailed in this study supports the significance of public perception of schools. Sunrise is likely no safer than any other school, nor are the teachers any more committed than any good teacher. However, operating without some of the constraints of traditional public schools, teachers are perceived to be more competent and more caring toward each individual student.

Postscript: Where Do We Go From Here

I have tremendous respect for the parents in this study, both because they were so well educated about school choice themselves and because they also recognized that they were part of something bigger. They built their own community of parents, one without any geographic
border, but bound together by a singular goal of securing excellent education for all students. It is necessary to honor the voices of the parents and to acknowledge that parents must have an equal place at the table as school options are debated. Districts need to be reminded that parent engagement is one significant reason why schools succeed or fail. There are real consequences for the community when parents opt out of a particular public school.

I left Sunrise a few months after conducting this study and am currently working for a small non-profit economic development organization in the community of Chardon, Ohio, a very tight knit community 30 miles south east of Cleveland. I have been invited to serve on a newly created business advisory committee convened by the local school district superintendent. The schools are not dissimilar from Sunrise’s college prep focus in that the current topic deals with the statewide program changes in accessing college courses at the high school level.

**Why should we pay so much attention to the parents?** The decisions made by parents to enroll or un-enroll their child in a school have significant impact on both the school that they're going to and the school that they're leaving. Whether based in reality or perceptions, parents’ choices are driving the economy of the school. That is important not only because of the dollars involved, but because these decisions also pull and tug at the social and cultural capital within the school. This is an exciting time to be involved in K-12 education because it is changing; now is the time to make it healthier.

In this study I offer a small glimpse in to the mindset of parents who are engaged in public education. I share their voices in this platform because no one has heard from them before on this topic. As a charter school administrator was imperative for me to know specifically what parents wanted from Sunrise. As a parent, it was important to know that my
own children were going to be taken care of. Like the Sunrise parents, my husband and I sat with our own children, read to them and paid attention to homework. That’s not enough and parents know it's not enough; we know that we need to be right on top of what’s happening tomorrow because we don't see twelfth grade as the last grade.

Do we have any obligations to the parents? Parents are aware that their schools should be better. They are demanding that to some extent by not passing local school levies, as that is what seems happen. Parents get frustrated and then they vote with their feet and leave the district and they vote to say no to increased property taxes that will not directly benefit their child. Like the parents I interviewed for this study, our family did the same thing. We are grizzly mama and grizzly papa parents. First and foremost we will do whatever it takes to protect and grow our children into productive citizens. Parents, myself included, are shouting in new ways that you cannot experiment with my child anymore. My study corroborated that parents recognize that all schools should be more like Sunrise in its student-centered approach. My identified themes demonstrated that the issue is not just about money or test scores. Learning can happen on a playground or on a parking lot. Most importantly, allowing parents to say, “here is why I chose this school and here is what my children did with that education” validates that it can be done for everyone.

What lessons from the charter school can and should implemented? Parents at Sunrise believed that teachers were more caring than traditional public school teachers. Sunrise teachers and administrators are identified as good teachers because they are perceived as being passionate about what they do in the classroom or managing the school. Parents recalled times when teachers showed up at students, events even in the summer. I still receive phone calls from parents on occasion and am in touch with both parents and graduated
students. Like most Sunrise teachers, I remain connected with former students on Facebook and other social media sites. These efforts reflect a mutual and genuine relationship among parents, teachers, and students.

In the end, each and every teacher had his or her own little group of students, like mine, who were either part of an official or unofficial club or sport or group so that no one was left out. These strategies are easily replicated at any school. Teachers want to be effective; nobody goes to college to be a bad teacher; everybody wants to come out and a really good teacher. School boards and school administrators need to make me sure that happens. As educators, we must look at what is working and leave everything else that doesn't work in the dust. Charter schools may not be the answer; but we now know more about successful practices at Sunrise deemed important to parents. Those policies and practices can be replicated easily. Delivering high quality tuition-free education is complicated but far from impossible.
References


APPENDIX A: Participant Recruitment Letter

You are being invited to participate in a study that explores your experiences with school choice. I am interested in learning more about your role as a suburban parent who has selected a charter school for your child rather than your home district school. My name is Sharon McGraw and I am an administrator at Horizon Science Academy Cleveland. I am a graduate student at Northeastern University. This study will serve as my doctoral thesis. Dr. Billye Sankofa-Waters, Northeastern University, is supervising me.

Participation in this study will involve completing three interviews with me conducted either in person or over the phone. The first will be a short interview of between 20-30 minutes. In this interview I will ask you a few demographic questions (such as your name, age, gender, etc.) I will explain the study to you and go over the Informed Consent Form with you, which must be signed and returned to me prior to the interview. This will also be a chance for us to get to know each other so I will ask you a bit about yourself and answer any questions you might have about me, and about the study.

The second interview will take approximately 60- minutes. In this interview you will be asked to describe in detail your own educational experiences and how you have made educational choices for your child(ren). This interview will be audio-recorded and the recordings will be transcribed either by me or a professional transcriptionist service such as Rev.com. During the transcription process confidentiality will be maintained. All identifying features such as names, organizations, and locations will be disguised in order to ensure your privacy. After the interview is transcribed I shall analyze the data in order to understand your experiences and your methods of school selection. All recordings, transcriptions, and researcher notes related to your interview will be stored in a locked cabinet, and will be accessible only by myself. The third and final interview will involve a brief meeting, about 15-20 minutes, either by telephone or in person to clarify any information or discuss other study related issues.

Benefits to you from participating in this research may include making a contribution to a deeper understanding of the issues of school choice and how parents make choices about school placement. In order to qualify for participation in this study you must be a parent of a current or former Horizon Science Academy student residing in a successful home school district. A successful school district is identified as one that is rated “Effective” or better on the state of Ohio annual school report cards.

If you meet the criteria for participation and you are interested in discussing your experiences please contact me by email at mcgraw.s@husky.neu.edu.

Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any point in the study. It will also be confidential. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this study. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sharon McGraw
Student Researcher
APPENDIX B - Informed Consent

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s)  Principal Investigator: Billye Sankofa Waters, PhD.  
Student Researcher: Sharon McGraw

Title of Project: Public Options: An Analysis of Parental Choice at One Charter School in Cleveland, Ohio

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate because you have chosen a charter school for your child(ren) rather than your home school district.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to learn more about school choice through the parents’ perspective. The research will investigate what parents seek in education programs for their children.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to meet with Sharon McGraw 3 times over about a 3-week period beginning this spring for varying lengths of time. The first interview will consist of me obtaining background information about you and your child. This will last about 20 minutes and may be done over the telephone. The second interview will last about 1 hour. This will be done in person at a location of your choice. During this interview you will be asked to provide details about your experiences with school choice. The third and final interview will last about 20 minutes and may also be done in person or by phone. This final interview will help fill in any gaps in information.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interviews will take place either by phone or at the location of your choice. We can also meet at the high school. The first interview will last about 20 minutes, as will the last one. The primary interview will last about one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
I do not anticipate any risk or discomfort to participants.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**
There will likely be no immediate benefit to you. However, the information gained from this study may help other parents who are seeking non-traditional schools for their children.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your identity as a participant in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

The original interview files (MP3 files) will be saved on the researcher’s private, password-protected computer. This is backed up to an online server, which is also accessed by password only. Clean copies of original data will be stored on an external disk drive. Likewise, security measures and storage methods will be developed for protecting the identity of the parents. All identification markers will be removed or replaced. A pseudonym will be ascribed to each participant.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
Participation is strictly voluntary.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment solely because of my participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a school parent.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Sharon McGraw at mcgraw.s@husky.neu.edu or by phone at 216-316-4639. I am primarily responsible for conducting the research. You can also contact Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, the Principal Investigator, at b.sankofawaters@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No
**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
No

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
You will be one of 4-6 parents interviewed for this research.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

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