Conversion Charter School Leaders' Perceptions of School Change: A Narrative Inquiry

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Conversion Charter School Leaders’ Perceptions of School Change:

A Narrative Inquiry

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by

Bridget Dwyer Ramsey

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Dr. Susan Korach
Abstract

Three decades of change efforts in American urban public school districts to improve educational opportunities for students have had a lackluster impact on student achievement. For students living in areas of concentrated poverty, achievement gaps and drop out rates remain unacceptably high. These gaps were brought into stark relief in the city of New Orleans following the devastating flooding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August, 2005.

This qualitative study is about school change from the perspective of school leaders who were hired to run the converted Orleans Parish schools. These experienced, former Orleans Parish school administrators took on leadership roles in a time of personal hardship and collective uncertainty for the future of the city. They did so with the express charge of improving educational opportunities and demonstrating improved student achievement over the course of the five years granted in their respective charter contracts. Using narrative inquiry, the personal stories of how these leaders went about opening and building their new organizations were mined to discern changes in the routines and practices, referred to in the literature as the grammar of schooling, post-Hurricane Katrina. Through the telling of their stories, evidence of innovation in the systems of schooling, including but not limited to teacher recruitment, induction, and development practices, authority and power distribution, knowledge transmission regarding vision and goals, was examined. The study aimed to illumine the perspectives of these principals.
regarding their leadership experiences and changes they were making in their organizations to improve student achievement.

Through the rapid authorization of conversion charter schools by the OPSB and the state take-over and creation of a majority charter-operated public education portfolio of schools, a new age of accountability has emerged in the city of New Orleans. This study brings to light changes in the grammar of schooling taking place in the conversion charter schools as revealed by the school leaders.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Ever since public education became compulsory in the United States in the 1920s, stakeholders have expressed concern about the quality of education received by students attending public schools. Parents, educators, students, business, industry, politicians, and academicians continuously debate the quality and effectiveness of public education. From state to state and from suburbs to cities, the quality of educational opportunities available to students and families is varied and academic effectiveness as evidenced by stark learning achievement gaps is often lacking. Urban centers with high concentrations of poverty continue to demonstrate the greatest gaps and deficiencies in student learning. Despite three decades of change efforts in American urban public school districts to improve educational opportunities for underserved students, minimal impact on student achievement has been made, as evidenced by test scores (Haycock, 2001). For students living in areas of concentrated poverty, achievement gaps and drop out rates remain unacceptably high.

New Orleans, Louisiana, has been a poster child for failed education reform. For the majority African-American student population enrolled in New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS), educational opportunities have been abysmal for years (Miron, 2008; Dingerson, 2006). By 2005, the district had become a showcase of problems common to
urban schools: persistent poverty, racial segregation, deteriorating school buildings, low student achievement, and student transience (Kozol, 1991; Hill & Hannaway, 2006). Local politics, including union influence, compounded and stymied change efforts (Tillotson, 2007). Crumbling school buildings, indicted employees, fiscal mismanagement, and the academic failure of its students characterized the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) system (www.tulane.edu/cowen_institute). In Louisiana, students are required to pass the standardized Graduate Exit Exam (GEE) in order to earn a high school diploma. By all indications, the 2004 school year results for students attending high school in New Orleans were a testament to the system’s failure to prepare students to meet the challenges of a vastly competitive world. The scores showed 96% of NOPS high school students testing at below basic proficiency in English, and 94% testing at below basic proficiency in math (www.doe.state.la.us).

The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) overseeing district schools in 2005 was plagued by charges of mismanagement, infighting, and corruption (Gambit, 2004). Years of union influence, entrenched power bases, entrenched poverty, limited support for local funding of schools, and the turnover of nine temporary or permanent superintendents since 1996 hindered reform efforts (Hill & Hannaway, 2006). By the fall of 2005, the school district was under a federal investigation. However, in August 2005, the “system” that had underserved generations of children and which had proven to be resistant to myriad efforts to stop the downward spiral of academic underachievement and low rates of school completion (Miron, 2008; Beabout, 2008) was literally submerged by a natural disaster in the form of a Category Four storm, Hurricane Katrina. The floodwaters that breached New Orleans’ levee system destroyed the physical structures of over 70% of the
city’s schools, disrupted the lives of over 400,000 families, and subsequently led to the political dismantling and diminishment of the NOPS system via local and state actions (Tillotson, 2007).

In assessments of post-hurricane damage, fewer than 20 of 127 school buildings were deemed habitable (Urban Institute, 2006). With physical structures destroyed and the organizational structure and personnel dispersed and in disarray, the New Orleans Public School (NOPS) system was paralyzed. Getting district schools up and started again appeared too immense a task for anyone to comprehend or undertake (Tillotson, 2007). Whole neighborhoods had been destroyed. Most of the city’s residents were scattered throughout the country awaiting word on when they might be allowed to return. The National Guard patrolled a city under curfew, and teams of government disaster relief workers waded through debris, going door to door looking for survivors and victims and assessing the extent of the disaster.

The fate of the city’s schools was being decided outside of New Orleans in the halls of the state capitol. Two months after the devastation, in November 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco signed legislation legalizing a state takeover of the majority of the schools once operated by the OPSB via Act 35, (Louisiana House Bill No. 61, 2006). Three months following the storm, the size and scope of the city’s 153-year old centralized school system was truncated and the authority of the OPSB diminished to the direct control of only five of its pre-storm inventory of 127 schools.

Hurricane Katrina presented the opportunity to rebuild a failed urban-American public school system. In the aftermath of the disaster, educational reform unique in the history of the United States was proposed and acted upon (Bring New Orleans Back
Commission, 2006). The possibility of changing the organization, structure, delivery and experience of schooling to create successful educational opportunities for the children of New Orleans began in the first few months after the storm.

From the rapid decentralization dictated by the state, a hybrid mechanism of local and state school oversight and educational delivery emerged. This mechanism, or “system of schools” as it is referred to in planning documents, included a combination of the five remaining OPSB-operated schools, twelve independently operated conversion charter schools authorized by the OPSB, two charter schools authorized by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), 34 Recovery School District (RSD)-authorized charter schools, 33 traditional public schools operated by the RSD, and nine conversion charter schools run by the Algiers Charter School Association (www.tulane.edu/cowen_institute).

School choice presented parents with new educational opportunities for their children, along with the challenge of maneuvering in an educational landscape that was still undergoing shifts. The dissolution of assigned, district neighborhood schools and the establishment of enrollment deadlines and enrollment caps at some schools forced parents to attend to their children’s schooling in a way that did not exist before Hurricane Katrina forced the dismantling of the old system. These events led to an educational condition that was unique to post-Katrina New Orleans. No other school system in the country has undergone such transformation. No other system has experienced such a deliberate, rapid, and extensive process of conversion and creation of charter-status schools. Five years after a disaster of unprecedented proportion, public education in New Orleans is an experiment in public schooling that combines a de-centralized mix
(Maxwell, 2008) of 86 public schools, operated by an amalgam of authorized entities, available to the city’s 40,000 resident school children (www.coweninstitute.com).

Charter schools, which are public schools operated independently of the local school board, often with a curriculum and educational philosophy different from other schools in the district-operated system, are the centerpiece of New Orleans’ reform efforts. New Orleans now has the largest concentration of charter schools of any urban school district in the United States (Cowen Report, 2010). With the student population just over half the size of pre-Katrina enrollments, an estimated 60% of the city’s approximately 40,000 students are currently enrolled in charter schools, making New Orleans the only major city in the United States in which the majority of student enrollment is in charter schools (New Schools for New Orleans, 2008).

Anyone who called New Orleans home and lived through the approach, impact, and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, has a story to tell. These stories reveal dismay, adaptation, flexibility, and courage in the face of extreme, life-interrupting circumstances. The leadership experiences of those who took on the task of organizing and opening schools in the destroyed and still vulnerable city is a yet-unexamined perspective through which school change can be studied.

**Background: The New Orleans School System**

After Hurricane Katrina, public education in New Orleans began to emerge from the mire—both figuratively and literally. The post-Katrina educational landscape gave educators, community members, and politicians a chance to dramatically change education in the city.
Since Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has had a bifurcated school oversight mechanism that consists of the locally elected school board (the OPSB) and the state-run and appointed Recovery School District (RSD). The RSD is a special school district administered by the Louisiana Department of Education, created by legislation passed in 2003 to take over under-performing schools and make them successful (www.rsdla.net). According to a report by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (2009), the governance structure now overseeing the delivery of public education in New Orleans is radically different from that in most cities. New Orleans’ children now attend school in what is best described as a portfolio model of school delivery. In this model, a school district is transformed from a uniform set of district-operated schools to the holder and manager of a portfolio of schools. Just as a financial portfolio is a mix of complimentary stocks and holdings, a school district’s “portfolio” includes a mix of non-profit autonomously operated charter school operators, educational management companies, and other magnet schools that provide educational choice to serve the needs of students (Hill, 2006).

The “portfolio” concept is an emergent 21st century idea reflecting a response to calls for school improvement, decentralization, accountability, and choice (www.crpe.org). The school district sets performance standards, gives providers discretion and flexibility, supports under-performing schools, and eventually closes those that do not succeed. The goal of a variety of educational offerings is embedded in the 1995 Louisiana Charter School Demonstration Programs Law §3972.

Pursuant to the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, which authorized state takeovers of failing schools, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act Nine in 2003, providing for the
mandatory state takeover of schools determined to have failed under the school and
district accountability program. Twenty-six schools across the State were identified as
academically unacceptable and failing to demonstrate annual yearly progress for at least
four years underwent state takeover (www.centerforcsri.org). As of May 2005, three
months prior to Hurricane Katrina, five New Orleans district schools had been officially
deemed “failing” and undergone a state takeover (www.coweninstitute.com/wp-
content/uploads/2010/03/SPELA-RSD.pdf). Acceptable academic status was determined
by school performance, called the school performance score (SPS), in three areas:

1. student academic performance on the appropriate grade-level state
   standardized exam;
2. the school’s drop-out rate;
3. the student attendance rate.

State law set the academically unacceptable (AU) score at an SPS of 60. School
scores were monitored, and schools falling below an SPS of 60 were given four years to
improve. If the school continued in AU status four consecutive years, it was designated a
failing school, moved under the control of the RSD and became eligible for chartering if
an organization came forward with a formal chartering request. Significantly, the passage
and enactment of Act 35 in October 2005, two months following the storm, changed the
SPS scale, applying the AU label to schools with an SPS below the state average of 87.4,
instead of the previous SPS cutoff of 60. Legislative Act 35 expanded state takeover
authority to school districts with more than 30 failing schools, or districts in which 50%
of the student population was enrolled in schools with an AU status, as well as altered the
conditions under which chartering could be authorized (www.doe.state.la.us). Under the
new legislation, the Orleans Parish School District met the revised criteria for takeover: two-thirds of the schools met the criteria for failing. The action by the legislature was viewed as highly political (Perry, 2007).

Chartering presented an attractive means to get the handful of New Orleans schools exempt from takeover operational in the months following Katrina. The stakeholders interested in advancing these schools and severing ties from district control moved quickly after the storm to seek charter approval. Because of their purported start-up nimbleness and an infusion of federal dollars, charter schools provided an attractive alternative to reopening the former district schools (Miron, 2008). Stakeholders representing these schools acted to disengage from district control in order to open schools in an expedient manner and operate autonomously (Miron, 2007).

The Louisiana Charter School Demonstration Programs Law §3972 permitted educational experimentation by city and parish school boards via “the creation of innovative kinds of independent public schools for pupils” (www.doe.state.la.us/lde/charter/2624.htm). District schools in good standing could seek authorization for becoming a charter school from their originating school district; failing schools that had come under state control had to apply to the state for charter authorization. A conversion charter school is a school that existed as a public school prior to becoming a charter school. Once authorized, the conversion charter school then operated under the terms of a charter between the school’s governing board and either the local board of education or the Louisiana State Board of Education.

Under the direction of the charter school leaders who are hired directly by the school’s governing board, all charter schools are accountable for achieving specified
goals within the terms of the charter agreement or the charter will be subject to non-renewal. Accountability, choice, innovation, autonomy and competition are the hallmarks of Louisiana’s Public Charter School Program promulgated in the Louisiana Department of Education’s vision for “creating a world-class system of public education” (http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/charter/2624.html).

In the year following Katrina, twenty-one schools formerly under the control of the OPSB underwent conversion to charter status. The OPSB agreed to direct district control. The newly established Algiers Charter School Association (ACSA) would operate another nine schools. The ACSA had been authorized by the OPSB in October 2005 to oversee the operation of a cluster of schools on the city’s minimally damaged west bank of the Mississippi River in an area known as Algiers (http://educationnext.org/hope-after-katrina). Significantly, all of the converted schools were pre-existing schools in sound academic standing before the storm that did not meet the criteria for state takeover.

Currently in New Orleans, conversion charter schools are emblematic of both the long-sought desire and struggle for change and the implementation of a new way of providing public education in the city. As of the 2009-2010 school year, there were 88 public schools, including charter schools, in New Orleans delivering educational services to 40,000 students (http://www.louisianschools.net/lde/pair/1489.html). The reorganization of the school system following Hurricane Katrina has generated the following portfolio of schools:

- 12 OPSB charter schools serving 7,600 students
- 4 OPSB-operated district schools serving 2,806 students
• 37 RSD-authorized charter schools operated by various independent entities or educational management companies serving 14,800 students
• 33 RSD-operated “recovery district” schools serving 11,900 students
• 2 BESE-authorized charter schools operated by independent entities serving 800 students (Cowen Report, 2010)

While this portfolio of schools continued to change and grow as the city continued its recovery, charter schools were the dominant provider of educational services to the children of post-Katrina New Orleans.

**Statement of the Problem**

The schools of New Orleans had an opportunity to begin with a fresh start after Katrina. Before the storm, the city’s public educational system had not been meeting the needs of their students and families. Yet, the struggles of the NOPS system were similar to those in other urban areas. School reform literature is replete with evidence about the difficulty of reforming schools from within existing systems.

Existing school systems have recognizable and persistent characteristics that comprise the “grammar of schooling” identified by Tyack and Tobin (1994). The grammar of schooling, also referred to in the literature as the *behavioral regularities of schooling* (Sarason, 1985; 1996), or the *deep structure of schooling* (Tye, 2002), includes the regularities in schools’ organization, structure, pedagogy and curriculum practices, practices that have been in place with little or no change for over two centuries of American public education (Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Labaree, 2006). This grammar or deep structure of schooling embodies a sameness of practice and bureaucratic
inflexibility that research identifies as impediments to reform. The existing grammar of schooling makes change difficult.

The existing grammar of schooling organizes schooling around hierarchical structures, with principals and assistant principals overseeing the daily work of the school; yearly, monthly and daily time allotments and compliance and attendance requirements; mandated days for teacher professional development; earned credits for student advancement and requisite conferences between parents and teachers for progress reporting. In middle and high schools, the curriculum remains compartmentalized by subject, and direct instruction serves as the primary pedagogy (Schlecty, 2006). John and Evelyn Dewey’s (1915) *Schools of To-morrow* and “productive learning” remain illusive.

In the majority of schools, the use of technology is restricted and 75% of teachers are incapable of easily using the knowledge-age innovations so familiar to their students—iPods, blogs, Twitter, Skype, and the like (www.pewfoundation.org). Some 43 years beyond Sputnik and 27 years beyond the classic report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the 19th century efficiency model of education is still in play. In a world characterized as the “knowledge age”—webbed by instantaneously available information via internet podcasts, blogs, videos, reports, and the like—the public schools in which children spend almost 3,000 days of their lives appear stuck in a time warp. The process of schooling stands relatively unchanged (Elmore, 2004; Sharan & Tan, 2008).

**What “reform” means.** School reform advocates insist that unless systemic changes occur within schools, thereby “re-writing” the grammar of schooling, educational innovation that meets the needs of 21st-century learners will not take place (Schlecty, 2005; Christensen, 2006). To researchers and educational innovators, reform
means evidence of innovation in areas of teacher training, recruitment, induction, and retention (Schlecty, 2005; Christensen, 2008). Schlecty (2005) identified “six critical systems at the heart of educational innovation” (p. 65). These systems include the induction system: the ways teachers are inducted into the norms and expectations of the organization and developed as educators of children; the knowledge transmission system: processes and means by which organizational knowledge is transmitted to convey mission clarity; the authority system: how power and authority are or are not distributed within the organization; the direction and goal setting system: the clarity and permeability of messages conveying organizational direction and goal setting; the evaluation system: the system used to evaluate people and programs; and the boundary system: the system established to accomplish the work of the school via internal and external boundary determination (Schlecty, 2005).

Reform includes evidence of systems that promote flexibility to design teacher development programs and adapt curricular offerings in ways that meet the needs of teachers and students and provide challenging, engaging work (Schlecty, 2005; Christensen, 2008). Reform requires changes in the power and authority system within schools that encourage the development of teacher capacity and distributes leadership (Fullan, 2001). Reform means changes as well in the way teachers and staff are evaluated and in the ways students are engaged in learning and assessed to determine proficiency and understanding (Elmore, 2004; Schlecty, 2001).

Advocates of chartered schools promised change; they promised to disrupt the grammar of schooling and provide choice, accountability, and innovation (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Vallas, 2007). Charter schools may be viewed as a disruptive innovation,
a term applied in the corporate arena to describe how traditional, dominant businesses are supplanted by smaller companies that initially serve a niche market (Christensen, 2002). The fact that enrollment in charter schools in New Orleans now surpasses enrollment in the traditional NOPS and RSD school settings suggests that charters are a disruptive innovation providing services previously unavailable through the former centralized district school system.

Given the complete upheaval in the educational culture of the city following Hurricane Katrina, the release from bureaucratic constraints through the creation of charters, and the ability of school leaders to start anew, there exists a unique opportunity to examine schooling and discern changes occurring in the grammar of schooling in conversion charter schools in the city of New Orleans through the theoretical framework of Schlecty’s (2005) systems of innovation. New Orleans’ charter schools were chartered under a mandate for educational experimentation and innovation (www.doe.state.la.us/lde/charter/2624.html). The leaders of these conversion charter school leaders are accountable for the direction their schools are taking and the overall functioning of their individual school organizations. They are thus in a unique position to inform us about educational change occurring within schools.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of public school leaders as they establish conversion charter schools in New Orleans Public Schools. Their prior experience as public school leaders provides a portal through which school change can be examined. As Fullan (2001) stated, “An understanding of what reality is from the
point of view of the people within the role is an essential starting point for constructing a practical theory of the meaning and results of change attempts” (p. 137).

This research mines the narratives of the school leaders’ lived experiences to reveal perceptions and practices regarding the grammar of schooling. The use of narratives and narrative analysis “has a great deal to offer disciplines and professions that want to see how knowledge is constructed in the everyday world through an ordinary communicative act—storytelling” (Reisman, 2007, pp. 13-14). The stories of these conversion charter school leaders revealed their cognition, action, or inaction in the form of changes to or institutionalization of the grammar of schooling.

The school leaders in this study, by virtue of the charter agreements, were tasked with organizing their schools to improve student achievement. Given the opportunity to innovate and begin a school without any pre-existing structures, what changes did these leaders enact? What do their experiences provide evidence of change in the organizational, structural, pedagogical and curricular practices of schooling tell us about change?

**Contributions of the study.** This research investigates conversion charter school leaders’ stories about how they were able to use their autonomy to effect changes in their new schools. By mining the stories of conversion charter school leaders in New Orleans, this study makes several contributions to the field of educational change.

The participants’ stories reveal whether the opportunity to begin and lead a school organization without an existing bureaucracy allowed these leaders to break free of the grammar of schooling. These leaders’ experiences provide a lens through which we can discern the extent to which they have been able to disrupt the grammar of schooling.
Previous research on the grammar of schooling has focused on structures and programs (Sharan, 2008; Payne & Kaba, 2007; Goodson, 2001). This study instead explores the grammar of schooling through the direct experiences of school leaders directly involved in the internal construction of conversion charters. Because these charter school leaders previously served as principals in district schools, they possess a unique perspective on the existing grammar of schooling. Their experience equipped them with added perspective about any changes that may be occurring in the deep structures of schooling. Thus, this study expands our understanding of principals’ practices, specifically exploring how experienced school leaders have acted upon the opportunity to create effective systems in support of student learning.

Creating and opening charter schools under the best of circumstances has been likened to building a plane while flying it (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001). In New Orleans, conversion charters were the first schools to open their doors after Hurricane Katrina. The difficulties encountered by the stakeholders cannot be over-emphasized; infrastructure collapse, governmental disarray, environmental contamination, housing shortages, administrator and teacher shortages, wholesale instructional materials loss, and slow and disjointed federal response (Rodriguez & Dynes, 2006) were just some of the challenges the educational stakeholders faced. Five years after efforts to rebuild began, little is known about what is happening inside these schools that speaks to charter claims of innovation and improvement. This study helps shed light on their progress.

Since Hurricane Katrina forced change and attention upon the city in 2005, New Orleans has been called a laboratory of educational experimentation (Jacobs, 2006). Yet, literature on changes in the grammar of schooling in New Orleans conversion charter
schools since gaining independence from the district control is scarce. Literature
documenting the experiences of charter school leaders as they work to improve teaching
and learning within their school settings is similarly limited (Beabout, 2008). This study
contributes to the literature on schooling in post-Katrina New Orleans, and more broadly,
to the literature on the effect of school leadership on educational change. The study
provides a timely and worthy focus on the role of leadership in school change given the
current era of public school scrutiny, accountability, and continued state takeovers of
failing schools.

**Significance of the Study**

The rapid conversion of formerly district-operated schools into new charter
institutions operated by independent non-profit entities provides an important setting for
the study of urban school reform. Study of the direct experiences of school leaders who
were selected and are responsible for meeting the unprecedented need and demands for
educational improvement and accountability will enhance understanding of the reality of
the change process. This study responds to calls by Sarason (1999) and Bidwell and
Yasumoto (1999) for studies using direct observation, informants, and data so that future
reform agents can better negotiate the interplay of structural forces and tensions in the
school setting to advance change in schools. Further, this research answers the calls by
Leithwood (1988, 2008) and Fullan (2001) for inquiry into the conceptual landscape of
leadership in order to better understand the meaning and results of attempts at change.

The post-Katrina reconfiguration and rebuilding of educational opportunities for
the children of New Orleans promised to bring a world-class system of schools that
would provide quality, equity, innovation, and choice (Jacobs, 2006; Alexander, 2006).
The literature suggests that changes in the grammar of schooling are needed to provide both students and their teachers with the flexibility, skills and the technology to advance 21st century learning (Hill, 2008). An exploratory study of educators perceptions on the rebuilding process found that “the state’s structural changes may lead to little significant change unless new ways of interacting with children are considered by the city’s educators” (Beabout et al., 2008, p. 214). The study noted that for the new system of schools to succeed, “it will need to differentiate itself from the old system in its communication strategies, management practices, and performance (p. 227). Conversion charter school principals are key actors in the change process whose voices can inform our understanding of the challenges and successes faced by those tasked with implementing change that promotes student-centric, 21st century learning (Fink, 2003).

At no other time in history has such an opportunity to re-formulate or re-invent American public schooling presented itself. While studies of urban school reform efforts exist in the literature, most of the research focuses on the reform structures or actual changes that have been made to schools. The experiences and perspectives of school leaders provide a window into their conceptualization of the grammar of schooling. This study is a first step in documenting the changes in the grammar of schooling as experienced by the school leaders responsible for creating and sustaining the capacity for change following a disaster the proportion of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent devolution of a troubled urban school district.
Research Questions

The study sought to answer the question: What do the stories of principals who have served as leaders in both district-operated and now charter-operated schools tell us about school change? This fundamental question was addressed through two sub-questions:

1. How do principals describe the organizational, structural, curricular, and pedagogical components of their conversion charter schools?

2. What are the perceptions of the school leaders regarding the six critical systems of schooling (i.e., recruitment and induction, knowledge transmission, power and authority distribution, direction and goal setting, people and program evaluation, and internal and external boundary determination (Schlecty, 2005))?

The experience of conversion charter school principals provides unique insight into the past, present, and intended futures of educational reform efforts in the city of New Orleans. These school leaders were once part of a failing urban school system. In taking on a new leadership roles in a vastly altered educational landscape, they have become part of an experiment in public schooling unique in the history of America and urban public schooling. From the narratives of these school leaders who made the change from leading traditional public schools to leading converted charters, differences in their leadership experiences can be mined for a more comprehensive understanding of the charter school leaders as change agents. In eliciting their direct experiences as school leaders intimately involved in the day to day operations of the school organization, the
study adds to the literature on how leaders of conversion charters are leveraging their autonomy to effect innovations in the deep structures of schooling.

**Role and Perspective of the Researcher**

I returned to New Orleans in 2007 to become part of the change effort that was taking place. My interest in this research was threefold: as a doctoral student, I viewed studying the phenomena of the narratives of conversion charter school leaders as a unique platform from which to examine what changes are taking place in New Orleans’ schools that hold promise for all schools. Further, as a native of the city who grew up deeply aware of the inequities and inadequacies of the city’s educational system, I wanted to learn through the stories of current leaders in the re-creation and school building efforts whether the inequities and inadequacies so exposed following the storm are diminishing and if so, how. Finally, as an educator who worked in traditional public schools outside of the state of Louisiana for 12 years and who then served as a principal in two charter schools—one in its thirteenth year as a parent start-up, and the other in its second year as a New Orleans conversion charter—I have experienced first-hand the challenges of working in charter school settings. My desire to improve instruction and student learning was met with governing board intransigence in the former school and regulatory complexity and the challenges of institutional newness in the latter. In my role as school leader of a conversion charter in New Orleans from 2007-2009, I spent a significant amount of my time managing the complexities of a nascent organization taxed by the needs of a school staff that was overwhelmingly new to teaching and a student population that represented a significant departure from the school’s pre-Katrina, self-selecting student body and their accomplishments. A school leader’s ability to bring about
transformational change is undeniably daunting, and understanding how leaders bring about innovation for improved student achievement is pivotal to breaking the mold of the grammar of schooling that stymies improved educational opportunities for students.

Five years after the storm, the educational landscape is still emerging from the debris and dysfunction. New charter schools continue to be started, and new leaders and new teachers are being recruited and shaped to participate in this educational experiment. Various stakeholders have proclaimed that the new schools in the city will be world-class institutions that will prepare the city’s children to meet 21st century demands.

I believe that charter schools are the predominant vehicle through which this reform effort is taking place. The landscape of educational choices for the children of New Orleans is vastly different from that in any other city in the country. Charter school leaders are at the forefront of decisions shaping the newest 21st century public schools. The chance to redesign schooling to effect changes disruptive to the post-industrial grammar of schooling is in play. Documenting their stories and examining their experiences provides a road map for future direction. It contributes to the literature on challenges to the grammar of schooling and expands our understanding of leaders’ roles in conversion charter schools.

This research on the experiences of school leaders in New Orleans, who essentially “started from scratch” after Katrina and who continue to lead their schools brings to light how they have been able to act upon the opportunity to create and reform educational opportunities via the mechanism of chartering.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

*Genuine educational change remains a desideratum.*
—Sharan & Tan, 2008, p. 1

The educational landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans presents a unique venue from which to study educational reform. At no time in the history of American public education has as large and as rapid a takeover and dissolution of an existing school system, accompanied by an infusion of charter schools and educational experimentation, occurred. Understanding and learning from the experiences of those charged with leading change in conversion-charter settings for the advancement of student learning is the focus of this study.

The literature pertinent to this research draws from four areas, each of which is reviewed in this chapter. First, I review the literature on the grammar of schooling and its identified practices, including its organizational, structural, and curricular components. Research on the intractability and permanence of these components as inhibitors of change in light of identified 21st century learning needs and demands serves to illustrate the difficulties faced by those seeking to challenge the status quo.

Second, I present the literature on school leadership roles in school change. Recent studies on the link between successful school leadership and school improvement
indicate that leaders both directly and indirectly affect organizations’ ability to function effectively (Liethwood, 2006). While past studies have focused on the character attributes, and skills of effective leaders, research on the lived experiences, perceptions, and reflections of individual leaders on their own school change efforts—is emerging and adds to the understanding of how school leaders both perceive and effect school change (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Third, I review the literature on school choice in the form of chartered public schools as a vehicle of educational reform literature on the support for and clamor against this educational model is necessary to understanding the study’s setting for school change.

Finally, I examine the literature surrounding Christensen’s (2006) theory of disruptive innovation and its implications in the six systems of schooling identified by Schlecty (Schlecty, 2005; Christensen, 2008). The theory of disruptive innovation as it relates to the emergence of charter schools serves as the study’s theoretical underpinning for examining change. Charter schools have been touted as engines of innovation (Chubb & Moe, 1990) and vehicles for creating sound educational alternatives of choice for those underserved by traditional schooling. The rapid introduction of charter schools in New Orleans and their outpacing of the re-emergence of traditional schools mark the phenomenon as disruptive and portentous for public education as a whole. Schlecty identified six systems of schooling that require disruptive innovation in order to prepare students for the complexities, ambiguity and adaptability of the 21st century. This framework provides a lens through which the stories of the school leaders can be filtered and analyzed for evidence of school change.
The Grammar of Schooling

Literature on the grammar of schooling as an impediment to school reform illustrates the challenges facing conversion charter school leaders in effecting and sustaining change that marks a shift away from the conventional wisdom about what schools are and a move toward what they should be in the 21st century (Tye, 2000; Hill, 2008). Words such as reform, intervention, restructuring, renewal, reinventing, and transformation have been used to describe years of change efforts to improve America’s public schools (Hargreaves, 1998; Elmore, 2004; Hill, 2006; Hess, 1999). A medicine cabinet of remedies has been deployed in the school reform effort: increased funding, school-based decision making, reductions in class sizes, revisions to curriculum, the adoption of longer school days and years, blocked scheduling, schools-within-schools, standardizing curriculum and assessments, and state receivership (takeover) of failing schools count among the external and internal prescriptions for ineffectual schooling (Elmore, 2004; Goodson, 2001; Fullan, 2002; Squire & Reigluth, 2000; Sharan, 2008).

For the past 17 years, advocates for greater choice in education as a means of stimulating competition and improvement have held out chartered schools as a means to address what is seen in the current public education system as inefficiency and ineffectiveness (Coulson, 2008). Despite change efforts, schools have demonstrated remarkable resilience and resistance to change (Schuster, 2003; Sarason, 1996). Examined by Goodlad (1984), Metz (1990), Tyack and Cuban (1994), Tyack and Tobin (1995), Sarason (1996) and Tye (2000), schools’ entrenched regularities include the organizational, structural, pedagogical and curricula practices of schooling that have been in place with little or no change for over two centuries of American public education.
Deeply rooted features and practices such as the nine-month agrarian-based calendar, age-graded classes, the separation of subject matter, a linear curriculum, and teacher-centered classrooms in which student compliance is expected were found by Tye (2000) to constitute ingrained conventional notions about what school is and ought to be. Tyack and Tobin’s (1994) historical analysis of schooling in America likened the unwritten but understood regularities of schooling to those of native language acquisition and use. One does not necessarily need to know the rules and policies to speak the language—the grammar of schooling is understood. It is when a departure from the conventional is suggested or made that calls for tradition become loudest. The phrase, “the grammar of schooling,” will be used as the referent for regularities and practices of schooling (Sarason, 1996). School reform efforts are challenges to the grammar of schooling.

The organization of schooling. Amitai Etzioni (1975) characterized organizations as social entities deliberately created and often continuously restructured to advance specific goals. Bolman and Deal (2003) agree that organizations exist to aid in the collective endeavors of society. Both rational and post-rational theories of organization have been used in describing public schools and the way in which they are organized (Meyer, 1975; Weick, 1976).

Similar to most organizations, schools are organized and structured to promote order, efficiency, and timeliness of task completion. The structure of the organization serves to formalize or centralize the work of the school via policies and rules, and to establish and delineate roles and reporting boundaries. The work of the school organization revolves around teaching students, commonly called the pedagogical
component, and what they are taught, known as the curricular component. These various organizational components constitute the grammar of schooling and have been corroborated and examined in the literature (Tyack & Cuban, 1994). Unlike strict bureaucratic organizations, schools are distinct, complex, emergent, organizations marked by variations in and interactions among leadership, teachers, student populations, context, and locale, making each school a unique entity (Johnson, 2008).

**Organizational models of schooling.** Four organizational models are prominent in the literature on the organization of schooling: schools as bureaucracies (Hoy & DiPaola, 2007; Chubb & Moe, 1990); schools as loosely coupled social systems (Weick, 1984; Banathy, 1991, 1992); schools as community (Bryck & Driscoll, 1988), and schools as learning organizations (Senge, 1990, 2000; Fullan, 2002).

As complex social organizations, schools mimic the classical ideas and features of bureaucracy posited by structural theorists Frederick Taylor and Max Weber in the late 19th century (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Like organizations found in the business world, schools and school systems are comprised of an identifiable hierarchical structure throughout which power and authority are distributed. They are staffed in a bureaucratized, tiered manner, and held together by rules and policies designed toward a specific goal or outcome—the education of students (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Implicit in the bureaucratic orientation of schools is the notion of bureaucratic organizations as cumbersome, political, and slow to change, and therefore inhibiting school improvement (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Schools veer from a strict rational organization typology in that they are characteristically more diffuse, decentralized, or *loosely coupled* (Ingersoll, 1991).
Weick (1984) popularized the phrase “loosely coupled” in describing organizations comprised of “autonomous elements that are often unresponsive to one another, rather than rationally or hierarchically controlled” (Meyer, 1975). Bidwell’s research (1965, 1997, 1999) contributed to the loose-coupling perspective of schools by identifying the unique work, technology, and clientele of schools. While schools are bureaucratized and regulated from both without and within, the internal functioning and primary work of schools—teaching children—is performed primarily in isolation in an affective, non-tangible, and discretionary manner (Bidwell & Yasumoto, 1999). It is delivered to a clientele of socially and intellectually malleable and socially emergent children and young adults whose attendance is based on legal compliance and is therefore non-voluntary (Ingersoll, 2003). Throughout any given day, administrators make decisions that impact both teachers and students; within classrooms, teacher discretion, granted through what Meyer (1975) described as the logic of confidence, is employed through choices about what to teach and how to teach it. Despite the loose coupling of the organization, Meyer found that organizational stability is present.

Schools are interactive social systems, or what Banathy (1991) called human activity systems engaged “in sets of activities carried out by people who select and organize their activities to attain a purpose” (p. 8). Banathy’s (1991, 1992) work on systems theory and systems inquiry and its application in education (1996) brought the complexity of human activity and its impact on change efforts in schools into the line of sight of education reformers. His research marked a departure from viewing schools as closed bureaucratic systems toward a paradigm of schools as webs of relationships that transcend the boundaries of closed systems. The application of systems thinking to the
educational setting required a new way of viewing change in school. Banathy’s work introduced the concept of *stakeholder* participation and adhered to the belief that lasting change could only occur if “all elements of the system are involved” (p. 3).

Bryck and Driscoll’s (1988) research built on the effective schools work of Sizer (1984) and Metz (1986), examining the patterns of social relations in schools and their impact on student learning. Bryck and Driscoll’s (1988) pivotal work provided an alternative organizational orientation for schools: the school as community. The school-as-community construct established three core identifiable components:

1. Shared understanding of purpose and commitment to community;
2. Shared common agenda of activities for both pragmatic and symbolic purposes; and
3. An ethic of caring or habit of the heart demonstrated by collegial relations and extended teacher roles throughout the school (p.5).

The school-as-community construct was found to enhance both teacher and student satisfaction (Bryck & Driscoll, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1994). The validity of the construct as an effective organizational orientation was bolstered by the work of Senge (1990) on learning organizations and the subsequent research on professional learning communities in school settings (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). This combination of systems thinking with inquiry that values collective aspirations, commitment, and goal attainment generated efforts in schools toward building capacity and away from bureaucratic strictures.

In studying the behaviors of organizations demonstrating resiliency, creativity and survivability in turbulent times, Senge (1990, 2000) called those organizations “learning”
organizations. He found that such organizations engaged in identifiable best practices, or disciplines, that fostered communication and openness at all levels, vertical and horizontal inquiry and feedback, adequate time to learn from inquiries and feedback, and mutual respect and support regardless of where one is situated in the organization (Senge, 2000). The best practices of a learning organization are

- Individual self-mastery, the ability to honestly and openly see reality as it exists and enables vision clarity;
- Mental models, the ability to compare reality or personal vision with perceptions in order to reconcile both into a coherent understanding;
- Shared vision, the ability on the part of a group of individuals to hold a shared picture of a mutually desirable future;
- Team learning, the ability of a group of individuals to suspend personal assumptions about each other and to engage in constructive, participative dialogue; and
- Systems thinking, the ability to see interconnectedness and dynamics in the organization in order to understand the impact of decisions and processes.

In looking at organizational learning in schools, Dufour (1998) delineated six practices in which schools could engage to become what he called “professional learning communities,” capable of sustaining continuous improvement. These are

1. shared mission, vision, and values,
2. collective inquiry,
3. collaborative teams,
4. action orientation and experimentation,
5. continuous improvement, and

6. results.

These practices closely parallel those identified by Senge (2000). Schools engaging in these practices and processes reflect the nature of a professional learning community or learning organization continuously striving to advance student achievement (http://www.centerforcsri.org/plc/elements.html).

Categorizing a school as a distinct model would be to overlook the boundary permeability, human dynamics, and organizational complexity that exist within such organizations. Sharan, Shakar and Levine (1999) suggest that the various organizational orientations “exist simultaneously in the theory and practice of school organizations” (p. 2).

While schools defy a strict theoretical organizational categorization, however, research on urban school change suggests that the bureaucratic structure of school districts and schools continues to make them cumbersome, politically rooted, self-preserving, and slow to change (Sarason, 1996; Tye, 2000; Cuban & Usdan, 2003). Payne (2005) and Sarason (1996) note that the institutional intransigence of schools is reflected in a history of reform attempts with predictable life cycles of introduction, implementation, failure, or assimilation. Ulrich and Smallwood (2002) note that tiered and layered organizations in which stakeholder participation is limited or stymied by boundaries implicit in the structure lack the flexibility and agility to adapt and act quickly. The shifting paradigm for 21st century organizational success is away from rigid bureaucratic structures and toward permeable structures that maximize the “new success factors” of speed, flexibility, integration, and innovation (Ashkenas et al., 2002).
The structural component of schooling. The literature on the organization of schooling suggests that both the organizational and the structural orientation of schools play a role in facilitating student achievement and employee satisfaction (Bryck & Driscoll, 1999; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001; Hoy, Sweetland & Smith, 2002; Schlecty, 2005). Sharan and Tan (2008) identify six fundamental organizational tasks around which schools are structured and which remain constant in the grammar of schooling: the allocation of teachers to classes; the division of students into classes; the allocation of instructional time; the identification of academic curricula; instructional work/pedagogy; and the evaluation of student learning (Sharan, Shakar & Levine, 1999). These tasks have been consistently identified in the literature (Sarason, 1995; Sizer, 2004) and drive the structural design and decision-making nexus of school leaders. For Schlecty (2005), the execution of these tasks occurs within six systems. He asserts that while authority to oversee these tasks rests with the school leader, school leadership is not a guarantee for wielding the influence to bring about change (p. 112).

Structure exists so that the work of the school organization can be accomplished efficiently and effectively. Cusick (1988) asserted that within that structure lie the realities of the school in terms of the use of time, space, and resources, and the human activity of value sets, behaviors, and understandings that the participants in the organization share about those realities. In the present study, the concept of school structure encompasses the formal arrangements that accommodate the goal of schooling: student learning and achievement. Cusick's (1988) classic study of the behaviors and regularities of schooling asserted that no serious work on school improvement should be attempted or could occur without fully understanding school structure and its attendant
realities. Cusick defined school structure as "an abstracted coherence that makes sense of disparate elements" (pp. 4-5). The work of Sarason on the problem of change in schools (1971, 1991) acknowledged the complexities of the relationships between and among principals and teachers, and the function, structure, and traditions of schools.

Structurally, the work of and in schools continues to be modeled after the 19th century bureaucratic economic efficiency model of Taylor and Weber, emphasizing resource management, compliance, standardization, sorting, reporting, supervision, and time (Cohen, 1988). Formalization and centralization are two classic aspects of bureaucracies. According to the work of Adler and Borys (1996) formalization can be coercive or enabling, and centralization can be hindering or enabling. These are significant distinctions in discerning and analyzing the structure and effective functioning of the school organization (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001).

The extent to which an organization has a codified system of rules, regulations and procedures is the extent to which it is formalized (Sinden, Hoy & Sweetland, 2004). Rules are policies and prescriptions for how work is to be accomplished and how members are expected to interact with one another; rules guide actions and behaviors. Routines reflect processes or cultures within the workplace in the accomplishment of the work at hand. The more restrictive the rules and procedures and the more punitive the consequence for failing to adhere to them, the more an organization can be said to have a coercive formalization structure. Coercive formalization has been shown to discourage organizational learning, and produce stress and absenteeism among employees (Sinden et al., 2004). At the opposite end of the spectrum, organizations with enabling structures encourage problem solving, invite interactive dialogue and reward initiative and
innovative ways of responding to complicated or dynamic situations (Adler & Borys, 1996; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

The extent to which employees participate in decision making is the extent to which the organization is centralized. Roles define the hierarchy of authority and reporting and determine who is responsible and accountable for what work. Classic bureaucracies are top-down. Structurally, when authority to act and make decisions is concentrated at the top of the organization, hindering centralization exists. Control, compliance and discipline dominate interactions. Hindering centralization in schools is identifiable in increased supervision, over-standardization of work, and resistance from teachers (Hoy et al., 1983). Organizations with enabling centralization demonstrate flexible, cooperative, collaborative decision-making.

Schlecty (2005) finds agreement among school reformers that “moving the decision making authority down the system, as well as moving the authority to enforce those decisions down the system, results in greater commitment to and passion for the decisions that are made (p. 120). Sinden and colleagues (2004) maintain that enabling centralization results in more productive teaching and learning. In their analysis of enabling school structures, Sinden et al. assert that “the key to success is to avoid the dysfunctions of structure while embracing its positive forces” (p. 464). This can be achieved through the kind of hierarchy that exists in the school and the school’s tolerance for boundary permeability and ambiguity. Schlecty (2005) found that schools that empower those in a position to “see the problems” to develop the “rules by which the problem will be solved” create a “more flexible and responsive” organization (pp. 121-122).
Time as structure. Time is a driving component in the work of schooling and plays a significant role in school change. From the number of instructional minutes in a time-bound school year, to the number of minutes in a school day, to the number of minutes required to earn credit in any subject, to the time in which teachers plan or collaborate or meet formally or informally, time allotments dominate the business of the school. Changes in any of the allotments and uses of time are often met with resistance (Collinson & Cook, 2001).

As a resource, time in schools is identified as both valuable and scarce. Fullan and Miles (1992), in a study of teacher effectiveness, found that the most consistent laments by teachers centered on the lack of time. Time is needed for organizational learning to take place (Senge, 1990). Schlecty (2009) found that “reformers have complained for years that the biggest barriers to school improvement are the inflexible use of time and space and the standardized placement of people” (p. 36). Attention to how time is allotted and used is necessary for gaining stakeholder support in change efforts and creating space for innovation. School leaders who attend to the impact of time on student achievement and overall organizational learning and who impart consistent clarity about the purposes and uses of time foster change-adeptness in their school. Cambone (1994) argues that without a fundamental change in the way time is conceptualized in schools, teacher participation and support of innovation will continue to be tepid.

Enabling bureaucratic structures. Within schools, roles and reporting structures and the work involved in educating students permeates boundaries. On any given day in a high school setting, for example, a teacher’s conversation with an academic guidance counselor about a student’s repeated failure in English, a referral of that same student to
administration for persistent misbehavior in physical education class, and an attendance office report of a sudden rise in absences for the student should lead to flurry of human activity that crosses departments and involves parents. How all this information and the actors involved come together for the benefit of the student is often not delineated. In school settings, this hypothetical student may or may not be overlooked due to a lack of structural support, a lack of communication among actors, a lack of coordinated effort, unavailable parents, time lapse, or all of those variables. How schools use capacity and information means the difference between failure and effectiveness for both the student and the school organization.

This scenario illustrates the need for what Hoy and Sweetland (2001) identify as *enabling bureaucratic structures* in schools. Using Adler and Borys’ (1996) conceptualized formalization of bureaucracies as characteristically enabling or coercive and inquiring into the conflicting views on bureaucratic structural efficacy versus bureaucratic structural hindrance, Hoy and Sweetland (2001) proposed and tested a theoretical construct they termed *enabling structure* (p. 296). To test their construct, Hoy and Sweetland undertook a series of studies to measure the classic structural aspects of bureaucracy in schools, i.e., formalization and centralization. Formalization was conceptualized along a continuum from enabling at one extreme to coercive at the other (p. 306). Centralization was likewise viewed on a continuum from enabling hierarchy to hindering hierarchy. Sampling faculty members in 97 demographically and geographically varied high schools in Ohio, the study confirmed that enabling structure was a construct that could be both reliably and validly measured and that could promote teacher satisfaction and student achievement. Trust, truthfulness, and limited role
conflict were found to be the indicators of enabling organizations. Schools with enabling structures were found to “encourage cooperation, flexibility, problem solving, and broad professional autonomy” (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001, p. 314).

Ashkenas and colleagues (2002) credit organizations through which “information, resources, ideas, and energy” flow quickly as responsive and effective organizations (p. 3). For Schlecty (2005), schools demonstrating such facility are “change-adept schools” (p. 127). Like Christensen (2006), whose work on failure in industry brought to light the often paralytic response of large, inflexible organizations faced with change, Ashkenas and colleagues (2002) argue that 21st century organizations will succeed only if they embrace a paradigm shift from bureaucratic reliance on control and management—Banathy’s “old story”—to organizational features of speed, flexibility, integration, and innovation that maximize human and informational capacity. Hoy and Sweetland's (2001) identification of enabling structures suggests that attention to organizational design and structure can engender school settings that build capacity for responsiveness, flexibility, teacher capacity and problem solving. For Schlecty (2005), disrupting the grammar of schooling means creating enabling structures.

**The curricular component of schooling.** In public schools, the curriculum consists of a scope and breadth of knowledge and skills in specified subject areas that teachers teach and students learn (National Research Council, 2001). Debates regarding what this scope, breadth, and sequence should be can be traced back to the days of Socrates and the Sophists (Steiner, 2007). In the United States, over the past three decades, curriculum concerns in the United States have seen the ebb and flow of support for curricula that promotes cultural literacy, back-to-basics content, functional literacy,
and college prep, as well as standards-based curricula aligned to state-mandated assessments (Fullan, 2001). Parallel with those three decades, innovations in computerized, digital information creation, access, storage, and transmission have occurred outside of the classroom and have become part of the lives of students to a degree that is not reflected in the grammar of schooling.

Unlike traditional public schools that often follow an academic curriculum delineated by state guidelines, chartered schools set their own curricula. Each school’s established academic goals are outlined in its charter agreement, and the school leader is responsible for coordinating and leading the faculty in designing, delivering, assessing, evaluating, and ensuring that the school’s curriculum reflects the established mission of the school. This autonomy affords charter schools the flexibility to provide their students with learning opportunities not dictated by the state. According to a study of research on charter school innovation conducted by Lake (2008) for the National Charter School Research project, 72% of all charter school laws, representing 29 states, have explicit requirements for charter schools to serve as “laboratories” for improved educational opportunities for students.

The debate regarding what students should learn and in what sequence or manner of presentation is ongoing. In a study of influences on high school curricula, Lee and Ready (2009) find that competing and contradictory ideals are at play. On one hand is the democratic ideal that all students should receive equal educational opportunities; on the other is the ideal that students should be afforded choice so that they can pursue individual interests and have their learning needs met. These ideals are being played out
in the national arena of increased standards and standardized testing amid calls for increased school choice options.

Schools today continue to “remain largely grounded in the classical view of knowledge, expertise and learning” (Greenhow et al., 2009, p. 246). In the conceptualization and actualization of this classical view, determinations about what students should know and learn are made outside of schools, curriculum is driven by externally determined standards, and complimentary textbooks, instructional materials, and high-stakes tests are generated by an educational industry (Dede, 2008). Likewise, this classical 19th century view emphasizes formal education in which “there is only one correct, unambiguous interpretation of factual interrelationships” (p. 80).

The lives of students today are significantly different from those of students entering the K-12 system just 20 years ago. Literature on 21st century competencies calls for curriculum that goes beyond the classical view by supporting project-based curriculum aimed at engaging students in collaboration, real-world problem-solving, information and digital literacy, ambiguity-tolerance, flexibility and resourcefulness (Schlecty, 2005; Christensen, 2008). Students need to comprehend interconnectivity and the inter-relatedness of knowledge, thus requiring a shift away from compartmentalized, text book driven learning to curriculum that is research-driven, integrated, and interdisciplinary (www.21stcenturyschools.com).

Research on the use by teenagers of technology in the form of interactive social media—blogging, Facebook, MySpace, and Skype, for example—indicates that the majority of teenagers access the Internet multiple times a day (Lenhart et al., 2007). Teenagers engage in numerous content-creating activities that include conversations, problem solving, web design, on-line journaling or blogging, updating profiles, and video creation and sharing (Lenhart, et al., 2007).
From the vantage point of 21\textsuperscript{st} century communication and learning, Internet use and digital literacy are pervasive in the lives of children and young adults.

Today’s students are digital learners who “literally take in the world via the filter of computing devices” (www.21stcenturyschools.com). Oblinger and Oblinger (2008) report that computerized digital use and know-how, and the expectation of information immediacy in the lives of school-age children are in stark contrast to classroom learning experiences. Students’ facility with and access to computerized technologies in their lives outside of school are juxtaposed against classrooms and teachers with limited knowledge and facility with knowledge-age gadgetry and information access. Likewise, student access to and use of technology in the school setting are limited and controlled by protective filtering restrictions. Creating, supporting, and implementing curriculum that reflects the needs of 21\textsuperscript{st} century learners requires a conceptual shift on the part of educators at all levels of schooling.

The pedagogical component of schooling. Pedagogy refers to instruction strategies used in the classroom setting. Exposure of educational inadequacies and pressure from standards-based reform spurred by the 1991 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has served as an impetus for the application of scientific or evidence-based practice in classroom teaching (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009). Evidence-based practice refers to the use of scientifically proven methods of teaching techniques or instructional practices.

The results of a meta-analysis (Marzano, 1998) of instructional strategies and their effects on student learning identified strategies with a high probability of positively effecting student achievement. The identified research-based strategies include nine instructional practice categories for teachers to employ in the design and delivery of classroom instruction:

- identifying similarities and differences
summarizing and note-taking
• reinforcing effort and providing recognition
• assigning homework and practice
• nonlinguistic representations
• cooperative learning
• setting objectives and providing feedback
• generating and testing hypotheses
• cues, higher order questioning and advance organizers (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

While the average effect size varied and no instructional strategy worked equally well in all classroom subjects and settings, the identified strategies are examples of evidence-based tools for teaching and learning (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

In addition, a study of the effect of instructional techniques on science achievement found that teaching that was student-centric, focused on critical thinking skills, and used hands-on experiential laboratory activities increased student engagement and learning (Van Secker & Lissitz, 1999). Such practices have demonstrated evidence of improved student achievement.

Teaching and teaching for learning are not synonymous. In the urban school context, even the most experienced teacher can encounter challenging classroom dynamics such as students’ varying aptitude levels and learning styles, students who are psychologically unavailable to learning due to socio-economic deprivation, inadequate facilities, and limited curriculum resources. These challenges move teachers to resort to what Haberman (1993) calls the pedagogy of poverty. This teacher-centric model of instruction equates good teaching with classroom management, student compliance with student engagement, and the execution of
routine tasks with academic accomplishment. Literature on effective instruction in urban settings emphasizes the need for culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Anyon, 2005; Delpit, 1996). Culturally relevant and responsive teaching emphasizes personalized learning for students that promotes autonomy, self-reliance, self-directed and responsible learning. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as teaching that helps “students to be academically successful, culturally competent, and socio-politically critical” (pp. 477-478). Drawing on her work with effective teachers of African American children, Ladson-Billings notes that these teachers “demanded, reinforced, and produced academic excellence in their students” (p. 161). Their pedagogy focuses on creating new knowledge and understanding with and for students (Banks & Banks, 1995). Moving teachers from a teacher-centric paradigm to a student-centric paradigm requires leaders to communicate this new orientation clearly and consistently while providing teachers professional development and support.

Schlecty (2005, 2009) contends that schools must change the way they do business, fostering a culture of authentic engagement that taps into students’ desire for meaning and relevance in their lives as opposed to attending school in a ritually compliant manner. Teachers to whom the school’s mission and goals have been clearly articulated must be recruited and inducted into the technical, aesthetic, and conventional norms of the school. The school should be a learning organization in which time for learning and engagement on the part of both teachers and students is created and honored (Schlecty, 2009). Credible, valid, reliable, and trusted evaluation mechanisms should be in place to sustain continuous improvement (Schlecty, 2005, 2009).
School Leadership and School Improvement

School leaders tasked with creating and sustaining organizations responsible for providing improved educational opportunities for children are the focus of the present study. Studies of organizations have linked the influence of leadership on the success of the organization, demonstrating that how leaders think and what they do matters (Yukl, 1989; Drucker, 1999; Fullan, 2001).

Studies on the effects of school leadership on organizational improvement and student achievement have emerged over the past 20 years, and have been conducted primarily within the context of traditional public school settings (Marzano et al., 2005). Within school settings, studies on leadership traits, styles, and behaviors confirm the school principal’s influence on efforts at school change and improvement (Leithwood et al., 2006; Gilley et al., 2009; Waters et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

Hallinger and Heck (1998) produced one of the first meta-analyses of literature that appeared during the years 1980 to 1995 on principal effects on student achievement. The study included 40 published journals, papers presented at peer-reviewed conferences, and dissertations. The study found “a small but direct effect of principals’ efforts on improved learning climate as well as moderate indirect effect of principals’ instructional efforts on student learning outcomes” (Witzier et al., 2003, p. 417). The results noted that “the principal’s role in shaping the school’s direction through vision, mission and goals came through in these studies as a primary avenue of influence” (Heck & Hallinger, 1998, p.160). The study proposed that there are four school conditions through which principals exert influence: through the establishment of purposes and goals; through the
creation of school structures and social networks; through people within the organization; and via the establishment of organizational culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

Principals who were able to move their organizations toward normative change, thereby increasing the school’s capacity to innovate, were found to demonstrate a style of leadership called transformational leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Transformational leadership practices include six dimensions: the school leader’s ability to build school vision and goals; the leader’s ability to provide intellectual stimulation; the school leader’s ability to offer individualized support; the leader’s demonstration of professional practices and values; the leader’s demonstration of high performance expectations for all; and the leader’s development of structures to foster participation in school decisions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

A series of studies concerned with the effects of different forms and sources of leadership conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi (1998, 1999, 2000) found evidence of a direct relationship between leadership, vision and organizational learning. In the 2000 study to determine the effects of transformational leadership on organizational change and student engagement, data was collected from 2,465 teachers and 44,920 students in a large school district. According to Leithwood (1994), transformational forms of leadership emphasize the empowerment of colleagues and the promotion of leadership capacity toward direct leadership by those in the organization most in a position to effect results, i.e., department chairs and instructional coaches. The study found that “transformational leadership has strong, significant effects on organizational conditions and weak but insignificant indirect effects on student participation and identification” (p. 119).
Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) conducted a large-scale quantitative study examining leadership characteristics and practices contributing to school effectiveness. Their meta-analysis of 30 years of quantitative research examined 69 studies involving 2,802 schools and approximately 1.4 million students. The research demonstrated a “substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement” (p. 3). Additionally, the research resulted in the creation of a taxonomy of leadership responsibilities and practices directly correlated to student achievement (p. 13).

In seeking to answer the question of whether educational leadership is directly related to student achievement, Witziers, Bosker and Kruger (2003) undertook a quantitative meta-analysis of studies that examined this question over a ten-year period between 1986 and 1996. The meta-analysis found that effect sizes were small and that there was “no evidence for a direct effect of educational leadership on student achievement in secondary schools” (p. 415). The study found small but significant evidence of direct effect in the area of school climate (Witziers et al., 2003).

Literature on school leader effect on school outcomes has been studied from the perspective of teachers and students via survey data and models of direct and indirect influence. The studies demonstrate that school leadership as demonstrated by what leaders do, the structures they put in place, and the processes they enact or cause to be enacted are directly linked to change in schools that foster teacher development and student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Gilley, et al., 2009).

**Charter school leadership and change.** While a significant body of work exists on the role of traditional school principals and the leadership challenges faced by public school leaders (Yukl, 1989; Ackerman, Gordon & van Der Bogert, 1996; Northhouse,
2004; Fullan, 2005), studies on the work of charter school leaders are limited. Yatsuko (2008), Lake and Hill (2005), and Gross (2006), in their work for the National Charter School Research Project, identify the amplification and extension of leadership challenges faced by leaders in the charter context. In addition to overseeing instruction, attending to school culture, serving as instructional leader, and ensuring that school mission and vision are embodied in the work of the school, leaders of charter schools take on additional work. Charter school leaders function as a central office where policies and procedures are concerned; developing, supporting, and managing staff; obtaining and overseeing effective use of resources; building capacity to serve the needs of the students; ensuring compliance with charter agreements; and serving at the pleasure of a governing board (Campbell & Gross, 2008).

In a study of charter school leaders in six states, Campbell, Gross and Lake (2008) found that charter school leaders came predominantly from traditional public schools, and that they had less administrative experience than traditional public school principals upon taking their leadership positions. The study also found that charter school leaders reported struggling with obtaining and managing facilities, attracting and retaining quality staff, and balancing finances due to often uncertain enrollment. Beabout’s (2008) qualitative study on school principals’ perceptions of leadership in the chaotic environment of immediate post-Katrina New Orleans uncovered concerns about building capacity for change in a setting of turbulence.

Conversion charter school leaders are in a unique position to influence change in school. They are responsible for shaping the structure and culture of the school via instructional leadership and overall school management. Conversion charter school
leaders are in a unique position to influence their schools and create opportunities for knowledge-age learning.

**The School Choice Movement**

Following the 1983 publication and distribution of over six million copies of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, innumerable and varied efforts to improve public schooling throughout the United States ensued (Bast & Walberg, 2004). Reform initiatives included decentralizing the management of schools to promote school-based decision making, creating schools within schools, stiffening student graduation requirements, ending social promotion, and mandating the use of state curricula and assessments (Fullan, 2002; Elmore, 2004).

Conflicting evidence about the efficacy and efficiency of public schooling abounds in the literature (Bracey, 2004; Goodlad, 1999; Cuban, 2006; Reigluth & Grafinkle, 1994; Tyack & Cuban, 1994; Berliner & Biddle, 1995). An analysis of the 1980 *High School and Beyond Survey*, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, and the subsequent 1984 *High School and Beyond Administrator and Teacher Survey*, correlated lackluster academic performance with the institutions of “direct democratic control” by which schools have traditionally been governed ([www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/hsb/](http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/hsb/)).

In the early 1990s, sentiment emerged that the singular U.S. system was failing to educate and provide students with a world-class education, moving the reform discussion to one of greater choice and parental voice in public education (Metz, 2005; NWREL, 1999). The idea of school choice was presented as a means to give parents a greater say

Applying the notion of laissez faire and limited government regulation in the economic marketplace to public education, Friedman and the “market” reformers argued that choice and competition would drive innovation, efficiency, and improvement (Hess, 2002; Cooper et al., 2006). The mechanism proposed by Friedman through which choice in education could be exercised was tax-financed tuition assistance, or vouchers (Friedman, 1980). Imposing the discipline of the market on school systems would force innovations and decrease the wastefulness of monopolistic bureaucracies incapable of change (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002; Cooper et al., 2006).

Political scientists John Chubb and Terry Moe’s book, *Politics, Markets and America’s Public Schools* (1990) furthered the “ability to choose” debate by questioning how a system that had failed to bring about substantive reform in the eight or so years following the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s publication of *A Nation at Risk* could possibly have—or be—the solution to public education’s woes. Through an examination of institutional behavior, Chubb and Moe identified the “real cause” of the failure to reform public education as the system (p. 47).

Our analysis shows that the system’s familiar arrangements for direct
democratic control do indeed impose a distinctive structure on the educational choices of all the various participants—and that this structure tends to promote organizational characteristics that are ill-suited to the effective performance of American public schools (p. 21).

Supporters of school choice decried government as unable to provide the needed reforms because government itself was the problem. Supporters suggested that the institution of government-controlled schooling was both monopolistic and broken, and called for pressure in the form of economic, market-place incentives that would allow for “institutional reform” as well as the creation of “new institutions” to bring about needed reforms (Nathan, 1990; Chubb & Moe, 1996). While the work of Chubb and Moe advanced the call for institutional change and promoted the idea of market-based reforms, it left unspoken a discussion about the role of economic market theory in education reform.

Charter schools and choice. Public charter schools are independent, autonomous schools of choice. They are “public” in the sense that they are funded by taxpayer dollars and are in turn obligated to public authorities to fulfill the terms of their charters (Loveless & Jasin, 1998). The idea for charter schools is credited to a former Massachusetts teacher, Ray Budde. Budde, a teacher of history, based his concept on the 1609 Hudson Bay Charter. In 1987, Budde’s idea was circulated in the form of a draft by the Northwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement. The idea was then endorsed by former president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Albert Shanker, in a 1988 National Press Club speech. Budde stimulated further interest in the concept of schools by charter in his 1988 publication, *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*. 
Nationally, charter schools are the most visible structure on the school reform landscape. Since the authorization of the first charter school was issued in Minnesota in 1992, charter schools have found significant support. Charter schools now number over 4,000, serve approximately 700,000 students throughout the United States and Puerto Rico, and range in scope and size from on-line virtual schools to thousand-student K-12 schools (Yancy, 2000; Deal & Hentschke, 2004; Ziebarth, 2005). Because state laws differ significantly, charter schools are as diverse as the students they serve (Bulkley & Wohlstetter, 2004).

Traditional public schools now operate in a quasi-competitive market landscape consisting of inter- and intra-district options, including magnet schools; voucher programs; charter schools; home schools; and on-line virtual schools. All of these now serve as educational options for parents and their children. Of these various educational options, charter schools are the most visible and numerous (Bulkley & Wohlstetter, 2004). According to the Center for Education Reform, by the fall of 2006, an estimated 1.15 million children attended 3,977 charter schools nationwide (www.edreform.com).

**Charter schools and innovation.** Charter schools represent the most touted educational reform initiative in the United States (Mullholland, 1996). Twenty-seven years since their introduction, charter schools have become a visible part of the tapestry of 21st century public education, viewed by supporters as offering a viable alternative to traditional public schools (Dressler, 2001). Charter schools are an institutional innovation reflective of the type of educational reform called for by Chubb and Moe (1999). Supporters of market-based reforms in education suggest that competition for students makes schools more responsive, yields greater parent satisfaction and produces increased
student achievement levels (Ladd, 2002). In the charter-market paradigm, schools are businesses, and parents and students are consumers choosing one school (product) over another (competitor) based on output (student achievement). Failure to attract, produce, and gain market share means closure.

Support for charter schools is bolstered by a theory of institutional change that posits choice and competition as “mechanisms to leverage school innovation and improvement” (Lubienski, 2005). The idea of competition is paramount to the current “marketization” of public education: the more public schools available to parents to choose for their children, the more likely this competition is to create innovation in the traditional public school system. This market system in which suppliers (the charter organization) are directly accountable to consumers (parents and their children) is seen as a mechanism for spurring system-wide improvements in traditional public schools (Harrison, 2005).

The literature shows that there is variety and choice in the charter education market. There is no one single type of charter school. Charters may be operated as non-profit or for-profit organizations. From state to state, charter law differs, the reasons for creating or converting schools to chartered schools differ, and the groups that start or manage charter schools do so for different reasons and in different ways.

**Charter schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.** Chartered schools are now the predominant educational delivery system in the city of New Orleans, providing for the education of the majority of public school students in the city (Cowen Report, 2008). The New Orleans public schools had been undergoing chronic educational reform for decades (Miron, 2008, p. 241; Tyack, 1974). Following the
devastation and standstill of the city after Hurricane Katrina, proponents of school change pushed for educational innovation and school choice. The opportunity for redesigning the city’s schools to make them “world-class” (Miron, 2008) and a “new national model” (Ritea, 2006) was presented and legislated through the passage of Louisiana House Bill No. 61, referred to in the literature as Act 35 (www.la.gov; Miron, 2008). Act 35 changed the definition of a failing public school and the terms under which the state could assume control of a school. The definition of a failing School Performance Score (SPS) was changed from 60 or below to any school scoring below the state average of 86.2 (http://www.tulane.edu/cowen_institute/documents/3-Recovery_School_District_002.pdf). Additionally, Act 35 defined a failing school district as one which had more than 30 failing schools, or one where at least 50 percent of students attended academically unacceptable schools. The majority of NOPS schools met the criteria for state-takeover (http://www.bcg.com/impact_expertise/publications/files/Public_Education_New_Orleans_Jun2007.pdf). Simultaneously, the federal government offered to contribute twenty million dollars in charter start-up money for the opening of schools in the city (Matthews, 2008). This offer fostered changes in charter law at the state level, where the legislature moved to relax stipulations on parent and teacher involvement in the chartering application and approval process (Perry, 2007). At the state level, determinations were made regarding the categorization of charters. Schools would be “typed” according to the authorizing body and stipulations within the charter regarding access or student entrance requirements (http://www.rsdla.net/InfoGlance/FAQs.aspx).
Five types of charter status are allowed by Louisiana state law:

- Type 1: Charter school authorized by a local school board (new startup school)
- Type 2: Charter school authorized by state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) (new start up or a conversion)
- Type 3: Pre-existing school converted to chartered status authorized by a local school board
- Type 4: School Board Charter school authorized by the BESE (new start-up or conversion)
- Type 5: Charter authorized by the BESE operating under RSD control (www.rsdla.net/InfoGlance?q=AQs.aspc)

As of the 2009-2010 school year, the reorganization of the school system following Hurricane Katrina has generated the following portfolio of schools:

- 12 OPSB charter schools (Type 3), serving 7,600 students
- four OPSB operated schools (traditional public schools), serving 2,800 students
- 37 RSD charter schools (Type 5), serving 14,800 students
- 33 RSD operated schools (traditional public schools), serving 11,900 students
- two BESE charter schools (Type 2) serving 800 students (State of Public Education in New Orleans, 2010)

This system of schools continues to change and grow as the city continues its recovery. Charter schools remain the dominant provider of educational services to the children of New Orleans.
Disruptive Innovation Theory

Christensen, in examining why successful businesses fail in the face of market and technology changes, cites neglect of the principles of disruptive innovation as the culprit for failure (2002). Further, Christensen distinguishes between innovations that are sustaining and those that are disruptive. Sustaining innovations are those that improve effectiveness and capacity in existing systems. Disruptive innovations are those that “dramatically alter both the structure and the culture” of the system (Schlecty, 2005, p. xii). In New Orleans, conversion charters represent an opportunity to discern alterations in the structure and culture of schooling. The theory of disruptive innovation serves as a lens through which change can be assessed.

Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation originates from his study of the success and failure of dominant industries. His research on established organizations that for years served as the leading innovators in their industries via making minor alterations to technologies that promoted greater efficiency, only to succumb to upstart (entrant) companies that initially attracted a niche market of customers, led to his theory of disruptive innovation (1997). Disruptive innovations, Christensen noted, came from entering firms who offered “a different package of attributes valued only in emerging markets remote from, and unimportant to, the mainstream” (p. 16). For Christensen, the term “technology” constitutes the processes by which an organization transforms labor, capital, materials, and information into products and services of greater value (1997, p. xvi).
To illustrate this theory, consider the loss of market share experienced by large telecommunication companies innovating the technology of fiber optics to replace wire line telephony. While competitive and higher performing, the innovation of fiber optics eventually lost ground and market share to wireless mobile communication technologies—technologies that initially attracted little attention, but appealed to an audience of adaptive users. Another example of an established technology that has lost market share to disruptive innovation is the production of printed greeting cards and invitations, which have been largely replaced by free downloadable cards and invitations via e-mail and the Internet. Another example is inpatient, invasive surgery such as hysterectomies and heart valve replacements that are now accomplished through intra-uterine robotics and arthroscopic surgery conducted in outpatient clinics.

Building on Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation as applied to school organizations, Schlecty (2005) states that disruptive innovations “require dramatic alterations in both the structure and the culture of the organization and changes in the way vital organizational functions are carried out” (p. xii). For Schlecty, disruptive innovation in schools is the alteration of the rules, roles, relationships, and culture of schooling that result in changing the “present systems and putting new systems in their place” (p. 215).

Christensen (1997) identified the characteristics of disruptive innovation as a change that is simpler, cheaper, promises lower margins, emerges from a niche market, and is a product that most customers initially do not want or cannot use. Disruptive innovation does not make it easier to do something by improving upon the existing system; it creates a new system. In the classroom, for example, the overhead
projector was an improvement on the blackboard as a means of displaying and sharing information. Currently, a technology called the Elmo extends the work of the overhead projector by allowing teachers to display work three-dimensionally via a computerized projection system. Both the technology and the pedagogy remain teacher-centered. Neither the overhead projector nor “the Elmo” are disruptive technologies.

Alternatively, hand-held individual student devices that allow students to share work with the teacher or the whole class change the dynamic of the class, moving learning and presentation skills directly and immediately to the student. This would be a new and different means of engaging students in classroom learning, and thus a disruptive innovation. Disruptive innovation means a new and different way of “doing” that attracts a clientele looking for ways to engage beyond the status quo.

**Disruptive innovation and Schlecty’s six systems of schooling.** Support for the idea that a one-size-fits-all system is no longer suitable to the goals of 21st century education is found in the literature (Cuban, 2003; Sizer, 2005; Schlecty, 2005; Christensen, 2008). Schlecty (2005) and Christensen (2008) purport that the public school system in the United States does not serve students who need to be prepared for a complex, fast-paced, 21st century world that will demand creativity and flexibility and not the lock-step learning, rote-memorization, compliance and attendance expectations on which 20th century schools were based.

Schlecty (2005) examined the grammar of schooling and identified the need for disruptive change in the structure and culture of schooling. Sorting the predictable and persistent components of schooling into “six critical systems at the heart of educational innovation” (p. 65), Schlecty asserts that unless there is “dramatic alteration in both the
structure and the culture of a school or school system” (p. 65) schools—high schools in particular—will continue to fail to engage and prepare students for the complexities, ambiguity, and adaptability of the knowledge age. The six critical systems Schlecty identified as requiring disruptive innovation are:

- **Recruitment and induction**: the process by which new members are inducted into the beliefs, values and mission of the school and developed accordingly.

- **Knowledge transmission**: the methods and processes through which organizational learning takes place and technical, aesthetic, and conventional (norms) knowledge are diffused, shared, and revisited. The professional development of teachers, decisions about curricular offerings, practices regarding pedagogy and student learning, and norms guiding teacher/student interaction and support are components of this system.

- **Power and authority distribution**: the degree to which capacity building and change-adeptness is present via enabling structures within the school.

- **People and program evaluation**: the process by which the performance and effectiveness of people and programs are credibly, validly, and reliably evaluated to promote continuous improvements.

- **Direction and goal setting**: leadership and autonomy at the school level that foster goal clarity, consensus building, and continuous improvement.

- **Internal and external boundary determination**: the degree to which schools determine and control their resources and personnel and are held accountable for student learning and for being responsive to the needs of students and
parents; the degree to which the school has become both a community building agency as well as a community-serving agency.

Schelcty (2005) argues that as schools are currently organized, their primary business is to produce attendance and compliance and to harvest existing engagement. He acknowledges that schools are working the way they were designed to work, but that this model is no longer sufficient for students in the 21st century.

Successful schooling for the 21st century requires a systemic paradigm shift from compliance and attendance to nurtured engagement. Engagement is defined in terms of the student’s attention, commitment and persistence in any given task or activity. Further, identifying student needs and focusing on the quality of student learning versus time on task is essential to establishing an environment in which student engagement in thinking and learning is the norm (Schlecty, 2009). This paradigm shift requires school leaders “who understand that they are dealing with values as well as technique, meaning as well as skill” (p. 3).

In Shaking Up the Schoolhouse (2000), Schelcty established a typology with which to characterize classrooms in terms of observable patterns of student engagement. Within classrooms, students can be observed engaging in different ways in different tasks. The types of engagement are (Schlecty, 2002, p. 3):

- **Authentic engagement**: the student is genuinely involved in an assigned task or activity and can articulate the personal and relative meaning and value of the task.
- **Ritual engagement:** the student participates in (complies with) the task or activity that has limited inherent meaning or direct value to the student, but can acknowledge that the task is a means to an end (i.e., passing a test).
- **Passive compliance:** the student participates to avoid negative consequences.
- **Retreatism:** the student is observably and admittedly disengaged from the task but exhibits no outward displeasure or disruptive behavior.
- **Rebellion:** the student openly refuses to participate and is disruptive.

The federal mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act moved many states to adopt standardized curricula and implement high-stakes testing (Greene et al., 2003). Much of the work of schools as they are currently organized is to produce students who perform well on tests. The work of Schlecty (2005) indicates that the engagement of students in schools that place significant emphasis on tests can be observed as predominantly ritually compliant. School environments that place emphasis on success in state standardized test performance, he argues, do not require authentic engagement on the part of the student.

Criticism of high-stakes testing is present in the literature and points to schools responding to the threat of sanctions by “teaching to the test” (Greene, Winters, & Foster, 2003). Opponents of high-stakes testing contend that schools operating in the existing climate of accountability and sanctions for low student performance and poor overall school test scores develop ways to improve results on the high-stakes tests without actually improving learning (Greene, Winters, & Foster, 2003, p. 1). Such schools are arguably not the schools that are preparing students for the ambiguity, problem-solving, and adaptability and flexibility of a knowledge-age world.
Christensen (2008) describes charter schools as possible models with which to create “new school architectures” in which 21st century learning can occur. Schlecty (2005) identifies systems within the grammar of schooling that could undergo disruptive innovation for the benefit of student engagement and achievement and overall school improvement.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This study is concerned with the lived experiences of school leaders involved in rebuilding educational opportunities for children and young adults in New Orleans following the catastrophic flooding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. How these school leaders leveraged their autonomy to impact the grammar of schooling was discerned, extrapolated, and interpreted through their individual stories, which were collected and analyzed through narrative inquiry method. This chapter discusses the rationale for the selected methodology, the process used in participant selection, the research design, confidentiality, data analysis plans, the researcher’s role, and the limitations of the study.

The study seeks to answer the question: What do the stories of principals who have served in both district-operated and now charter-operated schools tell us about school change? The supporting questions in the inquiry are:

1. How do these principals describe the organizational, structural, curricular, and pedagogical components of their conversion charter schools?
2. What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the six critical systems of schooling: recruitment and induction; knowledge transmission, power and authority distribution, direction and goal setting, people and program evaluation; and internal and external boundary determination?
This study uses the qualitative method of narrative inquiry. This method allowed me, as the researcher, to examine the lived experiences of the participants as told through their narratives—their personal stories—of the creation of their new schools. Through interviews, portraits of how they negotiated the new educational terrain of post-Katrina schooling emerged.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Bruner (1991) described “life as narrative” (p. 691). Narrative inquiry is a method of research that directs attention to the storied lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006) of the participants as a means to study an identified societal aspect. Narrative inquiry is essentially about discourse and interpretation. Through narrative interviewing, interpreting and extrapolating the lived and told stories of the participants, narrative inquiry takes its place in the qualitative research paradigm. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) elaborate on the narrative inquiry method in describing stories as a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study (p. 477).

Smith (1989) writes that the goal of inquiry is to make clear what was previously not understood, emphasizing that interpretive inquiry succeeds when it produces interpretations that not only sustain but deepen and enlarge our sense of understanding.
and community as social and moral beings (p. 138). In exploring and advocating the use
of narrative inquiry method in public administration leadership studies, Ospina and
Dodge (2005) uphold the method as an interpretive inquiry mode that better unveils
intention and action through lived experience. Denzin (1997, 1999) observed two general
orientations in the use of narrative inquiry method: analytic, a positivist orientation
maintaining a neutral stance on the part of the researcher; and storied, a theoretically
minimalist approach that seeks meaning in the stories of lived experience as interpreted
through the researcher’s discursive interaction and engagement with the field texts
(Polkinghorne, 1995). This study employs the storied approach to examine the
experiences of school leaders for their conceptualization of the grammar of schooling.

Rationale for research method. In selecting the methodology appropriate to this
investigation, it was clear that a qualitative study conducted in a non-experimental setting
was best suited to the study. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative research
is “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or
other means of quantification” (p. 17). In social science research, the qualitative
researcher intends to discover, uncover, interpret, understand, and extrapolate.

Numbers could not serve to adequately tell the story of these educators who
personally endured dramatic life changes after Katrina, nor could numbers convey the
educational rebuilding efforts in New Orleans. The people directly responsible for these
efforts and the stories of their lived experiences bear witness to the changes that have
taken place. Their stories were sifted and mined to reveal their thoughts and actions as they worked to establish and shape new organizations amidst a turbulent societal and physical landscape.

In this study, narrative consists of the stories told by experienced leaders of conversion charter schools operating within a year of the storm devastation and flooding of August 2005. Narrative inquiry provided the method to explore educational change and leadership by gaining entrance into what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as the bounded terrain of the temporal, societal, place and the professional knowledge landscape in which the participant’s live and work. It is the focus on the narrative—the told story—and not on texts independent or removed from the time, place, and people where they are scripted that distinguishes narrative inquiry from other qualitative methods (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). This narrative turn (Denzin, 1997; Riesmann, 2002; Gill, 2000)—the turn toward interpretation rather than explanation—is an increasingly utilized method in social science inquiry, aimed at understanding intention and action (Corvellec, 2006; Ospina & Dodge, 2005).

While various studies of leadership in schools have examined and attempted to explain the attributes, attitudes, and skills of principals leading change (Leithwood, 1994; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), the lived experiences of principals as revelatory of thought process and action have received limited treatment (Oplatka, 2003; Beabout, 2008). The stories as told by the individual participants, whose professional and personal
lives had undergone an unanticipated, life-altering interruption, and who had subsequently agreed to lead in unprecedented and changed professional circumstances, appeared rich for collection and interpretation.

The approach to this study was influenced by Reisman’s (2008) work that employs narrative in her research into interrupted lives, and Clandinin and Connelly’s (1998, 2000) work with narrative inquiry as a method of studying the work of teachers. Narrative Inquiry has its genesis in three theoretical veins: Dewey’s experience theory, Polkinghorne’s (1988) work as an academic researcher, and their emerging research into teacher practice and how narrative might yield understandings of school reform. Clandinin and Connelly’s (1998) work begins with four premises:

1. School reform is a complex practice/theory social process in which undirected change is inevitable.
2. Schools and their participants have narrative histories.
3. Educational reform literature has its own philosophically influenced history.
4. School reform is an epistemological matter that involves issues of practitioner knowing.

These researchers, motivated by the goal of generating research that would make a practical difference in schools and classroom life, set about discovering and interpreting the thought processes of teachers as they went about their work in schools (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Turning away from earlier explanatory research on teacher attitudes,

It is Clandinin and Connelly’s (1998) fourth premise—the epistemological aspect that was of particular interest. If school reform is an epistemological matter—a matter of individual knowing and understanding and constructing meaning about the world of schooling—then the stories of each individual school leader are apertures through which their professional knowledge landscapes can be viewed, and their perceptions, understanding, and actions as conversion charter school leaders understood and interpreted.

As the narrative researcher, I wanted to learn if the stories of the school leader participants indicated an epistemological shift about the grammar of schooling. Did their current experiences reflect a sameness, or a change in the grammar of schooling as they had previously experienced the role? Connelly and Clandinin cite Herron’s (1971) in-depth study of teachers who participated in the 1960s National Science Foundation training program. Herron’s study found that despite the intensive training in scientific inquiry and new curriculum, the teachers’ subsequent observed classroom practice, as well as, their thinking as evidenced by recorded interviews, were not distinct from their colleagues who had not received the training. Herron found that the teachers could
demonstrate what he called *knowledge as attribute*, but that their *knowledge as expressed in practice* had not changed (emphasis in Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 157). In the present study, I was interested in learning if the study participants would articulate changes in their leadership practices as they shifted from traditional to charter schools.

Five years have passed since the rebuilding efforts began in New Orleans. School leaders actively participate in these efforts on a daily basis. The stories of their experiences contain perceptions and actions that address leadership and change in school in a previously unexamined way. To make sense of the change efforts underway in the city, it was essential to record and interpret the experiences, perceptions and actions of school leaders. Narrative inquiry served as the method by which these school leaders shared their stories of conversion charter school transformation efforts designed to promote student success. Their stories informed my interpretations and understanding of change efforts within their schools.

**The characteristics of narrative inquiry.** As a research orientation, narrative inquiry focuses attention on the storied lives (lived experiences) of the participants as a method of studying an aspect of society (Ospina, 2005). Stories have been told throughout the history of the world as a means of sharing experience, imparting wisdom and carrying on tradition. Story telling is both personal and interactive, and leaves both teller and listener changed by the teller’s experience via the construction of meaning. Stories are both reconstruction and construction. In narrative inquiry, the narrative is the
storied recounting of past events, actions, interactions and thought from the inside-out. Following the work of Bruner (1986), narratives have five essential characteristics. They

- are accounts of peopled events over time, with a beginning, middle, and end
- are retrospective interpretations of sequenced events told from a particular point of view
- convey human intention, action, and interaction in the telling
- represent a construction of identity—revealing how the narrator sees herself in relation to others
- invite the audience—or listener—to co-construct meaning (Ospina, 2005, p. 145)

Narratives of lived experiences are therefore, rich multi-layered representations of past, present, and future (temporality), of perceptions, actions and interactions (sociality) and of place (locality of context). These dimensions contained within narratives are what Clandinin and Connelly (2006) call “the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry” (p. 479), and are the source of data from which interpretation and extrapolation emerge.

**Temporality, sociality, and place in narrative inquiry.** In delineating a framework for narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) created a metaphorical _three-dimensional narrative inquiry space_ (emphasis in original, p. 50). Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) note that while qualitative researchers often employ words in their analyses and engage in collecting and constructing stories about their subjects, it is this
three-dimensional inquiry space that serves as the territorial markings that distinguish narrative researchers and narrative inquiry. The territorial markers of temporality, sociality, and place are the “three commonplaces of narrative inquiry—which specify the dimensions of an inquiry space” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479).

Using this set of terms, any particular inquiry is defined by this three-dimensional space: studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

Simultaneous exploration of all three commonplaces is present in narrative inquiry (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007).

In the study, these three commonplaces were integral to studying innovation in conversion charters from the perspective of the school leaders, in a city where charter schools now feature so prominently. The concept of time or *temporality* acknowledges that people and events always have a past, present and a future (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). In this study, participants’ pasts—previous administrative leadership work in the failing OPS school district, followed by the taking on of a new leadership role in a newly authorized conversion-charter school under the unforeseen circumstances of a devastating storm and the subsequent disruption of life and work as they had known it, weighed significantly in this inquiry. Without this past, the story of present and intended future would be a different telling. Without the devastation wreaked by the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina, the changes in the educational landscape that are now underway—
what Governor Blanco cited as “the historical opportunity to start anew” in New Orleans—would not have happened. The past serves as the time and place in which abrupt shifts in the lives of the participants took place. It informs thought, intention, action, hopes and desires (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Czarniawska (2004) and Polkinghorne (1998) emphasize that the stories people tell are representations of the way they interpret experiences and construct their identities.

In the present time, represented in the day-to-day work leading their individual schools, and comprised of thoughts, actions, intentions and interactions, their stories are unfolding and moving toward an intended future—sustaining and creating meaningful learning opportunities and thereby, improved life conditions, via schooling. The present reflects the school leaders’ conceptualizing and acting upon circumstances and identified needs in their current school settings that promote sustainability and educational achievement. The future story is one that is yet to be constructed but one that is in process and can be glimpsed through narrative inquiry.

In conducting my research, I anticipated that the multi-temporal stories of the school leaders would reveal the principal’s perceptions and actions regarding change and innovation in education. Inquiring into their experiences was seen as a portal through which both change efforts and the role of leadership could be interpreted, understood, and shared for the purposes of further study.
The second commonplace of narrative inquiry, *sociality*, is indicative of the personal and social conditions of both the participant and the narrative inquirer. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) articulate that narrative inquirers are concerned with both the personal and social conditions of the participants. Personal conditions include the “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of both participant and inquirer” (p. 480). Social conditions include the environment, and surrounding factors and forces—including people internal and external to the environment. The narrative researcher responded to both the internal and external forces involved in the experiences of the participants as revealed in their narratives in order to discern organizational boundaries (Schlecty, 2005).

The concept of *place* within the narrative inquiry takes on both a literal and metaphorical connotation. Place is the literal context or setting, as well as the inquirer’s entrance into the “professional knowledge landscape” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, pp. 4-5) of each school leader. It is within the professional knowledge landscape that the conceptualization of schooling, can be found. In their research, Clandinin and Connelly (1998) adopted the metaphor of the professional knowledge landscape to capture the complexity of the “interwoven and multilayered scenes and plotlines” (p. 150) present in the dialogic relationship:

A landscape metaphor particularly [suits] our purpose. It allows us to talk about space, place and time…Understanding professional knowledge as comprising a landscape calls for a notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of people, places and things.
Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relations among people, places and things, we see it as both an intellectual and moral landscape. We see it in epistemological terms (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, pp. 4-5).

The timing of this research, the social context in which it was conducted, the past and present leadership experiences of the participants, and the significance of the educational improvement efforts underway in New Orleans lent themselves to narrative inquiry.

**Framework for narrative inquiry.** Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) delineate a “framework for designing, living out, and representing narrative inquiries” that demonstrates the deliberativeness of narrative inquiry as a research process “founded on a set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that are at play from the first narrative imaginings of a research puzzle through to the representations of the narrative inquiry in research text” (p. 33). This framework suggests to the narrative inquirer elements for consideration in the design of the narrative inquiry, for fieldwork and field text composition, and for the interpretation and writing of research texts (p. 24). These elements serve as guideposts or markers in the research process and parallel the work inherent in dissertation research. These elements include

1. **Narrative beginnings:** the justification of the study including the inquirer’s personal, practical and social reasons for undertaking the study.

2. **Naming of the phenomenon, or the “what” of inquiry:** In this instance, the phenomenon is the direct lived experience of conversion charter school leaders
with prior school leadership experience who created schools in the midst of personal and systemic chaos.

3. **Vantage point**: This requires thinking about and planning access to participants, how the inquirer’s presence might influence participants’ stories, and the manner in which field text (data) will be collected. From the commonplace of temporality, the participants were invited to tell the story of “what was” from the perspective of their former work and experience with the grammar of schooling; to tell the story of “what they envisioned would be” as they took on the role of school leader in their newly created schools; and to tell the story of “what is.” Within each of these stories, the interwoven stories of social and personal conditions (sociality commonplace) and the “specificity of location” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) emerged.

4. **Analysis and interpretation processes**: This element involves attending to the commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place, while simultaneously attending to how the narratives speak to mental model conceptualizations and to changes in the six systems of schooling delineated by Schlecty (2005).

5. **Narrative positioning**: The researcher’s prior experience as a school leader provided empathy and context for the study. The role of school leader is acknowledged in the research to be a position that is increasingly complex, harried and isolated (Fullan, 1997; Evans, 1996).
6. **Uniqueness of the study:** This study is unique in its subject matter, inquiry, and method, which lends itself to a setting in which talk and stories are a part of the fabric of life. New Orleans is a city with a storied past. Since Hurricane Katrina, writers have come to New Orleans to record the stories of residents from neighborhoods that no longer exist. This study has enabled the stories of school leaders, and the schools emerging out of the ruins of post-Katrina New Orleans to be included among those shared with the larger community. It was my intent to give voice to the *commonplaces* of school leadership and change efforts that have yet to appear in the literature.

7. **Ethical considerations:** The method used evokes an “ethic of care” (Noddings, 1992) beyond mandatory ethical review. The method involved developing a relationship of trust beyond the clinical or formal interview. The interviews were conducted with integrity and transcripts were shared with the participants as a means to corroborate authenticity and accuracy. The goal was to re-present the stories and voices of the participants with an ethic of care in honest and “resonant ways” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 30).

8. **The process of representation:** The researcher must be “narratively” faithful. Clandinin and colleagues (2007) stipulate that deciding to use the method of narrative inquiry must be intentional from the start. “Narrative inquiry is so much more than deciding at the last minute that a paper or dissertation or talk would be
more compelling if told as a story” (p. 31). The stories reflect the complexity and dynamics of the current educational landscape in which these school leaders live and work.

**Research Design**

This research required the collection of the stories of the school leaders of conversion charters who were involved from the operational start of the schools they now lead. Narrative interviews took place in the midst of the metaphorical boundaries of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space established by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). As the researcher, I “travel[ed]” (p. 49) directionally *inward, outward, backward, and forward* “in the midst of” the inquiry space. This directional interaction with participants was predicated on Dewey’s notion of the continuity of experience: “experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experience” (p. 2). To elaborate, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that

By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality-past, present, and future. We wrote that to experience an experience-that is, to do research into an experience-is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way (p. 50).

Through the interviews the participants’ past and present leadership experiences were recorded. The interviews occurred in places arranged by the various participants. Interview questions and prompts were used to encourage the participants to explore
temporal aspects of their leadership roles. All the participants agreed to have their interviews audio-taped. Reisman (2008) notes that “the goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief or general statements” (p. 23).

Narrative inquiry often proceeds through interviews that are relatively unstructured so that the interviewer can leave space for the participants to tell their stories. Narrative interviewing rejects the strict model of the inquirer as the objective facilitator probing the respondent for answers. Instead, narrative interviewing requires the researcher to engage in turn-taking, relevance-seeking, contextual exploration, and associative probing in order to gain insight into the complexity of experience. Open-ended, broadly framed probative questions engendered “genuine discoveries” (p. 24). In narrative inquiry, it is the responsibility of the researcher to get out of the way so that details, turning points and the full complexity of the story can come forward (Reisman, 2008).

This type of discursive interviewing (Mishler, 1986) requires a give and take on the part of both the interviewer and the participant. As the interviewer, I was the person to whom the story was being told, the person engaged in sense-making about the told story by interacting with the field texts (recorded and transcribed interviews). During the interviews, the participants contemplated and communicated the sense-making of their experiences through the telling of their stories.
Access to school leaders was acquired via phone calls and letters, inviting the participants to select times and locations for the interviews. The narratives were gathered through one-to-one interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, depending upon participant availability. Each participant was interviewed a minimum of three times, and an additional interview was needed to complete the telling of one story. Each interview invited a different temporal focus (past, present, future), though all of the interviews consisted of the school leaders traveling back and forth in narrative time.

In following the guidelines of narrative inquiry, the participants were encouraged “to tell me about” (Riesmann, 1993, p. 54) their experiences. Conversational techniques such as those used by Rogan and deKock (2005) in their research on narrative methods and analysis were used. Such techniques included

- motivating informational sharing by emphasizing the professional significance of school leader participation
- acknowledging and supporting the experiences of the participants by sharing professional stories
- defining the position of the researcher as a person who faced and understands their challenges
- assuring confidentiality
- arranging a flexible interview schedule
- negotiating meaning with spontaneous questions
supplying linking statements to clarify meaning
making supportive comments (p. 633).

Each interview centered on Schlecty’s six critical systems at the heart of educational innovation: recruitment and induction, knowledge transmission, power and authority distribution, people and program evaluation, direction and goal setting, and internal and external boundary determination (Schlecty, 2005). The first interview invited the leaders to tell the story of their past and how they came to be in their current positions. The second interview focused on their current practices. Guiding questions were used to elicit their thoughts and practices as they related to the six systems. The final interview asked the school leader to tell about their perceptions of the effect of their work in their schools and to engage in visioning about the future of their organization.

During each interview, I listened and allowed for shifts, using them to explore “with the participant, associations and meanings that might connect several stories” (p. 24). Probative interview questions were used to draw out stories about the practices of schooling that comprise the organization or “system” components delineated by Schlecty (2005).

At the beginning of the second and third interviews, clarifications were requested to fill in areas in need of elaboration that had been identified by listening to the recordings and reviewing the transcripts from the prior interview session. The stories were coded for evidence of differences in their present role as a conversion charter school
leader to flesh out the organizational components of the grammar of schooling. The third interview served to complete the stories or round out digressions that may have taken place in the previous interview. Through in-depth, multiple interviews with these participants, the experiences and perspectives of these school leaders were recorded, transcribed, and interpreted for the purposes of providing a window into their mental models regarding the grammar of schooling.

Participants. The participants in the study were selected based on the following criteria: All participating school leaders had had prior school leadership experience in the NOPS system; they were the school leader originally selected post-Hurricane Katrina to lead their respective conversion charter school; the converted charter school was established within the first year following Hurricane Katrina. At the time of this study, records indicated that there were five conversion charter school principals who matched the criteria: three high school leaders and two elementary school leaders. All five school leaders were invited to participate. Two high school leaders and one elementary school leader agreed to participate.

These school leaders had first-person experience of the day-to-day operations and thinking that existed under district control that enlarged the lens of insight and understanding into motivations for conversion and visions for change. Their familiarity with the “before” and “after” of school leadership provided a unique vantage point from
which to share their lived experiences in shaping organizational structures and cultures that were revelatory of challenges the extant grammar of schooling.

**Narrative analysis.** Narrative analysis requires moving from field texts to research texts (Clandin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 119-120). In the present study, all field texts were transcribed to record the stories of the participants into research texts. A graphic organizer to visually denote thematic connections was used to sort and weave the individual narratives for thematic resonance. Each transcript was coded using thematic markers: RI= Recruitment and Induction; TKO= Transmission of Knowledge and Organizational Learning; EV= Evaluation of People and Programs; DG= Direction and Goal Setting; IEB= Internal/External Boundaries. Additionally, the transcripts were coded to indicate narrative areas concerned with the organizational, structural, curricular, and pedagogical components of schooling.

Through narrative analysis, the convergence of each principal’s perceptions and actions with changes that have or have not occurred in the six critical systems informed the relationship between the school leader’s narratives and school change. In this manner, stasis or change in the six systems was examined and interpreted.

**Anticipated Limitations**

Nespor and Barber (1995) write that “No one is detached or ‘neutral’” (p. 53). Scholars writing from the empiricist tradition caution that narrative approaches foster
interactions between researchers and their research participants that serve as potential sources of distortion and bias (Jansen & Peshkin, 1992). In selecting this qualitative methodology, I acknowledge that I could not wholly detach from my own presuppositions (Groenewald, 2004). As a narrative researcher, I entered into an inquiry relationship with the school leaders, bringing with me my own experiences and awareness of the challenges, hopes, and compromises inherent in school leadership. Having served as the leader of a conversion charter school in New Orleans, I was familiar with some of the struggles related to me by the participants. I had also had the opportunity to previously meet the participants in my role as a charter school leader in the city. The mutual struggles were partially responsible for my interest in the impact of conversion charter school leaders’ work in improving learning opportunities for the many underserved students in New Orleans.

Additionally, as a former school leader for four years and classroom teacher for 12 years, I brought to the study an awareness of the nature of the work of principals and teachers (Patton, 2002). Thus acknowledged, the goal in establishing an inquiry relationship with each participant was to practice reflexivity to ensure that the relationship was comfortable and safe. The formal processes of consent to participate were followed, and participants were assured that ethical consideration of confidentiality would be attended to through the use of pseudonyms for them and for their school (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The participants informed their governing boards that they
were taking part in the study and provided signed consent forms. Finally, the participants were provided both with copies of the original transcripts, as well as the completed respective narratives for a member checks.

**Narrative Inquiry and Validity**

The aim of this narrative inquiry was twofold: authenticity of representation, and resonance of participant experiences and perspectives as captured through the details of thought and action that were revealed in the telling of their respective stories (Berger & Quinney, 2005). By turning life experience into research text, the goal was to achieve what Van Maanen (1988) called *verisimilitude*, or what Clandinin and Connelly (2008) call *wakefulness*. Acknowledging that narrative inquiry “relies on criteria other than validity, reliability and generalizability” (p. 184), Clandinin and Connelly outline the criteria in exemplary narrative inquiry as “having an explanatory, invitational quality, as having authenticity, as having adequacy and plausibility” (p. 185).

The narratives in Chapter 4 represent a representation of lived experiences as shared by the participants. This study embodies the reflexivity of the researcher, and a sense-making that goes beyond the conventional scientific standards of statistics and research. I have made every attempt to render this research respectfully and authentically, and to convey the breadth and depth of experience on the part of the school leaders involved in the most challenging work of school change.
Chapter 4
The Narratives

Introduction

This chapter presents the stories of three conversion charter school principals’ experiences with change. These stories form the basis of a narrative inquiry through which I explored the mental models the principals carried with them from district-operated schools into their new conversion charter schools.

In each interview, the principals were asked to tell their stories through a temporal perspective, reflecting on their past and present experience as educational leaders, as well as their intended future. The stories of their individual experiences in shaping the current organizational, structural, curricular and pedagogical components of their schools revealed their conceptualizations of the grammar of schooling. The school leaders’ rich narratives were then mined to determine their experiences in creating the various systems in their organizational settings (Schlecty, 2005), as well as their perceptions of the components of the grammar of schooling.

By inviting the principals to share their experiences as veteran administrators rapidly severed from district leadership roles into the positions of school leaders of conversion charter schools following the catastrophic event of Hurricane Katrina, the researcher aimed to understand the leaders’ perceptions of school change. The excerpted
narratives presented here allow the reader into the lives of the leaders as they shepherded their new schools into operation—organizationally, structurally, curricularly and pedagogically. Excerpts from each school leader’s narrative serve as examples of their assumptions, beliefs, and practices.

The three school leaders were interviewed during the spring of 2010, the fourth full year of their leadership of the schools now operated as charter schools. The stories contain reflections on their experiences of the present, the past, and the intended future of their respective schools. This temporal view provided apertures into their thoughts and actions regarding the work they had been able to accomplish in their new leadership roles, and invited them to envision the futures of their organizations. Each leader and school was assigned a pseudonym.

Two of the principals interviewed lead high schools (Bobby Gillbeau at Harp High School and Lela Watson at Mid City Charter High School), and the third, Mary Eastlake, is the principal of a K-8 elementary school. Lela Watson had past experience as the principal of a middle school in the district and had also worked for six years as an assistant principal at the high school she was asked to lead post-Katrina. The experiences of each of the school leaders served as a lens through which to examine school change.

**Bobby Gillbeau’s Story**

I met with Bobby Gillbeau on three occasions in the spring of 2010. Bobby was affable and self-assured, giving directions to his secretary and an assistant principal as he walked me into his office at the start of our first interview session. One minute into the interview he excused himself to answer a phone call on his cellular device. Having done so, he smiled, offered an apology and said, “Ok. What do you want to know?” I then
invited him to tell me the story of how he had come to be the principal of Harp Charter High School.

Gilbeau launched into a story that revealed his ability to hold an audience captive. He had been principal of Edith Harp High School for 25 years, he said, when Hurricane Katrina and the flooding that followed the storm’s landfall on August 29, 2005, changed both the topographical and educational landscape of the city of New Orleans. Gillbeau had left town when the mandatory evacuation was announced and had driven with his family to Houston where he stayed for three months. Shortly after the flooding, he received notification that NOPS schools would be closed indefinitely. He was curious about the extent of damage that his school had sustained as reports were sketchy and varied, but he soon learned from friends that the section of New Orleans in which his school was located was minimally damaged.

Gillbeau and his family were among 125,000 New Orleanians seeking refuge in Houston (http://www.kff.org/newsmedia/7401.cfm). Within a week of his arrival he was contacted and hired by a school district in Houston and paid as a roving principal to provide services to schools that were enrolling New Orleans school children relocated due to the storm. The work he took on grew as the enrollment of students increased:

When I started, we had about 125 kids and by the time I left at Thanksgiving we had about 1200 kids. It was a phenomenal experience. I had a suite of offices that were as big as one of my wings of the school here…. One office was filled with teddy bears, backpacks, pens, pencils—all stuff donated by children in the district. I would start the morning at my office around 6:30 and by 7:30, I was usually at a school site, rotating to five or six schools a day (G-1-2).

Gillbeau traveled to some 44 schools in the district, including five high schools and numerous middle and elementary schools, meeting with children and families
displaced by the storm, as well as district personnel, in an effort to address the pressing
needs of everyone involved. The issues included a lack of personal documents such as
transcripts, health records, and employment records, as well as clothing, food and shelter.
Through his travels within the Houston school district, he met student after student and
family after family whose lives had been upended by the disaster. He was happy to be of
assistance, he said, and the work gave him purpose. Despite the unprecedented influx of
students he was heartened at the response of the Houston school district. He found the
district to be “as prepared as anybody could be for an emergency that didn’t involve them
to deal with our kids” (G-1-2). He related that “they literally had staff meetings for a
week before I joined up and my first day they asked me to address counselors from every
school” (G-1-2).

In late November, 2005, Gillbeau was able to return to his home on the west bank
of the Mississippi, an area known as Algiers. Algiers had sustained some flooding, and
many properties had severe wind and water damage. Checking up on his school, Gillbeau
found that the gym and cafeteria had significant roof damage. “Some of the mobile
classrooms were in bad shape,” he said, and there was damage to areas of the main school
building’s roof. All told, with clean-up efforts and minor repairs and mopping, the
building appeared to be habitable. He shared this with me matter-of-factly, his level gaze
indicating that he recognized the “work ahead”, but that he was ready to get back to
work.

Gillbeau learned the day after his visit to the school that there were no plans to re-
open Harp as a district school in the immediate future. District personnel were scattered,
the school board in disarray, and talks were ongoing with the state about how, when, and
by what means schools might be brought back on line. Shortly after learning this, he received a phone call from a friend and colleague who had just been tapped to head the Algiers Charter School Association (ACSA). This newly created governing association had been granted authority by the Orleans Parish School Board in a hastily called meeting in October to operate nine open-access conversion charter schools on the west bank (Miron, 2008). All the schools had formerly been under district operation by OPSB, but the OPSB, in disarray, under federal investigation and greatly diminished in scope and ability to operate schools post-Katrina, had authorized the ACSA to open the schools in converted status. Gillbeau’s former school, previously a college-prep magnet high school drawing from a select group of higher-achieving students, would be among the cluster of schools to be opened as soon as December 2005. Gillbeau smiled as he recalled:

When I came home for Thanksgiving, I got a call from [_____] and I met him over coffee… one afternoon and we talked about what it would be like to work together and that conversation lasted a couple of hours. The conversation was, ‘we want to put Harp back online, but we want to bring it online as a charter school. An open-access charter high school’ (G-1-1).

In Gillbeau’s absence, the decision to turn Harp and several other schools over to charter governance had been made by the Orleans Parish School Board. He did not indicate surprise or dismay at the decision during our interview. Again, his expression was one of seriousness. He indicated that his job was to get kids in school and the means by which this occurred did not matter.

Through the agreement with the OPSB, nine schools would become open-access charter schools, tasked with enrolling and educating any student who came their way after Katrina. Gillbeau was invited to apply for the position of principal and was told there would be no guarantee that Harp would be his to lead in the post-Katrina
arrangement. He interviewed with the new governing board “sometime during the week of Thanksgiving.” He remarked that he was surprised that he was the only one of the principals who interviewed for the various conversion charter school leadership positions who was offered a position at their prior school.

Hired by the ACSA as the leader of the now-converted high school he had led before the storm, he immediately began recruiting staff and organizing for the re-opening of the school as Harp Charter High School. Over a two-week period, in what he described as marathon interviewing sessions, he began to assemble a team of teachers and staff for the newly converted charter school.

**Beginning again.** Gillbeau’s description of organizing for the opening of the school demonstrates both the urgency and haste with which the conversions and school start-ups took place.

> the Monday after Thanksgiving I hired my first person who was my secretary… and the next day we did a first round of interviews for teachers. The following day we did final interviews for teachers and that Saturday morning we met and we had an NFL-style draft… it was the most outrageous, unique thing in the world (G-1-2).

Working together with members of the ACSA governing board and new staff, Gillbeau and the board determined that the school would initially open as a half-day school in mid December. On opening day, the school started with 125 kids and 18 teachers, my secretary, myself and one counselor. We had a half-day four-period day, four-period schedule before Christmas for eight days, came back and expanded to a full-day five-period schedule for January trying to concentrate on credit recovery and then at the end of January we expanded to a six-period day, again trying to give greater emphasis to the core and less emphasis to electives and that, that really worked out pretty well for the kids. They didn’t earn as many units, but they had missed [school] so, some of them had missed everything from the 29th of August on. Some of them had missed one day. It just depended. The kids came from 38 different states to
return. We expanded from 125 to 250, to 400, to 500, to 600, to 700, and the day after state testing [     ] called me and asked me to take 50—100 over-aged eighth-graders. So we ended up with over 800 kids and 52 teachers. One counselor to handle all of that. One secretary to handle the intake. It was crazy. It was nuts. I mean, I’ve never seen anything like it. I mean some kids had nothing… we got our second counselor around the middle of April…. So it was a time of great expansion, thinking on our feet tremendously.”

Gillbeau’s excitement and relief at being back to work were palpable during our interview. As he conveyed the coming together of the faculty and staff and students on the first day, his voice carried a notable weight of the hardships through which people who lived through Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath are all-too familiar:

The first day we came back from Katrina with kids, I had them all gather down in the cafeteria… and I am trying to think of something significant to say and a thought just came and I looked at the kids and I said, ‘If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t be here. It’s probably more true now than it ever was, because in September, when you weren’t here, we didn’t have jobs, and in October and November when you weren’t here, we didn’t have jobs, and it’s never been more true than now. Now that you are back we have jobs. We are working together. Now that you are back.’ And I don’t know, it was some kind of insight, you see, because before, it was more like we said it and it was lip service… and it really is about the kids… and one of the best strategies we did at the time was to have everybody share their Katrina story. We [the faculty] had told about our own stories before the kids got back, but I even pulled [my secretary] in and I think there were 20 of us [faculty and staff] and it took is three hours to get through it. But it was cathartic to hear… and as kids joined us after Christmas they got to tell their stories for a while, too (G-3-12).

As the work of the school took shape, the organization took on notable differences from the former school. Gillbeau related that the work he was now doing was “definitely not the same job” (G-1-3) he or the teachers were doing before the storm:

The kids we have today are much more challenging. Their fundamental skills are very different from the students that we were able to select prior to the storm… before Katrina we were a 7-12 magnet school with 1200 students. After Katrina we were a high school only. Open access meant that anybody could come to the school. We couldn’t pick who came. We couldn’t tell anybody at the end of the year you can’t come back because you don’t make your grades. So there was no selection process (G-1-3).
While the school could no longer select the students, as a conversion charter school leader, Gillbeau could now choose his staff. Unlike before, Gillbeau found that “hiring and firing were totally in my hands” (G-1-3). He shared that the ability to build and shape a staff became both a reality and a challenge. As the staff grew, he acknowledged that by the end of the year we had a lot of new people who had joined us and we didn’t have the same degree of cohesiveness that you have with 17 with 52. It was just, you know, one of those things. We ended the school year with 52 people for 800 kids. But that’s not just teaching faculty; we had around 35 teachers, including special education. Of that group of 52 there were about 22 of us who had been here before the storm. The rest were new to the building… some of them had coached here or had worked in some capacity; some had been here, left, and came back, such as one of the secretaries I hired that summer, but most were new (G-1-3).

Gillbeau spoke of the rapid uptick in both student enrollment and teacher hiring. Inherent in this rapid growth within an organization were challenges of induction and acculturation of both students and teachers. He acknowledged the stressors placed on the organization and the impact on cohesiveness. He took it in stride, however, given the circumstances, as “one of those things” to be expected in a time of turbulence. Harp is now in its fourth full year of operation with an enrollment of 840 students with varied learning needs. The student population and challenges that have come with them have given rise to an expanded administrative structure supportive of identified needs.

The new school. Harp Charter High School is an open-enrollment charter high school educating students in the ninth through twelfth grades. Classes are conducted on a modified blocked schedule of 90 minutes of classroom instruction with exceptions at the freshman level for extended time in math and English. The work of the school is
structured and accomplished around three leadership teams responsible for various school functions. These teams include:

- an administrative leadership team responsible for safety, order and instructional and programming assignments for both teachers and students;
- a Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) team responsible for developing, supporting and evaluating teacher classroom instructional performance; and
- a Response to Intervention Team (RTI) responsible for the implementation and oversight of individual student education plans for students identified with special education needs.

“We have a school leadership team that is basically administrative,” said Gillbeau. “It’s the administrative part of the school [that meets] with department chairs” (G-1-5).” This team, comprised of one assistant principal, the registrar, the academic counselors, and department chairs, are responsible for scheduling and course programming. The structure resembles the administrative support structure that existed in the pre-Katrina organization of Harp.

The programmatic decisions are made through the school leadership team in terms of [asking], ‘Are we offering any new courses next year? What are they going to be? What do they look like? Who’s going to teach them? How many sections are we going to have?’ and all that kind of goes into planning (G-1-5).

The makeup of this leadership team is typical in most high school organizations. Discussions between academic counselors aware of student credit and curricular requirements, and administrators versed in building utilization, employee quotas, teacher capabilities and class loads are standard practice at the high school level.
The second leadership team at Harp, the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) team, is an additional support. Comprised of administrators and teachers identified as master teachers, this team serves as a support system for teacher development and evaluation. The concept and position of a master teacher is new to Harp and the other schools in the ACSA cohort. After Katrina, the ACSA allied itself with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching’s (NIET) program, the System for Teacher and Student Advancement, commonly called TAP. The goal of TAP is “to attract, retain, develop and motivate talented people to the teaching profession” (http://www.tapsystem.org/).

The ACSA’s commitment to TAP is identified and cemented in the ACSA charter document as “the backbone for improving teacher quality and growth in student achievement” (http://www.algierscharterschools.org). Gillbeau expounded on the far-reaching integration of the program into the school...

... we have a cluster meeting on most Tuesdays except when we’re testing, and that leadership team determines a lot about instructional practices and evaluation of teachers. TAP schools basically divide teaching faculty into three groups: you have career teachers, you have master teachers, and you have mentor teachers. The master teachers teach teachers. They do not teach specific groups of students, although they will go into a teacher’s class and use their students to demonstrate a particular part of a lesson or an entire lesson—instructional strategies. The mentor teachers have an additional planning period and their role is to assist the master teacher with their cluster meetings, but also, master teachers, mentor teachers and administrators evaluate teachers (G-1-5, 6, 7).

The TAP team is an addition to the traditional high school structure. With it came opportunities for teachers identified as having instructional expertise to step into instructional leadership roles. They not only work with incoming teachers to acclimate them to instructional expectations, they model effective instructional strategies in
classrooms, provide professional development and coaching, and contribute to the evaluation process in rating and calibration sessions with administration. TAP also creates a pipeline of instructional leaders by developing mentor teachers who are specifically assigned to help new teachers gain confidence and comfort in the classroom setting. These mentor teachers may in time choose to apply to be master teachers, a process that will further develop their instructional and coaching expertise.

The TAP provides a new structure for the development, and support, of teachers with the goal of improved student achievement and determines the process through which teacher evaluation takes place.

Each teacher is observed four times during the school year, once each quarter by one of those folks. Administrators usually see the entire faculty, and there are three of us. We usually see the entire faculty once between all three of us. The mentors see the entire faculty once between the six of them and the three master teachers will evaluate all teachers twice (G-1-8).

TAP also plays a role in introducing teachers to the process they will undergo in their development as instructional providers at Harp. Gillbeau cited the introduction of TAP into the school as a primary re-shaper of the way teachers are both brought in and trained regarding expectations:

I don’t even remember what it was before to be honest. We had four professional development days you had to fit in somewhere. It seems to me that you got your teachers three or four days before you got the kids… At the start of school the teachers may have gone to a district meeting…. Quite honestly, I’ve always had a new teacher orientation that lasted about three hours and it was quick, it was dirty and usually the system would follow the next day… but this year in particular we hired like 13 new teachers and I’ve met with them on a couple occasions and lately I’ve been feeling very guilty [about not meeting more often] (G-1-9).

Now, through TAP, teachers learn about and practice instructional preparation and delivery under the guidance of mentor teachers. Their evaluation is embedded in the
instructional development and coaching process. Gillbeau shared that the current way teacher practice is evaluated bears “no comparison” to how teachers were evaluated under the former district system of teacher evaluations:

What we did before was… we’d run in for a half an hour and quite honestly if it was a veteran teacher that we knew and felt comfortable with we might stay for 15 minutes, we might stay for a full half hour. Administrators are now required to be in a classroom for the entire period, which makes it rough… because freshman math and English—they’ve got in some cases a 120-minute long class period (G-1-8).

Gillbeau said that all of the members of the TAP team receive training in the program, its requirements and the structured rubric used to rate instructional performance. Gillbeau explained that “the team is responsible for making sure that we have reliability among the team members” (G-1-8). Following calibration sessions in which those persons assigned to assess the teacher’s performance meet, share notes, and compare rubric ratings, the master and mentor teachers meet with classroom room teachers. These feedback meetings take place during teacher planning periods. Teachers meet once a week with the mentor and master teachers to work on targeted development goals identified during the group calibration sessions.

Harp Charter High School also has a third leadership team, the Response to Intervention (RTI) Team (RTI) that serves as a mechanism for early identification of student behaviors that impede student academic achievement. Initiated in 2004, schools implementing an RTI framework bring together administrators, faculty, social workers, and other school support staff for the purposes of using data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify

The staff and teachers at Harp work together frequently to discuss and make plans based on student performance data. Gillbeau elaborated:

…we meet once a week on Thursdays and usually it’s for a couple of hours, to identify, to plan; and that involves the nurse, our two social workers, our four counselors, the administrative team and any other people that we need to bring in including parents and regular classroom teachers, Special Education teachers… (G-1-9).

Gillbeau spoke convincingly about this method and framework for student support as representing an authentic and collaborative means of intervention for student success. He shared quite a bit about how it was different from the past where they had a Student Advisory Team that met monthly and did paperwork. The needs after Katrina were so intense that they couldn’t continue in the same way. Peoples’ lives had been turned upside down. Some were living in crowded trailers with distant relatives or friends. Many students had little in the way of clothing and most had no uniforms or money for uniforms. With rare exceptions, students new to the school had no transcripts to indicate grade level completions. No vaccination records could be provided. Parents did not know where or how to get their children back in school. “I got to a point… where I was just tired. I was tired of fielding phone calls from parents who wanted information and there was just a lack of information, and they wanted to know the process and nobody could define the process.” Gillbeau related that he and the staff started hearing some stuff about RTI and that was starting to come online and somewhere at the middle to the end of third quarter I said, ‘Thursday of this week all the support staff is meeting, and we’re going to just meet until we don’t have anything to talk about.’ And I said ‘We’ll meet twice a month.’ Well, we started meeting and it became apparent we needed to meet more than twice a month. So, after about the third meeting I just said, ‘Every week, Thursday morning, 9:30 we
meet,’ and I looked at one of the social workers and said ‘You’re in charge of this thing; make it work.’ And from that point my assistant principal has helped her manage things and ____ takes notes. She sends out an e-mail prior to the weekly meeting so that we have some sense of continuity from week to week. We know who we’re talking about. We know which parents are coming in. Counselors and social workers arrange for parents to come in and when they come in we tell them, ‘Hey we’re here to support you and your child, now talk to us about your kid. What are their needs, what are their problems, what are their wants?’ We go through all that and it takes a lot of time (G-1-5, 6).

As a conversion charter school leader, Gillbeau has been able to put structures in place in support of the diverse academic and psycho-social needs of students, teacher development needs, capacity building among his administrative team and teacher leaders. The acknowledgement of the need for more time and the subsequent commitment of time to accomplish the necessary work is new to Harp.

The TAP team at Harp represents an additional support structure and new process for developing and evaluating teachers. The RTI functioning at Harp exceeds that from Gillbeau’s previous experience which he called a a “façade” of support. The RTI team is a system for identifying and meeting student and family needs. It provides resources beyond a school’s traditional Special Education Department that works for and with students already identified with special needs, for the purpose of early intervention.

**Curriculum for student needs.** In December 2005, Harp Charter High School opened with a curriculum offering of four periods per day of core subjects: English, math, history and science. The students making their way back to the New Orleans came without transcripts and from a variety of states. Gillbeau related that “some of them had missed everything from the 29th of August on. Some of them had missed one day. It just depended. The kids came from 38 different states to return” (G-1-2).
The lack of academic transcripts, inability to obtain or locate transcripts from former New Orleans schools, and considerable absences from formal schooling experienced by many students between August and December 2005, initially required that the curriculum offerings concentrate on the core subjects. Gillbeau shared that the charter requirement that Harp maintain an open enrollment policy exposed the need for both remedial courses and to emphasize testing skills and scores.

Prior to the storm I don’t think that I ever spent more than about ten minutes about test scores other than, ‘this is how we did last year.’ Nowadays we spend half the year doing a 20-minute blitz everyday getting them ready for testing. We have charts out in the building telling the kids these are our goals; telling the teachers these are our goals. We have expanded the number of sections of remediation to the point this year that all of our freshmen are taking two hours of Algebra and two hours of English I. We also have a double block of English II for selected tenth grade students and all of that is based upon test score data (G-1-3).

Gillbeau readily admitted that the decision to double the amount of instructional time spent on freshman English and math has for some teachers been ―the bane of their existence,‖ (G-1-3) and one that was revisited mid-year. Making curricular decisions based on identified student needs demonstrates commitment to student achievement. Two hours of instruction requires that teachers be trained in strategies that engage students, move them about the classroom, and provide opportunities for student practice, simulations, discussion and reinforcement. Students, too, need to be acculturated to such instructional practice. Gillbeau suggests that this is happening via the work of TAP and the mentor teachers (G-3-5).

The increased emphasis on English language and mathematics skills has meant an increase in the numbers of English and math teachers in the building. Gillbeau noted,
“We have twice as many language arts sections this year in ninth grade as we had last year. We have twice as many math sections in ninth grade as we had last year” (G-1-13).

This emphasis meant that freshmen have an all-academic work load. Gillbeau stated, “We took away their electives. We gave them more of the core” (G-2-13). Further illustrating the diverse needs of the student body, he went on to say:

That’s at one end of the spectrum. The other end of the spectrum is we’ve extended our AP and pre-AP offerings because we have this span of student needs that is so much broader than what we used to have. Our gifted population pre-Katrina was about 33% and now it’s about 8%. So that’s a big difference. We didn’t have that many AP sections prior to Katrina because we had so many gifted sections. Now we’ve pretty much combined the two. We’re operating both but at the upper end in junior and senior year we’ve done a lot of combining. The state’s okayed the combination of gifted and non-gifted into the AP section so that’s helped our master schedule somewhat and it makes for fewer classes with really small numbers of students. So we’ve got pre-AP for English II, AP for [English] III and IV, pre-AP for Geometry, AP for Calculus, pre-AP for Biology, AP for Chemistry and Bio II, pre-AP for Civics and Free Enterprise and next year we’re going to add AP for World Cultures along with AP for U.S. History and European [History] (G-1-4).

The introduction of more Advanced Placement (AP) courses after Katrina is a shift in curricular offerings that mirrors a trend in urban low-performing schools to create more challenging academic opportunities (Eisner, 2001).

Harp now offers three curricular avenues to credit completion. First is a regular curriculum with courses available in math and English for students whose test scores are below 40% on nationally normed tests or below Basic on the LEAP/GEE tests. The Harp student handbook stipulates that these courses emphasize “preparing students for the demands of college, but at a different pace; one designed to meet their particular needs.”

Harp’s second path is an honors curriculum in core subjects at all grade levels designed for students demonstrating academic proficiency. The handbook states that
courses in this curricular path provide emphasis on “preparing the student to meet the
demands of a rapidly expanding global society while continuing to provide a solid
foundation in each skill area.”

A third curriculum path is available to Harp students at all grade levels identified
as academically gifted or talented (G/T). G/T students receive individualized instruction
based on an agreed-upon, legally binding Individual Education Program. G/T courses are
characterized by academic acceleration, compacting, and curriculum enhancement.
Students identified as talented are eligible for intensive instruction in drama, music, and
the visual arts.

The various curriculum paths are reflective of the span of learning needs of
Harp’s student body in its post-Katrina iteration as a conversion charter open-access
school. The course offerings represent decisions made to meet both students’ changed
academic needs and recently identified student interests. In illustration of the changing
needs, Gillbeau recalled that

Prior to Katrina we had a lot of kids electing to take computer courses. That’s not
the case now. We do have one full-time business teacher, but we actually only
have a couple of sections of computer lit[eracy], computer science and that was
very different pre-Katrina to the point where we changed our computer literacy to
speech as a half year course to balance out with ACT test prep. On the other hand
we now are offering film making as an elective… you know, because an elective
program really needs to meet the needs of kids at least as much as they are aware
of… you know, kids kind of want what they want whether they need it or not and
so some things really look great; then when [they] get into it they find out, ‘Hell,
this is just more work’ (G-1-5).

Identifying, acknowledging, and then providing for student needs and crafting
curriculum to meet those needs signifies a flexibility and student-centeredness present in
Harp as a charter school. While the reality of required courses exists, the inclusion of
courses reflective of students’ interests and upholding challenging expectations in sought-after elective courses places the students at the center of curriculum planning. The curricular component at Harp demonstrates an awareness of student diversity and a willingness and flexibility to offer courses in accordance.

Motivating students and overseeing their completion of curricula requirements is the purview of the college counselor. Gillbeau spoke with pride about his counseling department:

I have the good fortune of having a phenomenal counseling department. We have 800 kids, 840 students this year. We have three full-time counselors who do the regular high school counseling. We have a fourth counselor who does nothing but college counseling and she operates separately from the others although they are a cohesive unit.

The additional of a dedicated college counselor is a step towards providing students with the information and tools they need to learn about college opportunities, to engage in the application process, and to anticipate the expectations of an academic life beyond high school. The emphasis on high school completion followed by college is a message that is communicated to both students and parents. For Gillbeau, this push can be attributed to the addition of the full-time college counselor who works with the seniors and their parents:

She has a college room that she manages with computers and invites students and parents to come in and do online searches through the e-portal. They do career searches, college searches, Free Application for Federal Student Aid, all of that stuff. She coordinates all of the college recruiters, the military and all of that piece. She also takes the kids off campus, like our ninth graders were at UNO [the University of New Orleans] today because they didn’t test and it was good for them to be off campus. She coordinates individual college visits and approves absences for that purpose. She writes all the letters of recommendations for kids. She basically takes college from A-Z. She also coordinates our summer institutes for our rising sophomores and rising juniors at Our Lady of Holy Cross College and Delgado. That’s part of our Project Grad connection… 97% of our seniors
were in college this fall. She goaded them, she prodded them, she pushed them. She did everything but spank them. And she worked with their parents. You know, her room is open to students and parents, grandparents. You know, we’ll show you how to get on Louisiana E-portal, create your own resume, write your essays, do whatever you need to do, and we educate parents as well as kids on how to do that process. We start in the fall with our high school nights, our freshman night, our senior night, et cetera. And we take them through everything they need to know about high school and if they’re seniors, they get a dose of ‘this is what you need to be ready for college.’ We do financial aid night. We do college day where the reps come in, talk to them… she has visits to colleges (G-2-4).

Through the addition of the RTI team, the TAP team, and an expanded, hands-on counseling department, Gillbeau has created structures in support of changes in the school that have taken place after Katrina.

Teaching redux. “TAP,” says Gillbeau, “has changed the level of the adult conversation within the building” (G-2-1). When asked about instructional practice in his school he launched into an analogy about perception and subjectivity to illustrate the significance that the Teacher Advancement Program has made:

There’s an old saying that you know good teaching when you see it. I guess it’s like beauty. You know? Well, what’s beautiful to you and what’s beautiful to me may be two different things. I could look at a bunch of azaleas and say, ‘hmm, flowers.’ You could look at a bunch of azaleas and say, ‘hmm, roses’… seeing it [good teaching] and being able to say, here’s a rubric that describes 18 characteristics of good teaching and this makes it a 1 or a 2, this makes it a 3, this makes it a 4 or 5, and being able to really categorize it so that you can collect data and have a meaningful conversation with the teacher on how that teacher could improve is a whole different deal (G-2-8).

Gillbeau states emphatically that what passed for teacher evaluation and development in his leadership role before Katrina nears no resemblance to what is happening now:

There is no comparison. What we did before was ‘wham, bam, thank you ma’am’ to really be crude… yeah, we’d run in for a half an hour and quite honestly, if it was a veteran teacher that we knew and felt comfortable with we might stay for
15 minutes, we might stay for a full half hour… now we are there for the entire period, which… in some cases is 120 minutes long… (G-1-7).

Gillbeau says frankly:

When I first started as a principal… we had about 12 things that they checked off. Teachers were satisfactory or unsatisfactory. So that was your evaluation. That was the Stone Age. It got a little more sophisticated in the 90s when we went from 12 characteristics [of effective teaching] on one page to maybe 60 characteristics on 15 pages… It was ridiculous. It was still check. But now we have 18 characteristics; there is a rubric, and we sit down after we script and we look back through our scripts and we take note: did they have their objectives posted?… each area has four or five bullets that we can look for that tells us if they’re effective, they’re not effective, they’re [students] engaged, they’re meaningfully engaged, they’re really engaged. So, it’s very different… If you’re a classroom teacher, somebody’s going to come in first quarter, somebody will come in second quarter, somebody third, and somebody fourth… so we will get four snapshots from different cameras. One of them will be announced; the other three will not be announced (G-2-8, 9).

He emphasizes that the introduction, training, and use of TAP has made a difference in levels of expectation for the instructional performance of teachers.

Instructional practice at Harp is now guided by a rubric that provides a common vocabulary, a common language with which to discuss performance and instructional practice. The components of effective teaching that are talked about, developed and upon which teachers are evaluated include

- Attention to the State Standards and Objectives
- Motivation of Students
- Presentation of Instructional Content
- Structure and Pacing of Lessons
- Variety of Activities and Materials
- Questioning Techniques
- Academic Feedback to Students

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- Grouping of Students
- Demonstration of Teacher Content and Knowledge
- Demonstration of Teacher Knowledge of Students
- Teaching for Thinking
- Teaching for Problem Solving
- Content of Instructional Plans
- Quality of Student Assignments
- Student Work
- Student Assessments
- Expectations
- Management of Student Behaviors
- Classroom Environment
- Respectful Culture

Gillbeau likens the impact that centering instructional practice around a common rubric with multiple observers and opportunities for teacher improvement has had to the permeability and expansion of an ink drop hitting water:

It’s kind of like if you’re dropping a glob of ink on water; it hits, and I guess if you had oil it would just simply stay there. But when you’ve got water it all of a sudden expands out. And I think that’s the difference between seeing good teaching and having a rubric that establishes that language, that common language that you can engage in to discuss the nuances of classroom management, effective instruction, how they’re engaged in appropriate curriculum, whether they’re offering effective feedback, how they use data, and how they assess student knowledge, whether their classroom environment really facilitates a warm environment, all of those different factors that are really crucial in good teaching (G-2-8).
Teachers are required to attend weekly cluster meetings with their mentor and master teacher. Planning time is dedicated time and non-negotiable:

I think the smartest thing that was done in the chartering of the ACSA schools was to put TAP into the charter so that it was not a faculty vote... when you go to the average teacher and say to them we’re going to help you develop as a teacher but it’s going to cost you 40% of your planning time, the average teacher is going to say, prove that it works before I give you my vote (G-2-10).

During the cluster meetings, the “focus is real tight on instruction. Student work is shared. Field-testing takes place” (G-2-9). Gillbeau explains that teachers are encouraged to use student data, examine the effect of instructional strategies, and to “see what’s working, what’s not working” (G-2-9).

The master teacher and the mentor teacher will put their heads together. They’ll find a research-based strategy that has worked in other places. They’ll field test that to see what the results of that particular strategy is compared to the tried and true method. If the results look promising then they bring that back to the TAP leadership team and the TAP leadership team will then authorize the master and mentor teacher to expand it across greater lines. In fact it may go across the entire department’s lines if it’s really working well (G-1-7).

Gillbeau called the notion of the principal as instructional leader “the great lie,” one that has been exposed by the current use of TAP that brings together the expertise of numerous educators in shared responsibility for the evaluation and development of a teacher’s classroom instructional practice:

Prior to Katrina there was a great lie, and the great lie was that the school principal was the instructional leader in the school. We didn’t have time to really be effective instructional leaders. I understand that that’s the role, but now we have instructional leaders, and that is a shared responsibility between master teachers, mentor teachers, administrators. There are three administrators, six mentor teachers. There are three master teachers, and the masters do two observations of every teacher. The mentors do one, and the administrators do one. I could have gone into your class pre-Katrina and spent 15 minutes; or I could have avoided your class and not spent any time and filled out a check-off sheet. [Now] we go in for an hour; we script during that hour; we come back together. Most evaluations take a couple of hours to do (G-2-9).
As a conversion charter school leader, Gillbeau is participating in the change effort to improve instructional delivery and provide meaningful feedback to and development of teachers. The process involves observations of classroom teachers each quarter by master and mentor teachers, as well as administrators trained as TAP observers. The TAP process requires one announced observation and three others that are unannounced. During one of the observations the teacher is video taped. The tape is critiqued by the TAP team and the teacher receives feedback and continuous opportunities to work on classroom instruction. TAP provides both an introduction to instructional expectations and ongoing assistance to teachers in a way that is new to the organization. Gillbeau related that

… it’s one thing to say to somebody, ‘Look if you come to Harp, and if you need your hand held, you really need to go someplace else.’ It’s another thing to really have that ongoing support. We rely on TAP to do that and it does to a great degree… new teacher orientation used to last about three days… that wasn’t enough. TAP is now the mechanism through which continuous improvement of instruction takes place (G-1-9).

Gillbeau described the observations of teachers as “four views… four snapshots from different cameras” (G-2-9). He conveyed confidence in the program and effect on pedagogy, particularly its impact on teachers entering the profession through non-traditional routes:

I think TAP has helped in a lot of ways… I see some of our young people who are highly intelligent, but did not get traditional education degrees and through working with TAP—that reinforcement, boomp boomp boomp, every week…. To see their growth in terms of expanding their minds and opening their practice up to good instructional strategies; they have improved dramatically (G-3-5).

In addition, he has seen
that veteran teachers are sharing more with younger teachers than before. I think that a number of our teachers have become better teachers through utilization of TAP. I would also say that we have not maximized our potential through TAP, that this is like perfection… something you are always seeking… we will continue to strive to reach a higher, an ever increasingly higher level of proficiency (G-2-10).

Harp has put a system in place to develop and monitor the instructional performance of classroom teachers, one that utilizes the capacity of accomplished master and mentor teachers toward the goal of increased student achievement. Still, Gillbeau said, TAP does not meet all teacher development needs:

there’s stuff that comes up that really doesn’t fit into TAP. Example: TAP doesn’t deal a lot with classroom management. TAP doesn’t deal any with how to put grades into a computer, it doesn’t cover school messenger, which calls home, it doesn’t deal anything with Power School. So this year, in particular as we’ve come online with Power School and we’ve gotten our school messenger back and a couple of other things—it’s become apparent to me that we really have dropped the ball on these things this year to the point where that I’ve asked one of our fifth year teachers and one of our first year teachers who’s really done an excellent job to coordinate the teacher induction next year… next year there will be ongoing monthly staff development for new teachers, all teachers who are new to [Harp] (G-1-9).

Significantly, TAP’s emphasis on classroom instructional performance has given Gillbeau and his staff a clearer picture of the kinds of teachers they want in order to meet student needs. Getting the right teachers in Harp’s classrooms has become much more of a collaborative effort since Katrina:

After Katrina, hiring and firing were totally in my hands…and that was because we were no longer under the auspices of the district…prior to Katrina, I did much of the hiring personally… I might have had my administrative assistant or my AP assist me with interviewing… but now, because of the more advanced level of collegiality, as well as a comfort level with my leadership team, and also because I understand I can’t do everything and I shouldn’t do everything, and… the belief that good leaders create leaders, a lot of the hiring is decentralized. This morning we interviewed two perspective math teachers and I greeted them in the outer office and walked over and sat in on the interview for about five minutes and then left. And the master teacher, department chair and administrative assistant did the
rest of the interview… so we’ve got a couple more interviews scheduled… and we’ll see where we go. The bottom line is it’s an issue of trusting people you feel real comfortable with to… have a fraternal sense of where we’re going, if they want somebody to join their club (G-2-5).

“The really hard work,” Gillbeau said, as he sank back into the well-used orange office chair across from me:

is finding the best teachers and then doing two things—making sure that they have everything they need to be successful and getting out of the way; that’s a simplification… we can’t select the students, but we can select the staff. That puts a real burden of responsibility on us, making sure that the selections we make are the very best that we can. Certainly the time of year that you have a vacancy occur has a lot to do with the talent that’s available. This time of year [May], there are plenty of folks running around saying ‘hire me, hire me, hire me,’ and everybody’s got their hand up. If the vacancy comes up in late July… or if it happens in September, October, November, it’s tough (G-3-1).

I asked Gillbeau how he was getting the teachers Harp needed—whether recruitment and retention were different from his previous leadership work. He paused momentarily, sat up straight, looked at me and launched non-stop into the following story in answer to my question:

I used to have to put up with a lot of stuff back before the storm… I had a teacher one time, who I thought was poor, but she was the assistant building rep for the union. And we didn’t really hit it off. There was a level of argumentation that took place that wasn’t very comfortable. One day I was passing by her room, and I passed by several times, and every time I passed by she was seated in her desk… my intent was not on her, it was to take care of stuff… but every time I passed by her room, she was seated. I never saw her teaching actively and this went on for several days, and finally I decided to do a ten-minute observation. I went in, I did a ten-minute observation, she stayed at her desk the entire time. So I called her in to my office. I told her that I was really not pleased with all of the many observations nor with the ten-minute observation I’d done and so I was going to come and do a full observation. I let a week or two go by and went back and did a full observation. She handed out some papers at the beginning of the class, she stayed at her desk the entire time. So I called her in to my office. I told her that I was really not pleased with all of the many observations nor with the ten-minute observation I’d done and so I was going to come and do a full observation. So I let a week or two go by and went back and did a full observation. She handed out some papers at the beginning of the class and then sat down. At the end of the class, she stood up and picked the papers back up, but there was never any active instruction. So based upon that, I told her that I was putting her back into the evaluation cycle. And I expected that she would change her behavior. Well, I let two or three weeks go by and went in and did a full observation for a full hour. Same pattern, hand stuff out, sit down, stand
up, and pick that up. So I conferred with her after the evaluation and I told her what my problems were with what I’d observed. I expected her to pick up the can, actively instruct students. So I wait a month, probably a month and a half, and did a second follow up observation and saw the same thing. And so when we met, I said, ‘you know at those conferences, I told you like three or four times now that I have a problem with this mode of operation. Are you just determined that you are not going to change?’ She said, ‘I will run my classroom like I want to run my classroom.’ I said, ‘It's okay, I am going to give you the evaluation that you deserve and it's unsatisfactory.’ Well, she then filed a grievance against me. And I held the conference here with the building rep and turned down the grievance. A couple of weeks later, the grievance appeal meeting was held at the area superintendent’s office, they turned down the grievance. And then it went to the superintendent and that took like four months. And she was actually grieving that I had no grounds to put her back in the evaluation cycle, not the actual observations… The associate superintendent who heard the case for the superintendent came to me and said, ‘look, [Bobby], do you want to fire her or you just want her gone?’ And I said ‘she deserves to be fired.’ He said ‘well in that case, you will probably have to live with her for another year and a half.’ He said, ‘but if you want her gone, I can make that happen today.’ I said ‘get her out.’ And so you know that’s just one story (G-3-2, 3).

He laughed and shook his head as he rubbed his hair in a circle.

That wouldn’t happen now, because if I went into that same teacher’s classroom today, I would probably then take a walk over to [master teacher’s name] classroom and say, ‘Look, teacher X in room such and such needs your help… she doesn’t get up and walk around, she doesn’t instruct, she has no relationship with the kids, the classroom environment is cold… and [master teacher] would march down sometime that day and observe, and the next day, and begin to provide some help. If [master teacher] felt like she were short-handed, she would invite the mentor teacher… and then the assistant principal and I would go in and we would watch and observe, and we would evaluate and offer constructive criticism. At some point in time we would know if the person has been receptive and then make a decision (G-3-4).

He admitted that he still “has teachers who want to, who prefer to, stay behind their doors, their four walls and two doors, and not relate to anybody and run their little kingdom,” but in the “TAP world we now live in here, they’ve got to come out” (G-3-4).

What’s different? I asked Gillbeau what stood out from his former work as a principal. “There are significant differences,” he said.
The first thing I’d point to is TAP, the Teacher Advancement Program… We all have training and one of the things that we’re trained to do is to make sure that we have reliability among the team…. TAP has national results, they have state results, they have local results… we are trained to the school and here’s how it works. We’ll take a video of a teacher teaching an English or math or science lesson and our team, and there’s about 12 of us, will all sit down and we’ll take our notes and then we’ll take the rubric and then we’ll score the teacher based upon the rubric and as long as everyone on our team is within one point of the national average for each part of the rubric, we are considered to be reliable… It’s a calibration mechanism… we don’t want inflation; we don’t want the opposite effect either, so we work toward inter-rater reliability… (G-1-7, 8).

Gillbeau declared that the training and use of the TAP rubric have “…brought instruction to a higher level… it assists us in honing our craft” (G-1-8). He continued:

Prior to Katrina… we didn’t have time to be effective instructional leaders… now we have instructional leaders, and that is a shared responsibility [among] master teachers, mentor teachers, administrators… we have a rubric that describes 18 characteristics of effective teaching… we can collect and categorize data and have a meaningful conversation with the teacher on how that teacher can improve… we have a common vocabulary, a common language to discuss performance and… help improve instructional practice (G-2-8, 9).

…the second thing I think is that many of the decisions that affect the school environment are made here and stay here—the authority and responsibility to hire and fire, how we process students who violate school rules, spending; those take place here. I think the most [money] I ever had as an Orleans Parish principal—discretionary money—was around forty grand. Now it’s like seven million, so that’s a fairly significant difference… the money does not get to feed a hungry central office; it stays at the school site. ACSA, by its own rules, limit themselves to I think, 8.2 percent of our total revenues…. ACSA has a tendency to be very hands-off, allowing decisions and reinforcing the concept of decisions being made here at the school site… and, the size of our faculty is significantly larger than it was before in spite of the fact that we have about 350 students less (G-2-1).

He continued:

I determine hiring and salaries… We do have a scale, and for the most part when we hire someone we stick to the scale. If it’s really hard to fill the position than I may negotiate; I may deviate. For example, the parent liaison, she is paid slightly more than if she would have been on the [central office] scale… (G-1-15).

Having the discretion our make our own [staffing] decisions is significant… we added a counselor; now I have a full time nurse and two social workers… We
determine what we need based on the needs of the students, the needs of the school, the needs of the community (G-2-4, 5).

The budget Gillbeau now oversees gives him considerable leeway when it comes to making decisions about programming:

We’ve created our own summer institutes, we’ve created our own ninth grade academy… we’ve hired a technology staff developer… the idea is we have enough money now to make things work whereas before I might have been able to get some things in place, but there was never enough money to guarantee that you could support it (G-2-14).

The extent to which this school leader exerts authority and involves staff in decision making is markedly different as a charter school leader.

I will say this. For the most part, and I’m not sure what it looks like to the average teacher, but for the most part we try to collaborate on decisions. I have always felt that there is greater buy-in if decisions are shared… on long-term stuff like how many people will be in the English department, how many will be in the math department… Science next year wants another person—do the numbers support it? As a leadership team we get to sort it out and figure out what we can do. In a perfect world we might be able to do this but in our world we have to do that. It’s helpful for people to see that you don’t have an unlimited budget (G-1-14).

Programmatic decisions are made through the school leadership team… in terms of what we are offering, any new courses, what they might look like, who’s going to teach them, how many sections… they involve the AP, department heads, counselors, master teachers… (G-1-5).

During the year Gillbeau made a decision to double class time for freshmen English and math. While discussion had taken place over how to best alleviate and eliminate students’ academic deficiencies, the decision placed significant planning and patience burdens on teachers of those students. Eventually, Gillbeau admitted “a rush to judgment had occurred, I allowed both groups to reschedule their students…” (G-1-3).
In high school settings, changes made to schedules after the start of the school year are always disruptive. A need had been identified and the solution was to extend and intensify instructional time. Gillbeau went on to say that the decision was revisited

...at mid-year—admitting that perhaps a rush to judgment had occurred, I allowed both groups to reschedule their students within the clock. The math people decided to keep things as they were... but the English folks chose to reschedule students into different blocks so that they reflected a low, medium and high level of performance, and they determined who would teach which... it gave them the ability to control their destiny a larger degree, though each were given the same degree of autonomy. Each chose a different direction... (G-1-3, 4).

He acknowledged the difference in the student population and the stress this change has put on teachers:

The kids we have today are much more challenging. Their fundamental skills are very different from the students that we were able to select prior to the storm. One of the things that my district colleagues seem to always be surprised at as we talked about school success before the storm, was that I attributed much of our success to the fact that we were able to select our enrollment. They always seem surprised to hear me say that, but in all honesty prior to the storm, I don’t think that I ever spent more than about ten minutes talking about test scores other than this is how we did last year. The truth is, the better we got at selecting our kids, the better the scores were. So, there was no real secret, our kids were going to score well in spite of us. Now days, we spend half the year doing a 20-minute blitz everyday getting them ready for testing... We have charts out in the building telling the kids these are our goals. Telling the teachers these are our goals. We have expanded the number of sections of remediation to the point this year that all of our freshmen are taking two hours of Algebra and two hours of English I. We also have a double block of English II for selected tenth grade students and all of that is based upon test score data (G-1-3).

This has meant a significant change for teachers, both instructionally and emotionally from the vantage of the pressures to meet student needs:

Probably the biggest change for the teachers is that as a magnet school, the diversity of student learners was narrow. They pretty much all came to us high school-ready going into seventh grade. Now we have kids coming in at ninth grade who are reading on a fifth grade level or third grade level. And so, the diversity in the classroom is extremely broad. That has tremendous implications
on student behavior, which has tremendous implications on teachers’ stress levels (G-2-5).

**Gillbeau’s closing thoughts.** As we came to the end of our interview time together, I invited Gillbeau to share some final thoughts about his experience as a conversion charter school leader and his hopes for the future of his school. He paused for a good minute, then said:

I think it’s really incumbent upon us to get it right… We have one shot because there are forces out there that would like to see a school system again. And if we prey on the ignorance of parents, if we decide, for whatever reason, to be selective [of students] on our own without some higher authority determining that that’s what we’re supposed to do, then we would repel choice; we would stink it up… The parents are going to send us the best things they have and they can’t do anything about that; it’s always going to be imperfect, the kids you get, you get. But we have to open our doors to receive all the children. I would like to see more diversity. It’s going to be what it’s going to be. I don’t have any influence on it… but we just have to get it right. Otherwise, we’ll have a big monopolistic system and eventually we’ll have the same kinds of problems that we just got rid of (G-3-13).

**Mary Eastlake’s Story**

As I sat in the wood-paneled anteroom of the school office of Fairlane Elementary Charter School, I took in the brightly displayed words on the bulletin board: “Eagles Soar!” Around the picture of an eagle in flight are the words “fortitude, responsibility, caring, determination, and scholarship.” A door opened, and Mary Eastlake, wearing a sparkling black and gold jacket, extended her hands in greeting. The New Orleans Saints had just won the Superbowl and anything seemed possible in “the city that care forgot.”

Eastlake’s bright eyes sparkled and she smiled in a way that expressed a woman comfortable in age and grace. As we stepped into her large office, she put a note on the door to ward off time-seekers. I invited her to give me a bit of background about her
work in the OPS district and how she came to be the leader of Fairlane Elementary Charter School. She stated confidently:

I am the chief executive officer, CEO, and principal of Fairlane Elementary Charter School here in the New Orleans East area of town. I was the principal of Fairlane Elementary School that was completely destroyed by Hurricane Katrina (E-1-1).

She tells me that she began her work for the Orleans Parish school system as a high school English teacher in the early 1970s, moving into administration in the 1990s. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, she served as principal of two elementary schools in eastern New Orleans. Her administrative know-how was responsible for her assignment to the city-wide access magnet school she had been leading at the time Hurricane Katrina struck the city in August 2005.

Eastlake related that during the 2004-2005 school year, conversations about becoming a charter school had begun to take place among teachers, administrators and parents at Fairlane. Driven by concerns for student achievement, school excellence and “red tape and the bureaucratic confusion” (E-1-1) on the part of the district, they had begun to collaborate in investigating, calling, getting information, finding out all that we needed to do and talking with our parent group at the PTO meetings. Everyone had come to a decision that [chartering] would be the best thing for us, so that we could really help our kids soar and more importantly design the school community that we thought, the high-quality school community that we thought we could provide for our children (E-1-1).

She continued:

… after the storm we decided to become a charter school. It was about nine of us total, seven teachers, myself, and another person on our staff and we returned to the city in October and began working on our charter application. At that time, all of us, everybody involved, lost everything. We lost everything at the school, everything in our homes. We were basically on unemployment and food stamps
like everybody else from New Orleans at that time. We would meet at the place I was living… most of us were on the West Bank and we had about two cars between us and so we would, together, take care of the errands we needed to do for our personal lives, getting medicine and all of that, trying to get mail routed to us, all of those things, and then also in preparing the charter application. It was a difficult time, but we all look back on it now, it was also a great time. We were already a close faculty prior to the storm, but this event made us even closer since we were so dependent on each other (E-1-5).

She went on:

We were already having the conversations. Our parent group had already decided before the storm that we wanted to be a charter school. Basically, there were things still going on in the district and we saw some things that we wanted to do with our school community that was taking forever and all of the red tape and the bureaucratic confusion it takes to move something… we had already decided that before the end of the previous school year. So to be honest, we were really working on the charter application and… had the storm not happened, we were still turning in an application in October… Fairlane was doing very well… but our hands were being tied… For example, [the superintendent] had come in and we had to do the program Success for All and different programs he brought in. Some were good; some were not good. Some were not conducive for our learning environment. And so, and we had already embarked on some… things we wanted to do; however, we had to do what the system wanted us to do, what the district wanted us to do. And so that became a problem and we just felt like, the teachers and I, that we could really do some incredible things and really create the kind of environment that we wanted for our kids (E-1-4).

Over the summer, Eastlake and others had begun writing the application for charter status, anticipating that they would submit it during the 05-06 school year. School had been in session for two weeks when the storm began its formation and approach along the Gulf Coast. The magnitude of the storm led to the eventual order to evacuate the city on the evening of August 28, 2005.

Eastlake related that the school closure and evacuation were routine in a city and region known for hurricane activity:

We left that Sunday; I didn’t take anything with me. We just thought, you know, remember this has happened in New Orleans before…you grab your credit card and you go and you figure you’re gonna have a little unplanned vacation for a
couple of days and stuff. So we locked down the school and did all of the stuff that we were told to do and that we usually did. The custodian and I left that Saturday. But, we had no idea it was going to be this devastating, nobody did. But God, that’s just the way it happened (E-1-7).

The devastation in New Orleans East was staggering. The eastern part of the city, a low-lying area populated by a majority of African American homeowners, experienced extensive flooding. The majority of the homes and buildings in the area were underwater (http://www.nhi.org/resources/katrina/). Ensuing talk of limiting the footprint of the city through the reclamation of portions of submerged eastern New Orleans fueled Eastlake’s drive to open the school (web.mit.edu/colab/work/communities/duspequitablerebuilding.pdf). She was motivated by her belief that “if a school opened… people would return” (E-1-6). Eastlake’s words conveyed anxiety, along with a determination to fight that effort:

People would say things like, well the east is not going be there anymore and they’re not going do this [rebuild], and you know there was the controversy of making a green space. That was real… because at this time they’re meeting and having meetings, city officials, about the master plan; that master plan stuff started immediately because there were some people who saw opportunities to do other things with this area of town… let it go back to swamp or… develop stuff… and have some outsiders come in and develop things, but not a residential area anymore. Saying that it was unsafe. Saying they couldn’t protect it, so they were giving those kind of ideas… And so that was the stuff we were met with. But at any rate, we persevered. By this time we had a board of directors and… we got the charter and all of that, and so I was working and the board president, and we’re calling back and forth and running behind folks and picking up; just endurance, just like, I am never going away. This is going happen. And I will be in your face every day because I have nothing else to do but get up, take a shower, and then do this… The first battle was convincing people to allow us to come here and open the school… When I first tried… to get this building… I contacted the State; I was told I first had to contact NOPS… There was controversy because no one knew if NOPS was going to open schools… I started contacting the state about leasing the building and that took forever… and I was calling back and forth and running behind folks; just sheer endurance… (E-1-7, 8).
Like many of the school buildings and most of the residential areas in New Orleans east, Eastlake’s former school complex was a total loss.

We went back to the school and everything, part of [the school] was portables, the majority of it, three-fourths of it was portables; so all of that floated away, and the other building was all one floor; it was just totally devastated because New Orleans East was under water (M-1-5).

Undeterred, she set about re-grouping, locating her teachers and staff, and organizing, determined the school would re-open as a charter school. Despite hardship, inconvenience, and the interruption of life and work as they had known it, Eastlake and the small group pushed forward to fulfill their goal of re-opening as a conversion charter school.

**Starting anew.** During September and October 2005, Eastlake worked to reconstruct, formalize, and submit the charter application to the minimally functioning OPSB. Collaborating with others in the city who were scrambling to complete charter applications, Eastlake’s goal was to submit hers for an October review and vote. Eastlake recalled that she spent three months reconstructing the application:

Before the storm we had started the application and all the copies of what we had done were destroyed because I had a copy at my house, a copy at the school, and one of the teachers had a copy at her house; but all of our houses were destroyed (E-1-7).

Eastlake persevered, contacting teachers and parents and re-creating the charter application document with the help of other educators from the city. A board of directors was established and Eastlake would head the school as principal.

She began a search for a location for the conversion charter school. Eastlake recalled that though they were offered sites in “uptown” New Orleans, the board and teachers were adamant about re-opening for families in the eastern part of the city:
We started going around, riding around, we started looking, spending days looking. Here we go driving in the car, a bunch of ladies with our ham sandwiches and our potato chips and our sodas, and started looking around and trying to find a school… (E-1-6).

Eventually, they identified some possibilities, and together with the person who would become board president, began to petition the state for permission to open the school on a former OPS district school site.

The charter received approval in January 2006, but due to the difficulty in securing a site, did not open until April of that year. Now in its fourth full year of operation, Eastlake is at the helm of a school boasting a 100% student proficiency rate in math and reading scores (www.educatenow.org). She reports to a governing board that oversees the charter and identifies herself as “the chief executive officer and principal” (E-1-1) of the conversion charter school. The work she is doing requires her to wear both of these hats. She described her new role:

There’s a business side to this, and I see that most times as the CEO side, and then there’s the principalship side of this. The CEO is involved in the politics, and when I say the politics, we’re not politicians, but you’re fooling yourself if you’re in a charter school and think that you cannot keep up with the political temperature in regard to education. You have to watch; I watch the laws. I watched them as a principal before, but you know, the school district took care of all of that and making all of those decisions about which laws or new policies they embraced. Now I am the person. I have to look out for my family and this is our family… I have to be well-read and keep up and know, and when I have the opportunity and when I talk with politicians or anything, I make sure that certain things that will benefit our community, all of the kids of charter schools, are passed. And so that, that is my job, and the job of every other principal who is a principal of a charter school. We have to be actively engaged in that arena also; and not as a politician, as an advocate (M-1-3).

Eastlake’s expanded leadership role into policy oversight and charter advocacy is one she stated she is “learning to grow into” (M-1-4). It is far beyond the scope of her work as a district school principal. As the leader of her school organization, she has taken
ownership of this new role and is working to establish connections outside of the boundaries of the school into the greater political arena in which charter school leaders must learn to advocate for the needs of their organization. Eastlake recognizes that the success of her organization is linked to forming alliances outside of the organizational structure and is taking steps to accommodate and become knowledgeable about her expanded leadership role. While the formal nature of the school is an independent conversion charter school, it is clear that an aspect of interdependency is at play. Eastlake understands the need to build community support both within and outside of her school.

Sharing leadership in a new school setting. Fairlane Elementary Charter School was the first public school to open in New Orleans East after Katrina. In April 2006, Eastlake and a staff of seven teachers welcomed 66 students in grades kindergarten through sixth grades. By the beginning of the school year, the school had reached an enrollment of 338 students. The intent was to add a grade in each coming year, moving students up to form a K-8 school. As of 2010, the school is fully operational as a K-8 school.

Fairlane operates on an 8:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m. school day schedule and has extended the number of school days to 195, which provides 71,400 minutes of instructional time per year far beyond the state guidelines of 64,800 minutes per year. Students at Fairlane have a 420 minute school day in contrast with the state’s minimum requirement of 360 minutes per day. Prior to the storm, the school operated as a Montessori magnet City-wide Access School (CWA), attracting students identified as gifted or high achieving. As part of its charter agreement, the school was able to retain
entrance admission parameters for students and is therefore considered a criteria admissions school. It is the one elementary school in New Orleans that boasts a 100% passing rate for fourth and eighth graders on the state standardized test.

The enlarged oversight role in which Eastlake found herself in her new school informed her decisions about structuring and distributing the work of the school. The first full year of operations, she hired an assistant principal to help with safety, order, and student and staff policy oversight. In addition, she acknowledged that the “instructional leadership part that I love and die to do all day long” (E-1-10) was out of necessity delegated to three instructional facilitators. Eastlake said:

I needed someone else to make sure that the things that we have in place and the things that we are envisioning are happening, minute by minute. These instructional facilitators are also the first line to teachers, they do team-teaching with teachers. They monitor and assist and enhance the instruction delivery in the classroom. They provide guidance day by day, PD—Professional Development. They make sure that the mission of the school is being carried out in a form and fashion that the school wants it to be carried out and the level that it needs to be carried out (E-2-7).

Eastlake expounds on the role of the instructional facilitators, calling them masterful, masterful teachers… they’re coaching and doing PD, and team teaching with the teachers and children… They are… instructional, curricular specialists, but more of the kind that’s actually in the classroom and interacting with the teachers and seeing them and helping them to grow (E-1-12).

She elaborated that the instructional facilitators bear the responsibility of getting teachers acclimated to the school culture, to the curriculum, the way we do things. They are there to assist… and help teachers design lesson plans… they review lesson plans and make sure they are in the format they’re supposed to be in; they make sure they are providing the quality, the information that is supposed to be delivered; that the teachers are on target with the GLEs [grade level expectations] or what we call targeted objectives… and they are watching for all of that (E-1-27).
Eastlake explained that the instructional coaches also play a key role in interviewing new teachers and familiarizing likely candidates with the culture and expectations of the school:

That’s part of the way I set up the school… they’re an insightful three women who, on the first level interview of a teacher… talk to them and sit down… and interview them, along with the assistant principal. What they try to do is give the person a summary of what the school is like, what our school day is like and the kinds of things that they have to do, and what we expect from them. We talk a lot about the school culture and the school climate because even before the storm, Fairlane had a strong school culture and we brought our same culture with us and we’ve just been enhancing it… so we talk to them and we always tell them about the beginning [of our chartering] and why we are what we are and why we do what we do, so they can understand how important this is to us and that this is more than a job or career for us (E-1-12).

Sharing leadership responsibilities makes it possible for her to accomplish the work of both CEO and principal:

I’ve always been an advocate of shared leadership with my teachers… because if you get everybody on board and get everybody interested in supporting what you’re doing then you’re less likely to have to worry about detail monitoring or standing over people or anything like that. But I’m blessed in that area because I have a phenomenal staff of people who are true professionals, and charter schools tend to attract people who really want to do schooling, who really enjoy it and see it as their ministry (E-2-11).

Eastlake promotes teacher input on scheduling to contribute to building teacher ownership and leadership capacity. Grade-level teachers determine as a group the scheduling they would like and present the recommendations to the instructional facilitators who then share recommendations with the principal for finalization.

Now leading the school through its fourth full year of operation, Eastlake employs a staff that consists of thirty-four teachers, one assistant principal, and three instructional facilitators to serve an enrollment of 463 predominantly African American students. To ensure on-site academic, health, and psycho-social services, Eastlake also hired 2 full-
time special education teachers, a full-time school nurse, and a full-time social worker. These educators and health professionals collaborate in designing and promoting a social skills program insisted upon by Eastlake to develop “the whole child—nurturing the mind, body, and spirit of the child” (M-1-13).

Additionally, to accomplish the goals of building parent involvement and support, Eastlake hired a full-time parent liaison responsible for building parent awareness via the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings, for acclimating new parents, and for facilitating the needs of returning families. She also serves as communications coordinator for school activities. Eastlake has created an extensive system that involves professionals in the building at all levels of work in support of student achievement and well being.

**Targeted teaching for student learning.** When it comes to decisions about curriculum, Eastlake described herself as “a data-driven, curriculum alignment knucklehead” (M-1-17). She said this with pride as she began to share the story of how she came to value the use and impact of data in student learning and teacher development.

In 2002, when I was principal of a low-performing elementary school, I was encouraged by… [my] district assistant superintendent to attend a conference in Scottsdale, Arizona, on the Target Teach program. It was during this conference that I experienced a shift in my work as an instructional leader… It [the conference] was about curriculum alignment… and that’s when I got into data-driven instruction and curriculum alignment… I was coming back [to New Orleans] and I was on the plane; I could barely stay on the plane. I wanted to… jump off the plane… because I thought… oh God! We’ve been doing this wrong. Oh, my God! This is crazy! We’re not even giving children a chance because we’re just letting people go in and teach blindly without a road map (M-1-24).
Eastlake said that she found the conference eye-opening as it offered a systematic way to assess students in order to make determinations about their learning strengths and deficits, and then to look systematically at the way teachers were teaching lower performing students. The Target Teach program to which she was introduced at the Scottsdale conference is a trademarked process marketed as “an adaptive, evidence-based model for rapid and sustainable school improvement” (http://itargetteach.com).

Eastlake is a proponent of the program that emphasizes curriculum alignment and state standards. Fairlane’s curriculum materials are not only aligned with state standards, but include national grade-level standards as an enhancement. The features of the program provide for the

- identification of goals by prioritizing state and district goals;
- alignment of the teaching and testing curricula;
- identification of gaps in the instructional curriculum;
- determination of objectives and benchmarks to periodically assess student mastery; and
- on-going monitoring of student progress using computer software.

Eastlake believes the program works because, “First of all, everything must align; anything we do; even the social skills program. All of that aligns to the curriculum” (E-1-21).

Eastlake and her staff know what the children need to learn, what skills are on the state test, and the Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) with which the curriculum is aligned. She says these things are not a secret, and has taken steps to ensure that using the curriculum is easy and systematic:
Everything’s color-coded…. And I can go in to a classroom and tell which objective set they’re on, whether they’re still doing some teaching to benchmark one; let’s say it’s benchmark three now, we’re in benchmark three. At the beginning of benchmark three if I saw some green objectives still listed, it means that the teacher was re-teaching those and they were still displayed there because this is our eagle instructional delivery program. This is how teachers deliver instruction… we’re all unified, doing the same thing, so when a child comes to me in kindergarten and moves on through school, he’s used to this form of organization, the way that we teach and the things that we do… when you go into the classroom, color-coded objectives indicate what instructional delivery is taking place (E-1, 16-17).

Eastlake shares that the instructional facilitators serve as the go-to people for any questions that teachers or parents have about the curriculum:

… they monitor, they check… review lesson plans, weekly quizzes, everything, projects that teachers are thinking about doing and stuff like that, they could be creative and do all that, but we have to make sure it is outlined succinctly and detailed to our objectives, our curriculum objectives and that’s important that you are teaching the objectives (E-2-7).

The three instructional facilitators are responsible for coordinating and overseeing both the curriculum implementation and instructional practices of classroom teachers. While direction comes from Eastlake and her choice of the Target Teach Curriculum, the school’s instructional facilitators train, reinforce, and ensure that teachers deliver the program, understand how to use data for instructional impact and differentiation, and engage students in their daily learning. When student deficiencies are identified through assessments, teachers are expected to use that data to “bring in an action plan for each child on how they’re going to re-do, or re-teach.” If a student is not “getting something” said Eastlake, the expectation is that the teacher find a new way of teaching it. Eastlake insists that teachers “re-teach, practice, review, and reassess” so that students can reach “soaring eagle proficiency” (E-1-17). She added that teachers who prove unresponsive are not rehired:
… if we have worked with you, helped with lesson plans, done everything, everything… my conscience is clear… what I love now is I don’t have to go a whole year with that person on staff… I have had people get resistant. They still want to go in and do it their way… the key phrase is, ‘Oh, you are stifling my creativity,’ or, ‘I feel like this is teaching to the test.’ But if you are not re-teaching, if you are not addressing your students’ learning styles… then you need to be somewhere else (E-1-28, 29).

Working together at the end of a school year, Eastlake and the instructional facilitators also consider the scope and effectiveness of the programs offered to students:

At the end of the year we sit around this table… and we will have some conversations and narrow down some things that we may want to intertwine into our curriculum. Each time we add and just keep expanding it… we talk down and we talk up,… we talk to the people below you, the grade below you and the grade above you, so that you can ascertain whether or not you are meeting the needs in that year, providing what you are supposed to have and sending on a product ready for the level (E-2-6).

Eastlake’s reference to talking up and down is a practice of vertical alignment and vertical teaming. Through vertical alignment of a school’s curriculum, a seamless flow of instruction from one grade level to the next is devised and monitored. This is a systematic, big-picture approach to learning that accounts for the totality of a student’s education. Rather than compartmentalize learning one grade at a time, vertical alignment takes a holistic, scaffolded approach, prioritizing how much time is spent on identified critical components. This practice ensures that content being taught is grade level and developmentally appropriate and builds from one year to the next (www.teacher2teacher.info).

Under Eastlake’s guidance, the school adheres to a curriculum designed to move students from basics to proficiency to mastery. Alignment with both state and national standards for grade-level learning expectations, and informed by skill sets tested in
standardized state tests, students are proving capable of achieving the goals being set by
the school.

**Transmitting culture and expectations for student learning.** Eastlake had a
vision for the school from its inception. Her belief in students’ abilities to “soar” and
achieve was palpable:

The school is the eagle’s nest. We are all the eagles. Eagles soar to great
heights… We want to develop the whole child, nurturing the mind, body, and
spirit of the child… We have an Eagles with Etiquette Club that [teaches] values,
morals, not just etiquette, and self-esteem… and we’re teaching them to be global
productive citizens. So what you see on the board is what we’re about: courage,
forgiveness, integrity, fortitude, kindness, perseverance, compassion and
determination. We’re about nurturing their mind, body, and spirit and those are all
the characteristics… (E-1-13).

Eastlake talked passionately about the goal of generating in her students a desire
to be what she called “global productive citizens.” Inspired by her daughter who, she
observed, “lives in a very global world, one of finance and travel,” she has come to
believe that

children need to be able to compete globally; it’s not just about competing in the
state of Louisiana, or even America, it’s about preparing children to take on the
world. And when they take on the world, being able to go from one culture to
another culture, secure and self-confident in… knowledge and in the ability to be
life-long learners… They have to have the attributes and skills and know-how to
gather and get information that allows [them] to fit into that culture and be
productive… (E-2-2).

Eastlake’s vision of developing the whole child is being enacted through the
various activities students can engage in at Fairlane. She recalled how, before opening the
school, she

…sat down and talked with the Board… I told them my vision for the school… I
set goals for myself, me personally as the administrator and I set goals for the
entire school. Each year we add on… we’ve been adding extracurricular stuff and
more clubs. We’ve got the equations club, we have the academic games back…
we are back with our string program finally this year…we also have a lower and upper grade choir… that’s part of educating the whole child… the mission of the school… we’ve been doing all that… creating a nurturing environment for the children… and you can see there’s been growth… it is a continuous effort (E-1-34, 35).

The staff has embraced and contributed to the shaping and communication of her vision:

The social worker and all of us, you know, as a team decided what we were going to do and how we were going to do that because we wanted to develop the whole child and a lot of times if you get that part right, the other part will come. They will want to strive for hard work and determination, and that is what this is about (E-1-14).

The character attributes of the social skills program are displayed throughout the school. They are the first thing seen upon entry to the school, and they are also displayed in the hallways and classrooms. Students are nominated at each grade level on a monthly basis to receive acknowledgement for embodying Eagle attributes and being an Eagle

That’s the highest honor here, to be a student of the month… we do that monthly and they are introduced in the morning assembly in front of everybody and we announce them on the PA system and then their names go up on the board and… in the newsletter. It’s a big, big deal. They get a ribbon and they get a diamond, a big beautiful diamond inside of a case and they know if we have to evacuate they have to take it with them. The last time we had to leave, one of the parents had me laughing. She said, ‘we’re trying to get in the car to leave town and this boy is like wait, I gotta go get my diamond! Ms. Eastlake told me don’t leave my diamond, Mama! We could use this if we don’t have any money again! If we don’t have any money again, we could sell the diamond’ (E-1-14).

Students also attend morning assemblies for information sharing and encouragement. Teachers and students assemble in the “eagles’ nest,” a large open area in the center of the school. Eastlake shares that several students who matriculated to high school last year have returned to say they miss morning assembly and the inspirational moments provided therein. She relates that

every morning at assembly I ask for a spirit check. We do spirit check to make sure everybody’s spirit and attitude is okay… If you start your day with your
spirit right, everything will be better for you… and that’s what we teach… and I say, ‘spirit check’ and they say, ‘Eagles Rock! We are the smartest, brightest children in the world and we will achieve great things because we understand the importance of hard work and determination,’ and everybody recites that, students, teachers… and then sometimes we say, ‘Kiss your brains!’… and we are constantly building them up and telling them they can make it with hard work and determination (E-2-22, 23).

Eastlake emphatically expressed that teachers are responsible for modeling Eagle attributes. Teachers receive training and development regarding the culture and academic ethos at Fairlane primarily from the instructional facilitators.

**Teacher enculturation.** In the opening year, the teachers at Fairlane were comprised of a tight-knit group of the original staff committed to chartering:

…we kept in touch and I knew where my teachers were… so once we got here, I didn’t have a problem getting teachers because I had my ones that were returning—all of them didn’t return at the same time. When we opened we opened with one teacher per grade…. I think I maybe had to get three or four new people, the rest of them were former Fairlane Elementary teachers… but I got people through referrals… we wanted seasoned, strong teachers; and we wanted people who really had the same idea that teaching is like a ministry to us…. When we hire, we try to make sure that people are committed to it [the mission of teaching children]… Now we use the teacher recruiting that the East Bank Collaborative runs. We use it a lot. We also get referrals from people on staff. I start looking in January… if I know I am going to have a vacancy (E-1-10).

I asked Eastlake if this is a different process than before. She chuckled and said:

Before the storm—and this is one of the things that’s out there… you were told which teachers you had to have. They just sent you a list of teachers and then, if you were lucky, you could choose one of those. A lot of times they just assigned teachers to your school… you didn’t interview them or anything, you just got this list and they said so-and-so is coming… or, they would send you the number of candidates, of people who were available, you would interview from that pool and select that one, and often times if they did a surplus and you didn’t get to select, they just sent you someone and so then you were stuck with that. Sometimes it wound up good, most times it wound up bad… now, the union is gone, bless God… praise His name forever and ever, amen! And if Katrina didn’t do anything else—and I am not anti-union, I belonged to the union when I was a teacher, but I also got out of the union as a teacher. I got out. I had to get out. I think I was at [names school], a high school teacher, and they were about to go on
strike, and... it was a moral issue with me... The first year I started teaching... they went on strike... I just got hired and then two months later they were on strike. I'm like, what is going on?... That was bitter. That one was bitter... I could see that some things needed to change, ...but it started going south when it stopped being about the children; it was totally about the teachers... I believe in unions, I really do. But, they're not for every industry. And I think what happened here was, the union started off good... and then it got to the point where bad teachers wound up being your building reps; it became like a little conspiracy... they knew the contract better than you in a sense because they lived by it and that's all they did; they didn't do anything else—they didn't work! They didn't do any lesson planning; all they did was keep confusion up in your school and stuff. That became their claim to fame, their banner, their reason for getting up in the morning (E-1-10).

I followed up her story with the question, "So, what is it like now?" She sprang forward in her chair, smiling, her hands thrust open, and said, "It's wonderful! It's just wonderful. It's so freeing" (E-1-11).

Later in the interview, she shared the fact that the responsibility of letting teachers go had been a heavy one, but a necessary and justifiable process:

We evaluate [teachers]... when it doesn’t work I cut you [the teacher] loose... It's not comfortable, but it's for the kids... But my choice is, when I lay down at night... 'Do I keep this teacher or let 20 children suffer... and fall back... or find a new teacher? Do I keep this teacher? Or do I save these children?...'... It’s got to be about the kids... It's about the kids... and that's the hard thing as you know, to tell the colleagues of that person, you know. What I found is that people got very upset; because that’s from the old way. That’s from the old way where teachers are the only profession where people protect each other... But, we do that. We could know a teacher is bad and won’t do anything. We’d just say well, ‘I’m doing my thing, well, you know, but I don’t want to rock the boat; they need their job and they need this.' Well, what if I’m a child? The parent has sent this child here to learn. I’m depriving the child by letting that teacher stay (W-1-29).

She said that the staff, particularly the instructional facilitators, work hard to bring teachers into the culture of the school, to impart expectations. At the beginning of each school year, newly hired teachers receive 3 days of intensive training with the instructional facilitators. It is during that time that the teachers gain facility with what
Eastlake calls “our Eagle instructional delivery program” (E-2-18). Eastlake continued, “We explain to them and work with them and try to get them to know ‘here’s what you gotta understand’” (E-1-27):

We have a program. We tell them about it, that we have things in place… the way we do things… we don’t allow people to come in and close the door and… do what you want to do. There are people who say that stifles a teacher’s creativity. That’s not true. What it [the program] does is like any other industry. You have expectations for people, guidelines and expectations… see it’s like back-ending. You know what the test is; you know what they [students] need to know and how you are going to know that they know it… that’s what this is about… the written curriculum and the taught curriculum must line up with the objectives… that’s called quality control. The written curriculum and the taught curriculum must align with the assessments. (E-1-24, 25).

Teachers receive on-going oversight and development from the instructional facilitators who work closely with them and provide observational insight on teacher performance to Eastlake. This insight is shared as well for the purpose of evaluations.

We follow the same protocol we did before, two evaluations a year. The state requires you to do that. We have an evaluation document similar to what the state had, but we have added some things… We still notify them [teachers] in September like you have to. A lot of the things the union had in place we still do… but the instructional facilitators go in and they script them [teachers], take notes… meet with them, give them a copy in writing, and also give me a copy. So I know what’s going on, because they will meet with me or email me and I will read the evaluation… a lot of it has to do with changing the attitudes of people, and some people are just not going to work out (E-1-34).

Monitoring and developing teachers to emphasize reflection about students’ success and the impact their teaching is having on students is essential to getting results.

Eastlake says that teachers at Fairlane “know what is important”:

We have things in place… [we] have expectations for people… it’s a building process. We have guidelines and expectations… and… target lesson strategies, pal-packs for homework for children… a pacing guide… and curriculum alignment… and an open classroom policy (E-1-25, 26).
The open classroom policy provides opportunities for walkthroughs by the instructional facilitators and administrators. Parents are also invited into classrooms.

Eastlake emphasized that parents know they can come in unannounced, without a scheduled appointment, sign in at the front, and go in and sit and observe their kid’s class for 30 minutes. They can’t ask the teacher any questions and they can’t chastise the children or talk to the children, but they can observe, and then go back and sign out and you know leave a note to make an appointment or something like that. They can talk to the parent liaison, who talks to me and the IFs. We want our parents involved (E 1-26).

Eastlake relates that teachers are encouraged to teach in ways different from what they may have previously been allowed to do:

There are some people… who have been doing things that were acceptable where they were…. I distinctly remember saying to this person, what kind of results did you have on your state assessments? What kind of results, what percentage of your children passed? And the person said, ‘Oh, about 50 or 60 percent… I said, ‘50 or 60 percent?’… I said, ‘so what happened to the other 50 or 40 percent of the children? What did you do to remedy that? What happened?… You consider that’s good?’ I said, ‘Let me give you an example. You have a flat (tire) and you go to a gas station and they fill your tire up with 50 perce % of the air, and you get back on the road, what is gonna happen? (E-1-27, 28).

Eastlake relies upon the instructional facilitators (IFs) to be my eyes and ears. They are in the classrooms all day, every day so they are seeing what teachers are doing. If an IF sees that a teacher needs help, we continue to work with the teacher. The IF meets with them, goes into the classroom and team-teaches… or does a model lesson in the classroom… then they let the teacher remodel the lesson… they send them to observe another teacher’s class. They give them time, work with them during their planning time… we try to get them where they need to be (W-1-27).

Eastlake defined the type of teachers she has observed:

I’ve seen that there are two types of teachers: the one who comes in to hear themself, to be on their stage, and probably they should have been somewhere else and not the classroom. And then there is the other type of teacher, the one who comes in to facilitate learning. I need my teachers to be facilitators of learning (E 1-29).
In addition to reflective practice through the use of data from student assessments, teachers use data on student learning styles to make decisions about instructional material and instructional strategies to promote learning. Instructional delivery is based on students’ learning styles:

The first week of school, we inventory every child in the building on their learning style… so you [the teacher] have that chart and that information with you and if I go into your class, it tells me how each one of your children learns best (E-1-28).

Learning style inventories emerged from Gardner’s (1983) work on multiple intelligences. The work suggests that individuals have a preferential learning strength or combinations of learning strengths. These may include linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial-visual, interpersonal, or intra-personal. Eastlake expects that when teachers engage in lesson planning, learning styles are given strong consideration. Further, should student data indicate difficulty in reaching benchmarks, teachers, working with their instructional facilitator, must indicate in an individual action plan how the learning style is being addressed.

You will see teachers doing re-teaching because we don’t do remediation, because look at what the word remediation means, we don’t do that, we re-teach, because we accept the responsibility that even though it was a phenomenal lesson and it could get put into a law, it doesn’t matter if my children didn’t get it. And so that means I [the teacher] have to scrap that and go back and re-teach. And re-teaching is zoomed in more individualized to that child’s learning style and I have to develop an action plan for that. So you will see teachers re-teach it. You will see kids in small groups, you will see more individualized instruction going on or you will see that the objectives are color-coded and they are displayed in the classroom so anybody can know what is going on; you will know what objectives that group of kids are working on (E-1-18).

As school leader, Eastlake makes demands on the teaching staff to take ownership of student performance. Requiring teachers to craft individual action plans for students
falling behind and demonstrate the effectiveness of the plans in practice is done with the support of the instructional facilitators.

When teachers receive support in expanding their instructional strategy repertoires, students benefit. Teachers engaged in the collaborative process gain instructional capacity. Instructional coaching has been identified as proven means of building teacher capacity and improving student achievement (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Using instructional facilitators to model best practice, provide one-to-one teacher support, and ensure the overall quality of instructional delivery serves the needs of students beyond what is encountered in schools without a strong pedagogical component in place.

**Getting parents on board.** Eastlake spoke passionately and convincingly about the role parents must play in the lives of their children. She was very concerned that parents be brought into the realm of both school and student accountability. The accountability works both ways:

We have set the tone and the PTO Executive Board and our parent leadership and our parent liaison. We have set a tone. When we call, you come, because we are not going to bother you… unnecessarily because we understand you have to work. Now we make it convenient, we work with you, you know if something happens or you can’t or whatever, if I need to call your boss and explain… that you need to come to the school then I will do that. If I need to write a letter, whatever I need to do. But there is a sense of professionalism, parents see us as professionals and they respect the school as an organization that is here to nurture and work with them in partnership with them—not take full responsibility, we are not the parent and we will not be the parent. Parents are the first leader in the education of any child… You don’t have to be an educator to be a leader in your child’s education; you just need to be involved and involved means… you have to show you care through your actions and that means coming to the 4 o'clock conferences, doing a volunteer time and doing what you need, interacting and responding to the room mothers’ request… and talking with the parent liaison (E-2-12, 13).
She said that parents are told that Fairlane is a public school but that it is a school of choice:

We tell them that there is a commitment you have to put in when you choose this school… there is no excuse,… my job, my this, my that, none of that is an excuse because your child comes first… the children know… either you want to be here or you don’t… either you are an eagle… or you have become a turkey and it’s time to move on… and we put pressure on the kids to put pressure on the parents… and this is working for us (E-2-15).

Parents are introduced to expectations for both themselves and their children with regard to discipline:

We have a discipline policy … it is in our student handbook… we sat down as a board, along with the assistant principal and myself, and some teachers… to create and review [the plan]… they have to approve all of that. In the beginning of the year, for the opening of school, we go over the discipline policy, our expectations in interactions with parents, our expectation for interaction with students… For teachers, in the beginning of the year, we do that whole PD on the procedures [they] have in contacting parents and things we expect teachers to do. We’ve even been working a lot this year on public relations with parents and how to embrace them, and how to understand them and put yourself in their shoes. The social worker does a lot with that… and I have a parent liaison who talks about some of the things parents are concerned about (E-1-31).

Parents are also brought into the work of their children’s education with the help of the parent liaison and other personnel through the mechanism of traditional PTO meetings:

With the PTO meetings now, we make sure that we do some kind of professional development for parents. The first one we did we introduced a new teacher and another young teacher who presented on how to help children with their homework. They did a beautiful presentation to the parents that night and the different things to do and how to help them study and all of that kind of stuff. Then the next one we did, the lady from the state who handles some kind of division of the state with parents, she came in and taught parents… how to have conferences with teachers, the things to ask, how to interact with teachers. And she was very real about when there’s hostility or something… and how to present yourself, the kinds of questions you should ask, how to follow the chain of command, and our parents know that, if they have a problem first they try to meet with the teacher… They know the protocol. We have a protocol in place (E-1-32).
What’s different?  When I asked Mary Eastlake what is different about how her new leadership role compared with her past, she did not hesitate:

I think the thing that stands out the most as being different, is having the full opportunity, full responsibility of creating a total learning environment (E-2-1)... Now, as a conversion charter school leader, [you] really get the autonomy. You get the chance to grow a vision, put the pieces together, and do it without spending years trying to get it (E-1-20)…. Chief Executive Officer means I am responsible for 463 children, 56 employees, and a community of parents… finances, politics,… and I have learned to do my very best and stay on top of stuff… I wouldn’t have imagined it… (E-3-7).

In my previous role, I was not in total control to create the kind of climate, school climate… I knew our students needed… I couldn’t pick the textbooks…They [district personnel] just usually decided what materials they were are going to use for the whole district… you just didn’t have the ability to make a decision if you wanted something… Now, if I want something, my team and I sit around this table and decide what we need want, if it’s aligned. I pick up the phone and order what we need… (E-3-7).

She cited the individualized school calendar as one example of her ability to give greater consideration to school community and family needs:

Before, the district and the school board voted on… the calendar… and that didn’t necessarily work for your community. Now we do our own calendar,… the assistant principal, myself and instructional facilitator and the business manager… and the teachers can have input… We try to stay very close to what the district calendar looks like and I may look at what some of my colleagues in… other charter schools look at. We do our calendar that’s good for our community (E-2-9).

Eastlake believes that a culture of tolerance existed before the storm which promoted a lack of accountability on the part of parents. She stated that

Being poor or low income is no excuse for not parenting… Because parenting has nothing to do with not having money. Parenting is about the action of love, being involved. You don’t need money to come to the report card conference, you don’t need money to check up on your child’s school work One of our biggest challenges here has been teaching our parents to not pay lip service to valuing education and wanting a better life for… children, and wanting them to be global productive citizens, and putting action to those words (E-2-14).
Eastlake’s closing thoughts. I asked Eastlake to share some closing thoughts with me at the end of our third and last interview session. I was curious to know what she had learned about herself as a leader in this new role. She sat back in her chair, legs crossed, her left hand perched under her chin.

We better educate our children… and make sure we instill good values in them; make sure that they want to do things and explore what their talent is; get them excited about something. If we do that then it’s less likely that the state will have to take care of them… In the long run, if you do well on this end, with this product, if you put the money on this end, then you will have to put less money on the other end and in other arenas… because children grow up to be citizens, and if we take care and do a good job as they’re growing—building that foundation—that will reduce a lot of the other problems… (E-3-4).

Eastlake’s drive and passion for educating children is unwavering. She paused for a minute and said she would “get off [her] soap box,” but then continued:

I have learned that I could be more patient than I thought I could, because, you see, I am one of those folks who… likes to get things done and move forward. I have to see progress… I have to see growth… I think it comes from my mother… my mother always challenged us to grow and to measure growth as task completion. I can’t understand not completing a task and that was one of the things you know, we have to learn as a principal—multitasking, but you may not always have task completion. And so that was my hottest problem. My first year as a principal… there were too many fragmented tasks… so much to drop and go back to… So I have learned to live with that [not completing some things]… The other thing I have learned about myself is that I guess I never saw myself as a chief executive officer… I never saw myself as a person who could actually start a business and run a business… but I guess I am just amazed that I can maintain my passion and my love for people in spite of having to make hard decisions. I can terminate you if you are not doing right and give you a hug and tell you it is not personal, I love you but the decisions are for the children… And that was very hard; you know, you don’t know if you can do that because you have all these layers in the way before and you weren’t the heavy. But now I am the heavy and I have learned that I can sit in this chair I can do this. And I also learned that the core of me is people. The core of me is people and loving people and wanting so much for children just wanting them… to know more about what is out there and if you don’t go get it that’s okay, but I want them to know how to get it…(E-3-11)
It has been a great journey, but it’s not over. I am enjoying the journey, but I don’t think the whole city should be charter schools and that’s what we tell those people who oppose charter schools…. however, the data has proven that this is working. I do think Katrina gave us another opportunity… the central office just got too big. The charter school takes a lot of the politics out of schooling and that’s a problem with this community—too much politics, and the power that comes with it… I don’t feel in power, I feel… empowered… (E-3-13).

Lela Watson’s Story

After Lela Watson agreed to participate in the study, she stipulated that meeting off campus would be the only way to avoid interruptions. I arranged for us to meet at a place near the school to lessen her time away. As we prepared to start, setting the recorder in place and establishing the goal of a conversational interview that would allow her to tell her story of how she had come to be in her current leadership role, her mobile device buzzed incessantly. She laughed and set it aside, saying, “They’ll just have to wait.”

Lela Watson told me that she was in her third year serving as the principal of a City Wide Access middle school in downtown New Orleans in August 2005 when the mandatory evacuation order was declared in response to the approach of Hurricane Katrina. The previous day, Friday, NOPS district officials had issued directions for principals to secure their buildings. Watson and some of her staff made preparations:

Me and my staff went to the school the Saturday before the storm and moved everything off the floor of the first floor. We took all the computers and everything and covered everything with tarps, took all the books, put them up, covered everything on the third floor,… moved everything off the first floor onto the second floor. So everything was saved (Med-1-12).

The prior year, the school’s roof had been damaged from another seasonal hurricane, resulting in the loss of computer equipment. Following the roof repairs, the
school benefited by receiving new computers. Watson was concerned about securing the new equipment, a concern that would prove to be an unexpected boon for the school she would lead after Katrina.

Watson was a veteran in the OPS system. She had taught at both the middle and high school levels, served as an assistant principal at both levels, worked for a time in the central office, and had gone on to become a middle school principal. Her familiarity with the district system, her six years as an assistant principal at the high school level, and her connections made throughout her employment with the OPS would come in to play after the storm.

In November 2005, following Hurricane Katrina, she learned that her middle school would be included in the Louisiana state takeover of New Orleans schools failing to meet the established school performance score (SPS) (www.doe.state.la.us) guidelines. Prior to the storm her school was not in an academically unacceptable status, but after Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 35, which changed the measurement index by which schools could be deemed subject to state takeover. Watson’s middle school fell below the revised standard. The seizure and undetermined length of announced school closures in the city came as a shock:

The RSD took it over… we did not make the [required SPS score of] 80. We were 78.8 or something like that and they took it over. It was never in corrective action and it was a district school with a magnet component, a citywide component, but they took it anyway… they changed the rules… they changed the rules on everybody. It was a school that also didn’t get a lot of water. We got six inches of water and they did not open that school, not right away, they did not open that school. They could have cleaned it up… and had kids back in (W-1-1).
In November, Watson received a phone call from the spokesperson of a group looking to charter and re-open the oldest public school in the city. The call was an inquiry about her interest in becoming principal of the school if it were granted charter status:

The storm was in August. They [the alumni board] got together in October, and they called me in November…. Most of the people, the teachers, there was a group of teachers and alumni… the alumni made up the board. The teachers went to the alumni and said, ‘Look, can you help us get the school back open? It is the oldest public high school… we have to re-open.’… They wanted to make sure that they opened in the fall. They knew that they didn’t have a graduating class for 2006, 2005-2006, but the doors had always been open. There was a big effort to get the school open. So that was the alumni’s goal… the principal who had been there [before the storm] decided not to come back and retired. I had been there as an AP [assistant principal] and the teachers recommended me to the alumni board (W-1-3).

Watson said that she “knew the school, its teachers, and the student population.” “I had taught there for three years and then served as an assistant principal for six years, so I knew many of the teachers.” She related that she thought her prior experience with the school, the recommendations of former staff, and her willingness to undergo hardships upon her return made her an attractive candidate for the position. She was also asked “to help write the charter” (W-1-2, 3).

Located in the heavily flooded mid-city area of New Orleans, the school had taken on eight to ten feet of floodwater. The entire first floor, including the gymnasium, was under water for two to three weeks. Millions of dollars would be needed to clean and restore the historic building. However, there was no money in the coffers of the almost bankrupt NOPS to engage in such an undertaking (www.tulane.edu/cowen_institute/background.html). Rumors had begun to circulate that the building would be sold off as a hotel or land-banked. It was through the work of the active alumni association, combined with the mobilization and commitment of a veteran
A difficult re-start. The re-opening of Mid City High School as a conversion charter was done for the sake of expediency. Watson stated firmly that “there were no plans prior to Katrina to convert the school to charter status. It was ‘let’s get Mid City open’.” As a magnet school to which students had to apply, the school had succeeded in attracting high-performing students and had a solid academic rating due to entrance requirements. Watson said it was anticipated that these students would find their way back to the school once it opened.

Watson accepted the position of principal. During our interview, she conveyed that at the time, she knew nothing about charter schools other than having an awareness that another school in the city had been pushing for charter status the year before the storm. She turned to that group for assistance in helping with the completion of the application for Mid City Charter High School. She recalled that she and others working on the charter application did a lot of “cutting and pasting; we used phrasing from other charter applicants’ documents that had begun circulating” (W-1-6) among charter seekers and proponents.

In the meantime, having been told that the school was in need of significant repairs and would not open for some time, Watson accepted another position with the minimally functioning NOPS district’s central office staff:

I went to work for NOPS temporarily... I needed a job and I needed insurance... I needed income... and it was a blessing that I did take that job because then I learned how to deal with title funding because none of us who were City-wide Access schools were title funded [schools] before the storm (W-1-5).
Because there was no one else to take over the work she was doing for NOPS, Watson ended up “working both jobs from June to July. In a month I lost like 25 pounds. I would pin up my clothes… I was running constantly” (W-1-9).

As a charter school novice, she said organizing for the Mid City Charter High School opening presented challenges she had never encountered in her previous leadership work. She described much of what took place as on-the-job training:

When I first started in the position, it was a matter of just trying to re-open the school. Chartering was the easiest way to do that, trying to find some place that the children and families could come back to, so that the families could come back and rebuild. There was no plan for the school to charter before the storm; no grand plan. I don’t think a lot of us even thought beyond getting the school open… we didn’t even know how we were going to pay teachers, that was one of the biggest issues—finance. We didn’t even know when the Municipal Funding Program MFP was going to come in, how much it was going to be. Many of our board members were willing to take out mortgages on their homes so they could open… and then a large federal grant came in for those of us who opened after January 2006, and we got about $2,500 per child. And we had many more obstacles to overcome, paying the electrical bill, getting the place fixed up and getting and keeping the place clean, finding books, materials, and everything else… I think we all became extremely resourceful where finances were concerned. Most of us had never been that type of manager before. So it was OJT (on-the-job training), quick turn, quick learn. We had to do all of those things…most of us didn’t even know how we were going to pay the teachers, much less ourselves… (W-4-2).

Watson persevered, expressing her determination and that of the board to open the school despite a lack of awareness of what chartering would entail:

The school was going to open… chartering was not really a vision for a grand new scheme, it was a necessity…. It was the only way, because the parish and educational system were dragging their feet [about opening district schools], and they were willing to give out charters. They were under investigation, they were a mess; Orleans was a system in crisis… nobody knew where the dollars were coming from… when or how they could open schools; they were ready to give away the schools (W-4-2).
Watson officially began her work as principal following an announcement by the board of directors on May 30, 2006. Staffing was not fully in the principal’s hands. The board selected and announced an assistant principal. Given the fact that teachers had played a significant role in helping to mobilize support and promote chartering, the charter agreement contained language stipulating the hiring of former teachers:

Our charter said that we would hire for the first year at least 50 percent of the staff that was there before if they wanted to come back… We would give them first preference. That’s how it was… the previous… staff would get first preference over anybody else. So, I didn’t pick some of the people… I supplemented with certified teachers from the middle school I came from (W-1-10).

The school opened at capacity with 800 students in all four grades, and a staff of 30 teachers, reflecting a 30:1 student-to-teacher ratio. Staff and students were confined to two floors, the first floor being off-limits due to on-going reconstruction and repairs after Katrina. Watson described a short-lived halcyon period in which teachers and students welcomed the normalcy of the return to school:

My teachers started August 28th and September 7th we had almost 800 students in the building. We came in on a roller coaster so nobody complained as much those first six months… (W-4-9)

The rapid “roller-coaster” high was met with the following realization:

The first year was such a mess… some of the teachers had been at Mid City High School for over 30 years who felt as though it was their school and they did it their way, because they could never leave because they were the ones who approached the alumni group to get the school back open (W-1-21).

Watson soon found that the presence of veteran teachers on staff did not guarantee an environment conducive to effective instruction, order and security, nor future-forward thinking. Many of the veteran teachers held fast to notions about the
previous school culture: in particular, the notion regarding the type of student they would teach. Watson shared that she had to fight my board to get rid of a lot of people... people who wanted it to be the old way. I could not continue with them, with the old way. We were not going to be putting these children out... That was the hardest thing I did, fight my board to get rid of some of the old established people, the very people who united with the alumni to get MCH open... but I could not continue like that... and that was after the third year running, I had gone back and forth with the board... because I was dealing with teachers who had recommended me to the board, and I found myself dealing with these teachers who thought I worked for them because they had recommended me... Therefore, the teachers acted like, ‘I can do what ever I want to do and there is nothing you can do about it’... so when we [the administrative team] would try to rearrange classes, or scheduling, or ask for teaming,... we didn’t get the cooperation; we got resistance. Say if we had a new teacher and I asked someone to be a buddy to them, to mentor them, I didn’t get the cooperation... their thinking was they had brought me in and I needed to let them do whatever they wanted to do and run the school as they saw fit... That was the old way... when everything was about ‘me, me me’ [the teacher]. That was the old way... and as a charter school we could change that...as a charter school, it’s not about ‘me’ anymore, it’s not about operating in isolation... it took three years to change that way of thinking... it took getting rid of one important player...and once I did that... we had much more cooperation (Med 4-4).

While the charter had been approved on April 18, 2006, the extent of the school’s damage and scheduled repairs forced Watson and the governing board to establish an opening date of mid-August 2006. Despite construction delays threatening the opening, Watson set about furnishing the school. Using her connections with NOPS, she gained permission to remove the computers and other supplies she and her staff had safeguarded at her middle school before the storm:

They said [take] whatever you need before the state [takes] it over.... They would have pitched it. They did pitch things... so we, we took all the computers. The only thing that we couldn’t take was the books because, you know, they were seventh and eighth-grade, but then I called the other middle schools trying to open who I knew had seventh and eighth grades and I said, ‘Look, these are some books here if you need to go ahead.’ That was such a boon, you know. ... [Mid City High] was raided during the storm... money, food, and, and dry clothes
because people needed it…. Band uniforms…. Gym uniforms… people just went in and took whatever was there (W-1-12).

In addition to getting the school equipped, Watson now found herself in charge of human resources, operations, building maintenance plans and payroll. She even found herself in competition with other recently opened charter schools for a solar panel grant that would replace Mid City’s badly damaged roof:

A lot of people were competing for the solar roof. I put a reminder on my computer so that every two weeks I would call and check the status… The people holding the competition kept saying they had to talk with the district… they wanted to deal with the school system and not individual schools… That was an issue. I had to walk everything through and explain that there wasn’t a school system. I had to negotiate to get that roof. I had to call and ask, ‘Did you get the paper work? And the people would say, ‘Yes, and we sent it to Orleans Parish’… and I would say, ‘Oh, Jesus, here we go again.’ They didn’t understand. I said to my assistant, ‘Whenever you get anything on this grant, you send it to me and if you need something signed, you give it to me and I will walk it through.’ I walked everything through myself. And we got that roof (W-1-3).

New to most everything that was being required of her, Watson continued to seek advice from connections she had established in her work for the former district, asking advice from personnel working for Alvares and Marsals, the company hired to audit and oversee NOPS:

….all the operations came under me and then I had to attend property meetings because we were up for… window replacement, we were up for different things so I had to go to property, I had to go to accountability, I had to go to budget and finance, legal, because we didn’t know what was going on and if you miss a meeting, you know, you were dead—your project or whatever. So I would sit down and skim [agendas] and see where I needed to go. Then if there was something that I really did not understand I would go to those two guys and I would bug the shit out of them (W-1-16).

Other pressing concerns needed to be attended to in order to get the building open:
We were trying to get the building open and when we went into the school we realized we needed garbage cans and a trash service so I called them… We needed to have the water turned on so I knew someone whose sister was in charge of the Sewerage and Water Board and I called her to get her sister to help. Then I had a previous student who I got to call his mom who worked at the energy company… I wasn’t afraid to ask… and it got to where I would go out with my husband and people would see me coming… and say, “Put your checkbook away, here she comes… all she’s going to do is beg”… And I think sometimes if I didn’t have the connections we wouldn’t be where we are (1 W-17-19).

Securing contractors, workers, and funds forced further delays, and the school did not open until September 7. When it did open, the school was meant to “pick up where they had left off, a traditional college prep school” (W-4-4).

**Learning change.** On September 7, 2006, Mid City Charter High School opened with 792 students. Watson recalled that, “There was an excitement about it… we were open, kids were back, instruction was taking place” (W-4-1). The two academic counselors hired back after the storm had scheduled students in classes. The first floor was off-limits, brimming with construction workers, so the work of the school took place on the top two floors. From September through December, Watson said she and her assistant principal:

worked together doing everything. We dealt with student issues, parent issues, teacher issues, discipline issues, getting food into the school for the kids, rats—big rats, construction noise from the hospital being torn down next door (W 4-9).

With the first semester approaching its end, Watson decided to make some changes, especially ones that would support student discipline and attendance monitoring:

We came in on a roller coaster so nobody complained as much during the first six months. Teachers were teaching, but by December it was clear that we needed to get some programs and systems in place, especially for discipline…When we started [the school year] I had an AP [assistant principal], a secretary and a social worker. I knew I needed two assistant principals but because of finances that
didn’t happen. I came in with a middle school concept, of teaming, of coaches... I knew I could creatively bring in instructional coaches... so when we saw we needed more help, more structure, I created two administrative assistant positions. They were teachers, but also part time like deans. I had an instructional coach also who taught two periods a day, part time, and the rest of the time she was with me. Then I also had two interventionists that taught two periods a day and the rest of the day they were with me or in classrooms, like coaches. At that time, MFP [student funding from the state] started to come in and that is what saved us more than anything else... So, when we opened in the spring, I had two administrative assistants. Both taught half-time and the other half one served as disciplinarian and the other was a dean of students, tracking attendance, calling parents. I made two teachers interventionists, one for science and math and the other for language arts and social studies. They were teaching part time but then also going into classrooms to make sure appropriate content is being used. My AP filled all the slots when I couldn’t be there (W-4-1).

When asked to talk about how she imagined her role and the structure of the school would look when she came on as principal, she shared:

There was no imagining. We were in survival mode... how do we get the school up and running and how do we sustain ourselves? We looked at financial sustainability first. Then we looked at discipline, and then the curriculum (W-4-3).

When I took the job I thought it was a principal’s [job], you know. But now [I] see it as the CEO of a small business... and really, I’m not a small business when I manage over a thousand people (W-1-7). I have learned a great deal. I have learned to write grants... I knew about Title funds from my work as the after schools program coordinator... and before the storm MCH was not a Title school... the Title money was always handled by the district... now I’m managing human resources and finances, learning where to put money to safeguard it... I’m in charge of payroll and making sure the bills get paid (W-1-14-15).

Watson found herself called to attend meetings held by the charter school’s authorizer, the OPSB. In turmoil and diminished in size after Katrina, the school board held frequent meetings in oversight of its 12 charter schools. She expressed that she found herself walking a tightrope between Orleans Parish and the board, because they wanted to be independent of Orleans, but Orleans is our authorizer and we cannot be
independent… they take 2% of our money, they tell us what we will be evaluated on… (W-1-31).

Watson’s extensive involvement in all aspects of the school found her “working seven days a week the first year…I would go home at 11 or 12 at night” (W-1-16). The management and operations work kept her away from school to the detriment of her relationship with her board:

When it came time for my evaluation, the board said I wasn’t doing my job because of what they were hearing during walk-in-Wednesdays where teachers could walk in and talk to the board [of governors], tell the board what was going on. The board members would then come in [to my office] and say that the building was out of control. It was just me and one AP. I didn’t have another AP, because at that time we had opened with the bare minimum of staff. We were so overcrowded (W-1 16).

Watson expressed that the board realized that she was under a lot of pressure. She was deliberately “hands-on when we first opened, for the first two years I was hands on everything, I had to know what was going on. Then my board worried, ‘What if something happened to you? Who other than you has the knowledge?’…” (W-2-5).

Admitting she could not maintain pace and that “it was eating [her] away” (W-1-16), she took steps in the fourth year to delegate duties:

I have now begun distributing responsibility. You just can’t keep up the pace. I mean I was working seven days a week… We were open six days a week with Saturday school from 8-12…. Up until this year I took a very active role in everything. This year I have required more of others; I put together an interviewing team. My AP and a team interview and pick the top two and then I sit down with them…. the candidates do not do sample teaching as part of the interviews… (W-2-4).

Further, she explained that the school now has “a school improvement team that helps to write the School Improvement Plan we provide the authorizer” (W-3-13).
She has placed her assistant principal “in charge of teacher professional development and standardized assessments.” She also has “a staff development coordinator who he sits down and plans with and if they can’t come to an agreement then I get into it” (W-3-5).

In the second year of operation, Watson “added more teachers to help with the high student-to-teacher ratio of 33:1. It was high, very high. Other schools started with a much smaller ratio, but we started with the max” (W-4-3). Watson brought on five more teachers and added a technology specialist to oversee both maintenance and teacher facility with the technological equipment in classrooms. The specialist also began training students to assist in computer and printer upkeep. From an operational and security standpoint, she outsourced payroll and went through the school’s authorizer, NOPS, to hire trained security guards.

In the third year of operations, and largely driven by the introduction of new classroom technologies, the traditional seven-period day with 45-minute class periods was scrapped for a modified block system:

We had invested in, through Title monies, technology for Model Classrooms. Teachers, leadership, department chairs and everyone wanted Model Classrooms. So we took our title monies and made all of our classrooms fully equipped and then we trained the teachers. We changed the schedule the third year after an assessment when teachers said they did not have enough time to integrate technology and instruction… 45 minutes was not enough time for instruction, especially using the new technologies—Elmo, Smart Board, you know, the Promethium Board and Quizno… not enough time to integrate technology with instruction… We met with everyone and decided. We were learning skills so rapidly… and the teachers and the students needed time to integrate technology and learning. So we ended up having a modified block…four periods a day of 94 minutes, alternating days (W-4-5).
Model Classrooms, wired for high-speed Internet access and equipped with the latest interactive teaching technologies, are part of the OPSB’s commitment to bringing a “world-class education” to students attending both traditional and charter-operated schools under its authorization. Mid City has benefited from this effort (http://www.nops.k12.la.us/pages/district_technology_plan). Teacher training is a part of the plan. Watson and her staff have agreed to restructure the use of time to accommodate the requirements of technology use and training, even requiring teachers to use planning time for training and updates. She is building in time for increased teacher training to ensure technology is used as a means of building teacher capacity and competency.

Watson has also found it necessary to ask more of the department heads as well. She shared that she “asked some to step down,” and wrote and implemented a position description for the role, offering a stipend:

The department heads I [still] need to work on… last year was the first year we gave them a job description and a stipend. They are supposed to go in, help the department redefine their pacing guides, look and refine the scope and sequence to see what is being taught when. We asked them to work with people in their department on classroom management or whatever the identified need is… They get a stipend to do this. We sat down and discussed what this would look like… we agreed on the stipend and not the extra period off as being more beneficial (W-4-7).

Up to this point the department heads were operating without a description of their roles and responsibilities. Watson said she was working to inject role clarity and promote a culture shift in the school, having found that changing from traditional mindset to a charter focus has been very difficult… It has taken three years to get systems in place… there are checks and balances now, but… more are needed (Med 4-6).
To further solidify changes and promote communication about these changes, Watson has increased the number of meetings among school leadership:

We have workshops, cabinet meetings with administration and department heads for information flow. We also have early release PD Tuesdays… where teachers learn about technology… or share expertise (W-3-5).

**Identifying what students will learn.** Prior to becoming a charter school, Mid City was a member school of the Southern Regional Education Board’s school improvement initiative known as High Schools That Work (HSTW). Upon chartering, the key practices of the model were retained (Med 4-3). These practices represent a philosophy of student success premised on ten practices:

1. High expectations for students accompanied by plentiful feedback
2. A rigorous program of study encompassing an academic core and a concentration
3. Academic studies through real-world problem-solving
4. Career/technical studies that provide students access to intellectually challenging studies in high-demand fields that emphasize the higher-level academic and problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and in further education
5. Work-based learning enabling students and their parents to choose from programs that integrate challenging high school studies and work-based learning and are planned by educators, employers and students
6. Teacher collaboration through cross-disciplinary teams to help students succeed in challenging academic and career/technical studies
7. Actively engaged students working in academic and career/technical classrooms in rigorous and challenging proficient-level assignments using research-based instructional strategies and technology

8. Guidance and advisement of students and their parents to develop positive relationships and ensure completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic or career/technical concentration

9. Providing extra help through a structured remediation program

10. Ensuring a culture of continuous improvement though the use of data to improve school culture, organization, management, curriculum and instruction to advance student learning

(http://www.sreb.org/page/1139/key_practices.html)

When the school opened as a conversion charter, one of the veteran staff members who had been re-hired was the school improvement coordinator. This person had previously overseen the implementation of the HSTW program and continued in that role. At Mid City Charter, the curriculum around which the HSTW practices revolved was known as college-prep and closely reflected the state GLEs. Watson spoke to the numerous interpretations that arise and lack of clarity surrounding the terminology of calling curricular offerings “college prep”:

We started this charter as traditional college prep. Well, what’s that? What does that mean? I mean really, how focused is that? We didn’t have a focus like some of the other charters that opened later with 100 children, or one grade level, with a focus and a totally useable building… We opened with 800 children strong, in a building under repair and we had to ask while we are educating these children, what do we really want to focus on (W-4-7).
Watson affirmed that the school’s motto, “we believe in success,” has remained since the school’s conversion.

Our mission statement says that we will provide rigorous and relevant instruction for all students at all academic levels to ensure each achieves maximum potential. This has not changed…. We have to determine how we are going to ensure success (W-2-12).

When creating charter applications, it is both encouraged and common practice for those writing them to decide how they will distinguish themselves from other charter or traditional schools. Within the city of New Orleans after Katrina, numerous charter schools opened with a focus. Among these are schools that center the curriculum on science and math, architecture, or maritime activities, and a single-gender school focused on business and math. All of the schools must ensure that students take the requisite state-mandated courses toward graduation, but a number of the schools enhance that curriculum and design classes that incorporate a specific focus. Watson’s aim is to steer the school in a direction that provides students opportunities above and beyond being prepared to enter a general college curriculum. Watson expressed that in the haste to get chartered, little time was spent on crafting a curricular focus for the school beyond “college prep”:

Whereas other charter schools did their focus first and then opened, those of us who were conversions had to do our focus later. We were forced to concentrate on finances and stability and then we were able to re-assess and define our focus, really looking at our population of students and asking, ‘What does MCCHS’s population need? Beyond general education, what is our focus?’ We are now still using the HSTW principles and designing educational pathways keeping in mind the community we’re in and the access to businesses, community resources, internships available while maximizing the time frame—four years—that we can do it in (Med 4-6).
Four years into the five-year charter, Watson and the administrative team and teachers, with the support of the board of governors, have begun using a state-mandated course taught at the ninth grade level, *Education for Careers*, as a springboard for an Academy Pathways Program:

This year we have added what we call Academies, pathways for students, aside from the traditional academic courses to move students on a career-workforce path. We have added an Allied Health Academy in partnership with Tulane Hospital. We have added sports medicine as a course, along with regular sciences. We have added a Leisure/Lodging Management Academy and have a partnership with the Hilton as part of a business pathway. We are looking at offering a Business Management course. We have decided to have two primary pathways… Business and Technology and Arts and Sciences (W-4-6)…. We are trying to give our kids exposure to careers: banking, accounting, for example, and trying to help them explore pathways to careers…we bring in speakers from universities, businesses such as Northrup-Grumman, banking industry people, accountants—so kids can learn what’s out there. I am beginning to build the departments so that, say, in English there are two ninth grade teachers, they can collaborate; also, one could do one pathway and one could do another. We have it in place but we need to refine it because kids are just being dumped in classes. We need to be more intentional about the pathways…the kids are supposed to come to school with a five-year plan—that’s what the state says—but the children do not come with it. There is so much that the state said to do but it is not happening. The counselors need to understand that the kids can cross pathways, but the counselors need to start thinking strategically about student placement in classes. (M-4-7)

Watson said that taking this new approach to curricular offerings is part of changing the mindset of the teachers from a traditional college prep district school, with a select clientele of students, to an open-enrollment charter school with a focus that attracts students because of that focus. Additionally, the move toward Academies is more closely aligned with the HSTW principles that promote education for careers and beyond, as well keeping parents involved in future planning (http://www.sreb.org/page/1139/key_practices.html). Watson sees the new curricular focus as having a positive impact on student engagement.
We have had a greater impact on students because we are able to assess, remediate, enhance, and help them explore in different ways…. We can now give a lot of immediate feedback and then we can move students in and out of programs with much more ease than we have ever been able to do. Because we are not tied down to particular programs we can—I would like to use the word experiment—yes, experiment, but that’s what it is. The student can experiment and can see results… We are doing a better job, much better job of educating kids and parents as to what results are important, how to read it and that’s the main thing that parents did not know how to do, how to read the results and what are the ramifications. We have been able to unite with many more industries to do career exploration. Student exploration of careers provides a lot of exposure to what’s out there, and what they need to study to get out there, rather than just say we are college prep and we will do the academic work. We can now offer lots of internships and we seem to be helping kids explore their options, options that they have never had before (W-3-1).

The identification of optional curricular avenues and career pathways has involved significant outreach to community businesses and resources who will provide the setting for student internships. Watson is excited about the recent signing of an “agreement with Tulane Hospital” through which students will gain access to health care professions and gain exposure to different fields… that might interest them… We have arranged it so 25 eleventh graders can do an internship at the hospital and they will get to do a rotation the second semester, rotating through different areas… The school is reaching out and the businesses are reaching out, so it’s partnership… and we all win because if we do not train our students to be part of the workforce, the city will die (W-3-2).

As the school leader, Watson is moving teachers and students forward in the restructuring of Mid City Charter’s curriculum to offer students pathways to both college and careers. Additionally, the curricular direction in which Watson is now leading the school is more closely aligned with the practices of HSTW, which emphasize engaging students in career, work-based, and technical studies.
Teaching the kids we have now. Before Hurricane Katrina, Mid City existed as a school with years of tradition, as well as a school in sound academic standing. Watson said that before the storm, teachers worked with a different, more academically driven, less behaviorally challenging student body. She also said that often, grades earned by students did not match their performance on standardized tests. “There was sort of a halo effect… the child was good, and brought me an apple everyday, so he deserved an A. That doesn’t work anymore. We need to look at the data” (W-3-16).

Since Katrina, the student population of Mid City Charter has greater academic and behavioral needs. Watson shook her head, saying, “We have children who are raising themselves.” But, she says, “the expectations for student success are high” and she insisted that she and the staff

…have tried to impress upon them that we are not going to water down the curriculum… they need to come up to our expectations, rather than us always going to theirs. We have done enough of that. Now they need to step up to the plate. We have held their hands and held their hands… especially our seniors. We try to talk to these children, to help them be prepared for the world, so they can be ready to get a job right out of high school or do well in college… We have separate gender meetings so the nurse and social worker and other people with expertise can answer their questions… (W-3-11)

Teachers veteran to the school have had difficulty adjusting to the changed student body. Opening for business with 30 teachers on staff, 15 of whom were veteran teachers from the original school, which was rich in almost 100 years of tradition, Watson believed that

I came in with teachers knowing what to do. Some came from my middle school where more than half were certified secondary teachers. So I didn’t have to be on top of them because almost everybody knew what was expected of them; they knew me and I knew them (W-2-10).
This prior association with the veteran teachers and confidence in their experience would prove both a help and a hindrance as the conversion charter began to take on a population of students in an open-enrollment charter environment. Watson soon found that many veteran teachers were used to what was called “the Mid City High way.” The “way” meant that students who did not respond to academic and behavior performance standards were sent back to their district school (W-1-15). As a conversion charter, Mid City Charter was no longer a magnet school. There were no longer district schools to which a student could be sent back. Students now enrolled in the school by choice and not assignment.

Due to construction delays, Mid City opened at a later date than other schools in the fall of 2006. The school accepted students as they applied, regardless of previous academic performance, and continued to accept students throughout the academic school year.

The later we opened, the more some of our better students went elsewhere. When we opened, we took who applied. Some didn’t stay, and it was hell trying to track students. We had to do a lot of academic interventions and behavioral interventions, a lot of attendance monitoring—going to students’ houses, going to trailers and saying, ‘you gotta come to school.’ Some of these kids were living by themselves. Some of the girls were living with people they shouldn’t have been living with. Getting them [students] and keeping them in school was a challenge. A lot of kids let you know that they felt like, ‘I’m back and all I have to do is show up every now and then and you need to give me a grade because I am a Katrina survivor.’ That sort of attitude we had to change and change quick (W-4-3).

The later opening of the school, and the conditions students had endured and continued to endure as a result of the hurricane manifested in delayed and erratic attendance. Students also began to exhibit tardiness and disruptive and objectionable behaviors, all of which impacted classroom instruction and student performance. The
trauma of living through the devastation and continued aftermath of homelessness, family separations, and what has been identified as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affected teachers and students alike. For both teachers and students, their psychological availability was stretched, and concentrating on teaching and learning proved challenging for everyone (Grunfeld, 2006; W-4-4). Watson said that the impact on staff and students was palpable and created unanticipated conflicts on the part of teachers used to working with a different student population.

Everyone came in with a whole lot of baggage… the adults expected you to understand their Katrina experience, but the adults couldn’t accept where the children were coming from, their baggage, and they had a lot of it. They [the teachers] wanted me to put them [the students] out. . . ‘They just weren’t Mid City High Material’ they would say; and they wanted me to put these children out. They wanted it to be like before, because Mid City High was a magnet and we could send kids who didn’t act right back to their district school. That all changed. These kids were the kids we had now. So I would say to them, ‘you don’t teach what you want, you teach what you have—all of the students—all of the time. Don’t tell me they aren’t Mid City High material, you take them and you make them MCH material. These are teenagers! They are still children’ (W-4-4).

Watson’s sadness and exhaustion in relating the struggle of adaptation to the newness of the post-Katrina setting was both audible and visible as she rubbed her temple during our interview. She said that she and her assistant principal talked about the need for greater support to assist teachers in classroom instruction. “Things were different; we had a lot of new teachers; and the veteran teachers needed to see things differently, too,” she said. Toward the end of the first semester of the school’s opening as a conversion charter, Watson was able to make staffing changes in support of teacher development and classroom monitoring (W-4-1), adding two part-time interventionists and a full-time instructional coach.
Watson and her leadership team determined that a more routinized approach to classroom instruction was in order. This included posting objectives, daily agendas, benchmarks, and making lesson plans available for “walk-throughs.” Teachers were required to follow a more standardized classroom routine and attend professional development on Tuesdays following an early release of students. These practices have carried into the third and fourth years of the school’s operation. Watson acknowledged, “We needed to tweak things, get tighter” (W-2-11). She said that teachers are now expected to be procedural, to put their ‘Do Nows’ and objective of the day for the agenda for the lesson on the board, have a lesson plan book available for ready access… everybody on the same page as far as the structure of the lesson. We are doing walkthroughs, the instructional coach… the interventionists, me, my AP (W- 4-7).

When asked about how the performance of teachers is evaluated, Watson talked about the first year of her leadership experience, saying:

I had to still follow the state guidelines [for evaluation] because we were under Orleans Parish so I had to do evaluations… Orleans insisted on it… the first year… things were so fuzzy… the first year was such a mess… [Other schools] balked at using it and so did [another school], but I was used to doing those because as the assistant principle that was my role… and it was the easiest way out to do it, to have people accountable because some of the teachers had been at [Mid City]… over 30 years who felt as though it was their school… so they did whatever they wanted… when they wanted to and then the board wanted me to… bring them documentation before I could… get rid of anybody… so in the midst of all this other stuff I am doing evaluations… so I split them up. I gave half to my assistant principal and I took half to evaluate… and the half that needed to go… was the half that he had… (W-1-21, 22).

In her previous role, Watson said, not everyone was evaluated on a yearly basis. Tenured teachers could

use the same objectives and the same form three years… a lot of it is a bunch of bull anyway that you do. But at that time, I didn’t have time to worry about that. It was about getting books… making sure children were in a safe environment (W-1-25).
She says she continues to divide the evaluations between herself and her assistant principal, but she now evaluates “all the back office staff, all non-teaching staff… and all the new staff, all new teachers,” while “he evaluates all the experienced teachers” (W-2-5).

Four years in, the replacement of some teachers, along with other teacher turnover is requiring closer monitoring of staff and staff development. Changes in scheduling have meant that teachers, as well as students, must learn to adapt to the schedule change and the additional 45 minutes of time that have been made available for instruction on the blocked schedule. The infusion of technology via Model Classrooms has also required “training and re-training” (W-4-6). Through professional development delivered by the instructional coaches and the technology specialist, teachers “are learning to teach from bell to bell and make every minute count… they have a lot of flexibility… we don’t stand over them and tell them what to teach” (W-1-12).

Watson conveyed that she must still “pull some teachers in and remind them that this is a team effort” (W-4-6). As a conversion charter school leader for the past four years, she has “learned how to navigate in a time of need, putting forth energy and skills [I] didn’t even know [I] had… and it’s a lot of luck, too” (Med 3-9). This frankness came on the heels of a significant learning curve, demonstrating that flexibility, adaptability, reflectiveness, fortitude, and humility are essential characteristics in school leadership.

Watson continues to have conversations with teachers about leaving the “old way” behind. In these conversations, both individual and in groups, she also calls upon the teachers to exert their leadership as adult teachers modeling positive expectations:
every adult in this building is a leader… I have heard enough talk about ‘what we were and who our students used to be’… We are responsible for every child that we have now… if you are going to go about breaking down a child’s morale then you are not MCCHS quality (W-3-12).

Watson is committed to helping others see the school in a new light. When talking about the message being conveyed, she emphasizes the importance of actions over words:

When I came in [as principal] I had to make sure we had teachers who could take kids to the next level. Before [the storm] we coasted. Now we need to be movers and shakers. We need to recreate our vision. But you just can’t change the wording; you have to change the working. We need to change how we teach, how we treat each other, how we look at each other. We are now educating our children so they will understand the ‘whys’ of what they are doing and not just doing what they need to do to get by. Before it was like producing a bunch of robots whereas now we are changing the goals… educating kids to be more self-driven (W-3-14).

She acknowledged that the process has been slow:

It has taken three years to get systems in place… changing from a traditional school mindset focus to a charter has been very difficult… Whereas other charter schools did their focus first… we were forced to concentrate on finances and stability and then we were able to re-assess and define our focus… looking at our general population and asking, ‘What does the MCCHS population need? Beyond general education, what is our focus?’ We are now designing educational pathways, keeping in mind the community we’re in and the access to businesses, community resources, internships (W-4-6).

Through the use of instructional coaches, increased routinization and through training on the use of data to drive instruction for success for all students, Watson is taking steps to help teachers be more frank about their performance and not just the student’s. “We have to put in extra effort,” she said, “because if we don’t prepare these students, then we have lost the future workforce, the very people who are supposed to take care of us”(W-3-16). She urged that “unless we start to give children purpose, then we are not doing anything for them” (W-3-17).
What’s different?

I asked Lela Watson to reflect on the past four years in her role as a charter school leader and any closing thoughts she might want to share regarding what she has experienced. She began with a reflection on leading a charter school and not a district school:

The good thing about being a charter is you can respond to a child’s needs right away… The hard thing about being a charter is the management… I think if it [the school] were smaller I could manage it better (W-1-31).

Watson told me that she

learned… once you put your mind to it, everything else falls into place. Because if your mind and your heart is in it, it's going to fall into place. But I have also learned that you must be able to negotiate. Communication is at the top of the skills you need. You must be willing to learn, learn from your mistakes and make better on those mistakes. You also need to swallow… that pride and know where to find the resources that you need because if you don’t then you are not going to make it (W-3-9).

She has found that as a charter school leader, she

can be a little more flexible and creative… just like with the computers. I was able to take money and say we are going to do this. That was a decision me and my leadership team made rather than having to go and plead my case [with the district] and then wait a couple of months to see if I get it and then… by then another year went by… and those teachers who had been gung ho on the idea and that I might have been able to hold on to have gone somewhere else… (W- 2-8).

Watson’s closing thoughts. My last interview with Watson took place during final exam week at the end of May. The school year was coming to a close. The seniors were finished and graduation was approaching, but underclassmen were still on campus finishing up their exams. This was the first time I met Watson on campus, as the press of her duties at that time of year was somewhat less intense. We managed to get through the interview with only a few vibrations on her phone device. I asked Watson if she would
share some final thoughts about her experience as the leader of a conversion charter school. She looked at me, and she looked tired.

In this journey as a charter school principal—other than at this time of year, because we are all burn[ed] out and tired at this time of year—it has shown me that the ability to choose your staff is crucial… As a charter school we have the ability to move people around… and the ability to do that helps to bring about a little more cohesiveness… like in business, if a person believes they are likely to lose their job, then that person might put forth that extra effort… and in education we need that extra effort… there is no more ‘halo effect’—for teachers or students. We can look at the data…. I can see a difference in the kids… we are starting to change the culture in the city… and to give kids purpose (W-3-16).
Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

This chapter examines the school leaders’ narratives to examine their perceptions of changes in the grammar of schooling. This chapter draws conclusions about the answers to the questions: 1) What are the perceptions of the school leaders regarding the six critical systems of schooling identified by Schlecty (2005); and 2) What do the stories of principals who have served as leaders of both district-operated and now charter-operated schools tell us about school change?

The study has aimed to expand our understanding of principals’ experiences with school change—as exemplified through their stories—in order to explore how experienced school leaders have acted upon the opportunity to create effective systems in support of student learning. Specifically, the study sought to discern changes in the grammar of schooling as perceived by these school leaders through the telling of their lived experiences as leaders of conversion charter schools.
School Leaders’ Perceptions of the Six Critical Systems of Schooling

Schlecty (2005) identified six systems of schooling that must change in order to achieve to innovation that disrupts the grammar of schooling: 1) recruitment and induction, 2) knowledge transmission, 3) power and authority, 4) evaluation, 5) direction and goal setting, and 6) internal and external boundary. The systems are not in order of ascendance. Rather, each is an operating system through which the business of the school is conducted and achieved. This study examined the five principals’ narratives of their past and present experiences through Schlecty’s systems in an effort to discern shifts in the grammar of schooling.

The recruitment and induction system. The recruitment and induction system identified by Schlecty (2005) includes the ways in which teachers are brought into an organization and the processes by which all teachers are continuously oriented to the goals and objectives of that organization. According to Schlecty (2005, 2009), effective induction processes have several characteristics: they take place over time, going beyond two-day orientation programs; they make use of mentor teachers skilled in curriculum implementation and instructional coaching; and they promote a pattern of communication among new staff and senior members of the school community. The teachers’ professional development is continuous and provides a feedback loop with ample opportunities for formative evaluation and improvement (Schlecty, 2005).

All three school leaders in this study indicated that the induction process is different in their current leadership roles. Gillbeau’s frank admission that he “[didn’t] even remember” what the induction process was like pre-Katrina stands in stark contrast to the induction system that is now in place. As a district principal, Gillbeau admitted
little familiarity with the work of inducting and orienting new teachers to the school. Now, Gillbeau is not only aware of the importance of such a program, he acknowledged feeling guilty that in his new role as a conversion charter leader, he has not spent more time with the many new hires brought on during the past school year. He lauded the now-implemented and utilized Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) as the primary means of providing extensive, meaningful support to incoming staff and on-line staff. He also indicated that teachers entering the profession through alternative certificate routes are benefiting from the support the TAP provides.

Young people who did not come in through traditional education degrees, who through the work being done via TAP and their mentor teachers are getting reinforcement every week... I have seen their growth in terms of expanding their minds and opening up to new instructional strategies (H-3-5).

TAP’s induction and teacher development system relies on a trained group of administrators and master and mentor teachers to shape, critique, and develop classroom instructional practice. Gillbeau cited TAP as an effective means to both induct and develop teacher practice around instructional expectations. According to Gillbeau, the introduction of the TAP to Harp “changed the level of adult conversation in the building,” cite this centering it on effective instruction.

Distributed leadership plays a role in the induction of new teachers to Fairlane. This school’s leader devised a system through which teachers can be developed and monitored to ensure accountability for the delivery of curriculum and embodiment of school ideals. At Fairlane, the identification of desirable teacher candidates, the induction of new teachers, and the continued development of the teachers throughout the year is the responsibility of the school’s three instructional facilitators.
Eastlake described an interview process that provide the candidate with an overview of organizational and instructional expectations. In this manner, both the committee screening the candidate and the candidate can make determinations about the candidate’s fit with the organization. Communicating the “beginning” of the chartering journey with the teacher candidate serves as a touchstone for potential connection with the candidate. As a school leader, Eastlake set up an interview process that established from the start that they are seeking teachers with a sense of mission.

Eastlake entrusted the induction of teachers to the instructional facilitators. Their work with teachers is on-going, serving to provide year-long assistance in lesson planning, the identification of student needs, and the crafting of individual plans to ensure both teachers’ curriculum delivery and their active tuning in to student learning styles.

After a rough start-up at Mid-City High School, Watson re-examined the needs of her classroom teachers and positioned instructional coaches throughout the curricular departments to enhance teacher performance. While no mention of a specific induction program appeared in her stories, she related that on-going weekly professional development to address identified teacher needs is now part of the fabric of the school.

The stories of these three leaders indicate that their schools have taken on an induction and support process characteristic of Schlecty’s model of on-going, master teacher-delivered instructional development in tune with the needs of students and faculty. Significantly, all three school leaders highlighted the changes in hiring and retention practices in their current roles compared with their work as district leaders. Watson recalled the “lists” that were sent from the district from which a school leader had to choose their new hires, sharing that, “before the storm, when I was in a district
school I didn’t have much choice” (Med 2-2) over hiring and staffing. Eastlake, too, recalled being “sent a list of candidates from the HR department” and having to choose from that list, a choice that “sometimes wound up good, but most times wound up bad” (E-2-10). In contrast, Eastlake stated she now has “total control” of what she called “the whole nine yards”—selecting, interviewing, developing and firing her faculty (E-2-4).

The school leaders’ frankness in acknowledging the shortcomings of the past induction program suggest reflective practice. Gillbeau, for example, recognizes that technical knowledge enabling teachers to enter grades and contact parents with ease, as well as make use of other available technologies, needs to be transmitted in a timely, consistent manner. Planning to meet these needs in the coming school year indicates forward thinking about the work that needs to be accomplished if the school is to continuously improve and meet the needs of teachers, students and parents.

Watson’s story described a traditional approach to hiring and induction. At Mid-City, new teachers attend an in-service orientation three days prior to the start date for returning teachers. A team composed of the interventionists, school improvement coordinator, and instructional coach work together to introduce the teachers to classroom and policy expectations. Watson did not elaborate on the specific ways in which teachers were recruited and hired, but she did not delegate any of this responsibility until this past year. When she learned that she had 40 applicants for two positions, she tasked her assistant principal to form a team to interview them and pick the top two, at which point Watson would get involved in the final decision (W-2-4). She acknowledged the amount of time interviewing required and the pressure she was receiving from the governing board to involve other people in decisions in case “anything happened” to her (W-2-5).
Watson’s story highlights a significant change in the teacher applicant and hiring pool that is occurring throughout the city and the strain that inexperience places on administrative staff. Watson related that as some veteran teachers left the school, inexperienced, younger teachers have been brought in to fill their positions. Watson and the administrative staff found that they must now work with the teachers to help them understand boundary setting between teacher and student. Watson’s experience of “having younger and younger teachers in the high school” and the identification of the need to “have to keep reminding teachers that you don’t cross the line, and you put up barriers, and if you don’t you are in trouble” indicates a need for increased guidance and coaching of “young teachers, especially those who didn’t pursue education degrees initially” (W-2-10).

The acknowledgement of an influx of teachers entering the professional via alternative routes alludes to the uptick in the presence of Teach for America and TeachNOLA in New Orleans after Katrina. Both organizations have successfully attracted and recruited college graduates who are spurred by opportunities to be part of education reform (http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/07/no_has_abundance_of_teacher_ap.html). Teachers affiliated with those organizations receive intense, alternative teacher training that includes abbreviated instruction and induction into the work of teaching in urban area, high-need schools. Once hired, the schools must work to induct, enhance and monitor these teachers’ classroom practice, making the need for strong induction and professional development within their schools even keener. Watson stated plainly that the hiring of alternative-route teachers has brought a big challenge, requiring greater
attention to induction and the monitoring and development of both classroom instruction and teacher professional behaviors.

All three school leaders spoke to the newness of the hiring practices, as well as to the newness of the ability to dismiss teachers who are not performing well. School leaders have taken on the hiring of teachers to suit the needs of their school community. With the exception of Watson who met with challenges from a governing board reluctant to approve the dismissal of veteran teachers, the school leaders were given the responsibility for establishing evaluation protocols and for hiring and firing teachers who did not measure up. Gillbeau and Eastlake, expressed entrusting the interviews and hiring recommendations to a team of trusted school leaders, and Watson was moving to this model. All identified a level of trust and comfort with their teacher leadership indicative of a commonality of purpose and mission.

**The knowledge transmission system.** School leaders are largely responsible for the dissemination and transmission of information and knowledge in their schools. Much of the work of leadership is the ability to “persuade specific persons in specific contexts to alter what they believe—and what they hold to be sacred, what they find comfortable and convenient” (Schlecty, 2005, p. 91). The challenge of creating systems through which school mission and purpose are transmitted is particularly challenging in new settings (Sarason, 1999).

All three conversion charter school principals are leading schools that emerged in a time of disorder, uncertainty, and extreme need. The way an organization manages change is determined in large part by the systems designed to support the creation, importation, and diffusion of knowledge within the organization, as well as, by the way
knowledge is shared between the organization and the larger environment (Schelcty, 2005, p. 88). According to Schelcty (2005) the knowledge transmission system in schools imparts technical knowledge, moral and aesthetic knowledge, and conventional knowledge (p. 93-94). Technical knowledge is oriented toward “what works best” (p. 94). Such knowledge is future-focused on accomplishing the schools’ missions and goals and is easily replaced if a new or better way is found. Moral and aesthetic knowledge reflect “group think,” and when entrenched, the school leader must engage in the difficult work of persuasion to effect change. Conventional knowledge is better understood as knowledge that has to do with “the way things are done around here” (p. 94). Such knowledge is problematic for school leaders when it is attached to old technologies that no longer serve “what works best.” Again, school leaders must use their persuasive skills to impart why change is needed and the benefits the change will bring.

At Harp, Gillbeau created three leadership teams through which the business of the school could be accomplished. In addition to an administrative team, which is standard practice in most school settings, Harp has two other mechanisms through which knowledge is created and disseminated. Through the TAP team, both new and veteran teachers have access to personalized and school-wide professional development. Gillbeau emphasized that unlike in his previous leadership experience, professional development is now “built into the school year.” Teachers now have instructionally focused professional development via mentor teachers and master teachers and the requirement of one 90-minute planning period per week dedicated to their development as professionals (H-1-8). At Harp, the TAP functions as a mechanism of knowledge transfer, imparting
technical, aesthetic, and moral knowledge throughout the school staff. Students in turn benefit from the consistent message and monitoring of engaging instructional delivery.

The introduction of a third leadership team, the response to intervention (RTI) team is an additional means of knowledge transfer: Gillbeau’s decision to delegate responsibility to capable staff demonstrate an openness and willingness to build capacity among his staff. He acknowledged a need to spend more time on crucial matters involving students and parents and has acted upon it. The staff engages readily in the work of keeping necessary personnel informed on a continuous basis. These team meetings and shared communications and decisions create a network within the school and serve those outside the school setting who need to know as well. Committing time and personnel to identifying and creating plans for meeting student needs is a hallmark of a student-centric school.

At Harp, the implementation of the TAP has required on-going communication among teachers and staff. Expectations about the manner in which instruction should take place flow back and forth with the administration and the mentor and master teachers on the TAP team. The program requires a significant level of engagement, beyond the individual classroom, in on-going development. Gillbeau noted that “forty percent of their planning time now is given to TAP. That’s a lot, big percent, so it’s much harder to hide, or remain disengaged” (H-2-6). The commitment of purposeful time in which guided development takes place mirrors Schlecty’s (2005) call for practice—the actual way things are really done in the school setting, versus preachments—the way things are supposed to be or ought to be done (p. 24). Gillbeau emphasized that teachers know the expectation is that “they are going to share, they’re going to mix it up with curricular
issues, and hone their craft instead of stay behind four walls” (H-2-5). As a school leader, Gillbeau has put in place multiple mechanisms through which information is channeled and shared, which furthers the goals of the school to include stakeholders in the education of all students.

For Eastlake, evidence of consensus building and knowledge transmission can be found in the pre-Katrina conversations of her board and teachers as they began to research what it would take to gain independence as a charter school. Motivated by wanting to do more for students, she and members of her staff, as well as parents, had come to a decision that chartering “would be the best thing for us, so that we could really help our kids soar and more importantly design... the high-quality school community that we thought we could provide for our children” (E-1-1, 2).

Eastlake’s goal of instilling in students what she calls a “soaring eagle mentality,” one that fosters in children a vision of going above and beyond anything they have ever imagined, is evidenced in both the social skills program and academic expectations that permeate the school via the metaphor of the “eagle’s nest” and “soaring eagle pride (E-2-22).” The shaping and dissemination of that message is embraced by her staff, who collaborated on the creation of the social skills program that imparts character attributes uses the metaphor of the majestic eagle through various daily, weekly, and monthly activities that involve both students and parents. According to Schlecty (2005), programs by themselves do not constitute grammar disruption in schools. The “moral and aesthetic knowledge base” (p. 98) of the school must emanate from a core ethic. Eastlake’s use of terms such as “mission” and “ministry” when talking about the work being done at Fairlane, and the types of teachers she hires, as well as the programs she is implementing
are indicative of such a core ethic. In addition to the social skills program aimed at student development at Fairlane, teachers, working with the help of the instructional facilitators, also learn what is expected of them and are provided support to achieve those expectations—another example of practice rather than preaching when it comes to knowledge transmission in an organization (Schlecty, 2005).

Eastlake’s story that expressed candid dismay that a teacher would consider a 50% passing rate “good” is an illustration of her ability to make her school’s goals tangible and understandable for her teachers. Her insistence on teachers knowing their students, using assessment data to drive instruction, and finding ways to reach those students who lag behind without assigning blame on the student again creates an ethos of student success and teacher accountability. Metaphorically, the teacher is the one responsible for ensuring that the tire—the student, gets the full complement of air necessary to sustain him on the journey.

As a school leader, Watson is just beginning to extend beyond the pre-Katrina identity of the school and generate a vision that embraces the strengths, needs and goals for its current students and families. As Schlecty (2005) and Sarason (1999) indicate as being often the case in new settings, she has had to engage in the hard work of leadership to change the beliefs and assumptions held by an entrenched majority (p. 104). She has created opportunities for her staff and parents to share in and expand her vision for the school via programs and practices. Throughout her four-year tenure as principal of Mid-City, Watson worked to change the attitudes of veteran teachers toward students who no longer reflect the population of who attended the school before Katrina, when it was a magnet school. The current approach to education is very different; no longer can
students be dismissed, as they could be in the magnet setting, for academic non-performance or minor behavior infractions. The conversion to charter status brought with it students with a multiplicity of learning abilities and needs. Watson emphasized a role reversal; students and families are now choosing the school, rather than the school selecting which students could attend. As a school leader, Watson knows that continued talk about “what Mid-City was” means that the school cannot “go forward” (W-3-12). Her insistence that “the school will be what we make it” (W-3-12) illustrates her work in countering the “knowledge base on which the normative order” (Schlecty, 2005, p. 100) rested for many years prior to the school’s conversion.

Watson is also working to transmit and root technical knowledge about best practice and to shift moral, aesthetic and conventional knowledge about what works best and what is best for the students of Mid-City. Over the past four years, she has worked to formulate a clear vision for the school as it now exists. Entrenched beliefs from those associated with the “old way” have, however, proven challenging to uproot. Watson acknowledged that it is an immense task to change the culture of a school in a city where the importance of education has always taken a back seat.

The stories of these school leaders illustrate that mission and vision clarity, together with consistency of message, are important to building cohesiveness in a school organization. Charter schools present opportunities for school leaders to create, disseminate, and stay on message when it comes to presenting and shepherding the goals for school excellence and improved student achievement.

The power and authority system. In New Orleans, newly converted charter schools were granted the ability to operate independently from district control. School
leaders, under contract with their governing boards, became responsible for the direct day-to-day operations of their schools, together with the accountability and sustainability of the schools in which they were placed in charge. The degree to which they are able to employ and distribute this newly gained autonomy and authority can be discerned through evidence that capacity building and change-adeptness is present in the school (Schlechty, 2005, p. 127-129). In action, this is reflected by enabling structures that encourage collaborative problem solving, shared decision making, and broad professional autonomy (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). The structure of most charters established a non-profit board of directors or board of trustees to be the charter operator that sets policies and oversees the leader of the school. The district provides oversight and sets accountability standards for all charters under its authorization. The charter operator, however, has the ultimate responsibility for improvements within the school and most often places this responsibility in the hands of the school leader. In the charter setting, the degree to which governing boards allow their selected school leaders to make decisions regarding the school’s operation is another indicator of an enabling structure.

All three principals indicated significant changes in their ability to exert authority for the benefit of their students. Harp principal Gillbeau stated that decisions are “made here and pretty much stay here” (G-2-1). He emphasized that programmatic decisions at the school are driven by the identified needs of the students and stakeholders in the school community. Additionally, Gillbeau now has the authority to make determinations within budgetary boundaries that are far beyond what he experienced as the leader of a district school. Overseeing a budget of seven million dollars, Gillbeau has increased the number of personnel on staff, hiring additional counselors, a social worker, and more
teachers “despite the fact that we have 350 less students.” He attributed this to the fact that money no longer goes “to feed a hungry central office” (H-2-1).

Eastlake spoke about autonomy that she did not have in her previous roles to make decisions for the good of the school. She too identified the central office as a barrier to efficiency and effectiveness saying, “you only had so much control because central office deemed and controlled everything” (E-2-1). She pointed to a central office out of touch with the needs of individual schools, preventing those “in the trenches with the children and who know the children and know the parents intimately” (E-2-1) from getting what they needed either due to a one-best system approach or lack of funding. She is now realizing the longed-for “chance to grow a vision, put the pieces together, and do it without spending years trying to get it” (E-1-20). As a school leader responsible for the entire operation of her school, Eastlake created a system to support the instructional mission of the school and oversee the integrity of the application of its mission in the classrooms through her instructional facilitators and her assistant principal.

The level of trust in her senior staff is apparent in her description of her staff as “true professionals.” She works to create a setting in the school, both culturally and instructionally, that promotes and advances a climate of learning and holistic child development. Eastlake’s declaration that she now has the ability “to solve a problem immediately, [to] change the direction immediately” (E-3-8) is a source of new found power and authority.

As a charter school leader, Eastlake’s scope of responsibility is admittedly larger than she ever imagined. She put systems in place via her assistant principal and instructional facilitators to ensure that the school remains focused on instructional
integrity. She also learned to wield the authority of fiscal control to make decisions for the benefit of students and the school community with an immediacy lacking in her previous role.

Watson revealed through her stories an unfolding awareness about the scope of her current and the attendant authority to make decisions, which were far beyond what she had previously experienced. The work she accomplished prior to taking on the leadership of a conversion charter school did not extend to personnel oversight, building maintenance and operations, grant writing, fiscal planning or the oversight and budget planning for the use of millions of dollars in Title Funds. Nor did her previous work include an extensive population of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, or the direct management of human resources including contracts and payroll.

Watson’s extensive involvement in all aspects of the school found her “working seven days a week the first year…I would go home at 11 or 12 at night” (W-1-9). Her hands-on-approach was unsustainable and called into question by a governing board both new to their role and concerned about the burn-out of the school leader. The fact that the governing board inquired of her, “What if something happened to you? Who other than you has the knowledge?”(W-1-9) illustrates the extent to which Watson controlled both the authority and knowledge base at the school. She began to relinquish responsibilities to her assistant principal and involve others in the hiring process. As the only leader-participant who stepped into a role beyond the grade-level scope she had previously led, her inexperience may have influenced her reluctance to distribute authority until well into the third year of operation. Watson’s narrative presents a picture of a school leader maturing after four years of on the job training on how to lead a conversion charter
school. Her story provides insight into the struggles encountered by a novice board and principal.

All three school leaders found themselves with increased autonomy to make decisions at the school level for the benefit of student learning. While two of the school leaders were able to act upon this autonomy from the start of the conversion, the third encountered intransigence from teachers and a governing board who continued to adhere to traditional ideas about the school organization. The autonomy experienced by the school leaders extended to the programmatic, curricular, personnel, and fiscal aspects of leading a school organization.

The evaluation system. Ideally, evaluation systems in schools exist in support of continuous improvement for student learning. For Schlecty (2005), school leaders committed to continuous improvement commit to open, continuous evaluation and learning on the part of themselves and their teachers (p. 140). While a broad definition of the evaluation system includes measures of student performance and overall school performance (Schlecty, 2005), this research focused on changes in the assessment of teacher performance after Katrina. Evidence of changes that have or may not have occurred in the system employed to identify teacher development needs and effectiveness for the purpose of insuring effective classroom instruction was sought.

The evaluation of teachers at Harp is driven by the TAP. Commitment to the use of this formative teacher development tool is demonstrated by its inclusion in the Algiers Charter School Association’s charter documents. Gillbeau endorsed the commitment by the school’s governing board and praised it as an effective and sustainable means of teacher development.
Gillbeau stated there is “no comparison” between the way teachers are currently evaluated through the use of TAP and the way he conducted teacher evaluations during his former leadership work. The breadth of TAP, which includes intense staff training, a dedicated time commitment, quarterly “snapshots” of teacher performance by multiple observers, and on-going developmental support, provides evidence of a paradigm shift away from the one-shot evaluation system of the past. In addition to providing teachers with opportunities to improve their practice, TAP also offers them a monetary incentive in the form of a year-end bonus should students demonstrate notable increased achievement on standardized tests. TAP is an integral part of the teacher development and evaluation program at Harp that Gillbeau both endorses and in which he participates as an instructional leader.

As a school leader now fully engaged in what he experiences as an effective evaluation system, Gillbeau derided his previous work in developing and evaluating teachers as “ridiculous” and unachievable. In fact, he viewed the notion of the principal as an instructional leader as a “great lie.” Gillbeau described the use of TAP as “much more effective . . . much more genuine” (H-2-9). As a charter school leader he was not only overseeing an effective evaluation system, but also authentically participating in the evaluation and development of teachers. TAP provided structures that empowered teachers to be the instructional leaders of the school.

The evaluation of teachers at Fairlane Elementary is shared by the instructional facilitators, the assistant principal, and Eastlake. Evaluation is part of an ongoing process guided by the instructional facilitators through instructional acclimation—what Eastlake calls, “the way we do things,” and instructional oversight designed to ensure that teachers
were delivering curriculum via the Target Teach program, as well as designing instruction cognizant of student learning styles.

Eastlake expressed that teachers resistant to adopting Fairlane’s expectations and established teaching methods based on students’ learning styles were not a good fit. She dismissed teachers who asserted that the school’s expectations stifle their “creativity” or claimed that the curriculum “is teaching to the test.” When evaluating the performance of teachers, Eastlake and the instructional facilitators observe for evidence of “re-teaching” in a manner that attends to students’ various learning styles. She stated bluntly that teachers who do not differentiate their instruction to meet individual learning styles “need to be somewhere else” (E-1-29).

Notably, the expectations for and development of teachers through instructional facilitators have not altered the technical process of evaluating teacher performance. Teachers receive two written evaluations per year based on a scripted observation following “the same protocol we did before” (E-1-34). Eastlake makes use of both a traditional evaluation tool—scripting followed by written feedback—and a process of ongoing instructional facilitation through the use of grade-level facilitators of teacher development to ensure effective teaching. Thus, the teacher evaluation system at Fairlane is a blend of a traditional process with some evidence of innovation that focuses on the values of the school and distributes the responsibility across an instructional leadership team.

Watson has retained a traditional approach that relies on a previously used and familiar evaluation tool. Watson took it upon herself to evaluate all teachers during the school’s first year of operation using what she described as “one sheet of paper we were
all supposed to use” (W-1-21). She attributed the selection of the instrument to a requirement placed on her by the charter authorizer, the OPSB. Her assertion that “Orleans insisted on it” suggests that she views her role as the agent of the authorizer rather than an advocate and leader for an autonomous school. In a year filled with change, stresses, and the hurdles associated with the newness of the organization (Sarason, 1971; Brouillette, 2002) the use of a familiar tool proved expedient. Her characterization of the evaluation process as “a lot of it is a bunch of bull anyway” indicates that she viewed the evaluation process as busy work unrelated to the development or improvement of teachers. The evaluation of teachers at Mid-City appeared pro forma and not a process though which formative assessment, development, and improvement of teacher instruction are delineated or encouraged.

Watson shared that she explored changing the evaluation system, even visiting a school that used TAP. However, she stated that “there are no funds” to implement such a change. While there appears to be a process in place to document teacher performance using the checklist instrument, there is no apparent system in place for the ongoing development of teachers for performance improvement. Watson acknowledged a need for improvement in the evaluation process, but identified a lack of funds and skepticism about the ability of an evaluation system to impact teacher development.

The three leaders demonstrate a range of practice in evaluating and developing teachers. Gillbeau welcomed innovation and saw the implementation of the new evaluation system as both effective and sustainable. Eastlake designed a blended system to ensure teacher support and development, along with documentation of teacher performance. She emanated vision-clarity in identifying the roles of instructional
facilitators to evaluate and develop teachers to support of Fairlane’s academic norms and expectations. Both Gillbeau and Eastlake used their autonomy to shape the evaluative systems in their schools. Watson has maintained a traditional process that documents teacher behavior rather than focuses on teacher development. Watson has begun to involve other staff members in teacher evaluation, and the impact of this change was not evident during the time of the study.

**The direction and goal setting system.** Schlecty (2005) asserts that setting a school on a path that focuses on gaining the students’ attention and commitment rather than mandating compliance and attendance is an indicator of future thinking (2005). The school leader is responsible for establishing a system through which goals are set and clarified, priorities are chosen and implemented, and the resources of time, people, space, information, and technology are distributed toward the accomplishment of the goal (p. 145). The direction and goal setting system is more than the mission or vision statement schools post on their websites and in pamphlets. It is putting voice into action through systemic processes that make the achievement of the goal doable by all involved. Teachers, for example, tasked with the goal of increasing student achievement in reading are trained to diagnose reading difficulties, plan lessons with instructional strategies that move dependent readers into confident readers, and are supported by the resources of the time, talent, and patience of mentors. This is a directional system in action.

The mission of Harp Charter High School is “to teach all students to be independent life-long learners and achievers through the involvement of all stakeholders.” Gillbeau explained that “all stakeholders” means everyone involved in the student’s education: parents, caretakers, teachers, and administrators. He talked about
how since Katrina, the learning needs of the students have driven the mission and work of
the school in a direction that did not exist previously because “the kids we have today are
much more challenging. Their fundamental skills are very different from the students
that we were able to select prior to the storm getting them ready for testing” (G-1-3).
Goal setting with students and teachers has become the norm; flexibility in class
scheduling is in place to allow more time to fill in identified skill gaps. Recognizing a
need, clarifying a goal, creating awareness of those goals in the minds and work days of
students and teachers, and expanding instructional time to meet those goals are a
demonstration of an activated directional system.

The students who now attend Harp reflect the gulf between academically and non-
academically prepared students. Having such an array of students in one classroom is a
challenge for even the most seasoned teachers. Providing teachers with instructional
know-how and support is critical to closing the learning gaps and preventing teacher
burnout. Gillbeau points to the TAP as a means of providing ongoing support (H-1-9),
and says that with the assistance of mentor and master teachers, he has observed that
teachers are “to a degree less frustrated” (G-3-6).

Despite the significant strides that need to be made by some students, college-
readiness is a goal for all students graduating from Harp. The goal of college-readiness is
a weighty one for Gillbeau and his staff. The Project Grad program supports preparing
low-income students for the college experience (www.projectgrad.org) and provides a
connection between the school and the outside community for goal attainment. Together
with his administrative team and the academic counselors, they are devising ways to meet
student needs and promote college-readiness.
In giving action to the goal, the school’s counselor has been equipped with a space to introduce students to college via computers and counsel both students and parents on their choices. She is able to assist them in navigating the Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA), a task many students and parents find daunting. She coordinates with teachers to ensure students are exposed to college, beginning with the ninth graders. The percentage of HARP students enrolled in and attending colleges demonstrates that efforts are paying off.

Student proficiency on state-mandated tests is a paramount goal for all of the stakeholders at Harp. Gillbeau shared that state-mandated tests weigh heavily on everyone. He would “like to see student achievement high. I would like to see all kids passing all the End of Course Exams...I would like to see all the kids passing all the tests at proficient or higher.” “But”, he added solemnly, “It’s complicated” (G-3-9).

As a school leader, he understands the enormity of the task facing everyone working to make goals a reality. With the help of his teachers and counseling staff, he is demonstrating an attentiveness to the needs of Harp’s students and taking steps to meet those needs via both remediation and more challenging classes. He is shaping the directional system of the school in ways that demonstrate action toward success for all students beyond the high school years. Engaging students in this process through exposure to information, career possibilities and choices is one avenue to creating independent, voluntary life-long learners.

From the start, Eastlake, the teachers, and the parents who worked to charter Fairlane Elementary knew the direction they wanted to take the school. She says that they wanted to charter the school in order “to design the school community, the high-quality
school community that we thought we could provide for our children…we just felt like, the teachers and I, that we could really do some incredible things and really create the kind of environment that we wanted for our kids” (E-1-2). She stated emphatically that “the teachers were on board…and the parents were on board.” In her role as school leader, whenever she advocates for the school she “presents what is best for children” (Mar 1-4). She explained that the goal was “to build a school program that developed the whole child, nurturing the mind, body and spirit” (E-1-13). According to Eastlake the stakeholders at Fairlane demonstrate vision clarity, a necessary attribute for directional control.

In chartering the school, Eastlake conveyed that everyone wanted to “create opportunities for our children to soar” (E-1-2). This message is put into action through morning assemblies, through the Eagles with Etiquette character education program, through the pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade College Days program in which students and parents research and present information on a college in order to imbue in students and parents that college is a given, not an option (E-3-1).

The message is also enacted through programs that support positive behavior and establish expectations for parents, students and teachers. Eastlake shared that the Board of Governors approved the plan for student behavior expectations in support of an orderly learning environment. With the help of the parent liaison and the social worker, parents and teachers receive an orientation regarding the school’s policies and expectations. Numerous stakeholders take part in orienting students, parents, and teachers to expectations. Reinforcement and follow-up take place in different venues throughout the school year. Parents receive further orientation to the school through the parent-teacher
organization, learning through both in-house staff and Louisiana Department of Education employees “how to conference with teachers” and interact on behalf of their children. The parent liaison also works with parents on “how to follow the chain of command, and our parents know that if they have a problem first they try to meet with the teacher…they know the protocol. We have a protocol in place” (E-1-32).

The anticipation of parent questions and concerns and the creation of processes and means to disseminate information both internally and externally exemplify Eastlake’s leadership skill. The fact that there is “a protocol in place” to guide how teachers and parents should respond and act toward one another reflects the commitment to wholeness of mind, body and spirit embraced by Eastlake and the staff. School is not simply about academics; it is about learning how to act and treat others with respect. She points to the fact that “attendance at our parent-teacher meetings is better than at other schools” (E-1-33) as a sign of willing involvement on the part of parents and teachers; this is despite the fact that the eastern section of New Orleans remains barren and parents who choose Fairlane for their children travel considerable distances to the school because they have yet to rebuild homes in the neighborhood.

Watson’s story reveals an organization finding its way in a changed environment. While the original mission statement and a motto have been retained and are familiar to students and staff, the school’s founders and staff continue to struggle with vision clarity and goal setting. Watson shared that the primary mission was “getting the school open,” with little thought for the future awaiting them. Watson said of the start up, “we were not an educational group…[who] knew where to put emphasis and what to do; we were a group of neophytes” (W-3-9). It has taken time to refine the school’s focus and
complement that focus with supportive goals, structures, policies and processes. While tactically the school was able to open, it became clear to Watson that there was no real vision and corresponding strategy to transform the school. Watson affirmed that “our mission is to provide rigorous and relevant instruction for students at all academic levels…our motto is ‘We believe in success’…but believing it and making it happen are two different things” (W-2-12).

Therein Watson voices the difficulty of the reality of putting words into action and creating success for all. Through “cabinet” meetings with her administrative team and meetings with her department heads as well as through regular professional development days, Watson has dedicated time to changing the attitudes of teachers regarding the now more academically diverse and needy student body population. She states vehemently that “we were not going to be putting these children out… that was the old way… when everything was about ‘me, me, me’ [the teacher]… and as a charter school we could change that” (W-4-4).

Through non-renewals of some veteran teachers, as well as increased delivery of professional development emphasizing routines in classroom instruction, Watson sees a clearer mission and curricular focus emerging, noting, “It took three years to change that way of thinking…it took getting rid of one important player” (W-4-4). Watson’s statement affirms Schlecty’s (2005) claim that a lack of goal clarity and belief and value coherence among staff lead to competing loyalties. In such a setting, opposition to change subverts efforts to bring about organizational change, affecting all systems. The removal of an influential person resistant to change efforts appears to have helped Watson in her attempts to bring about goal clarity.
Getting the message across to teachers that they are responsible for engaging all students and ensuring their success is a major goal of Watson’s. A message of teacher accountability is being crafted that reflects the “at will” nature of employment in the school. Like Gillbeau and Eastlake acknowledged in their narratives, Watson also understands that the new educational landscape means “if students are not achieving, or maximizing their learning potential, or not grasping what is being taught, then you are held accountable and you’ve got to go. And… that’s the bottom line” (W-3-4). Lacking a cohesive vision from the start, Watson has encountered challenges yet to be overcome.

**The internal and external boundary setting system.** A schools’ boundary system delineates the resources and activities under its organizational control or attempted control (Schlecty, 2005, p. 167). School policies, for example, are a type of boundary that guides processes and behaviors within the school setting. Homework is another example that extends beyond the school setting. Similarly, school projects or partnerships that involve community service or student internships extend beyond the physical boundaries of the school. Votes on how schools are to be funded and how school monies are to be spent also permeate organizational boundaries. Further, politically volatile determinations regarding school locations and whether or not transportation will be made available free of charge impact the boundary system of the school organization.

Boundary extensiveness and boundary permeability are boundary system issues that can demand significant time and energy from the school leader. Schlecty (2005) writes that “for many school leaders, the business of the school becomes maintaining boundaries so that some modicum of what needs to be done to educate children gets done in spite of the system” (p. 176). The three conversion charter school leaders who
participated in this study acknowledged a critical awareness of boundary extensiveness and boundary permeability as they worked to establish organizational viability.

At Harp Charter High School, Gillbeau found that as one of nine schools governed by the ACSA, he has been buffered from the operational administration and politics surrounding charter schooling in the city. The fact that the governing board resembles “a mini-central office, but it is very hands off, allowing decisions…to be made…and stay at the school site” (H-2-1) has enabled Gillbeau to lead without the distractions some of his counterparts endure. Accounting, payroll, and public relations are handled through the ACSA, as are janitorial and food service contracts. He has been able to control his own budget, and has seen to it that teachers and coaches are making “more than they would have made with Orleans” (G-2-2).

Gillbeau sees the school as being fairly remote from community connections. Efforts to build parent and community involvement in the new school are by Gillbeau’s assessment minimally successful. He described his efforts at greater parent involvement as “one area that we probably suck at” (G-1-12). His statement regarding the lack of parent attendance and participation is a common lament of high school leaders. The situation, he said, is not that different than when they were a magnet school. Then, as now, students accessed the school community from many different neighborhoods, rather than from a community directly linked to the school by district assignment. This may account for the school-community detachment to which Gillbeau alludes. He also commented that “after the storm, people were just weary; trying to get parents formed up after the storm was a real task” (G-1-12). The addition of a parent liaison, however, has had some impact, he said. Keeping parents and community informed of what is taking
place in the school is accomplished through newsletters, flyers, open houses, and monthly meetings (G-1-12). While newsletters and automated phone calls home are standard practice in most schools, they are evidence that Harp is making the effort to cross the boundary between school and home. To increase awareness and build connections, Gillbeau is hoping to see the rebuilding of a strong alumni association, one that will promote the successes and mission of the new school. “A lot of people have ties to Harp. We don’t have an alumni association now. People scattered. I’d like to see it come back strong” (G-3-11).

Gillbeau would also like “to see us strengthen our partnership with Project Grad USA and I would like to have an ongoing relationship with Gilder Lehrman, a group that promotes good teaching of U.S. History (G-3-10). Project Grad provides students with exposure to careers and colleges. The school has taken on a changed role after Katrina, leaving behind its original organization as a junior high, and then as a magnet high school. In its new iteration as a conversion charter, Gillbeau believes that the school is seen in a positive, though understated light: “It’s kind of funny, like you’re never the hero in your hometown kind of thing, but Harp’s reputation on the East Bank is, I think, very solid…” (G-1-13). Despite the lack of outreach to community or integration of the community into the school, Gillbeau maintained that he believed the school was thought of as doing good things for the students who attended.

Steps are being taken to expand Harp’s connections with the world beyond its physical structure. Though taxed in their ability to commit time to the school, a structure for welcoming parents via the PTO is in place. Bridges are being built with community colleges and other colleges via the counseling office to support students in advancing
their post-secondary learning opportunities, and efforts are underway to establish an alumni association in support of the Harp’s past and future success in the community.

Eastlake presents a different view of the degree to which she is aware of and participates in boundary permeability and expansiveness. She stated emphatically that as CEO she “is involved in the politics, and when I say the politics, we’re not politicians, but you’re fooling yourself if you’re in a charter school and think that you cannot keep up with the political temperature” (Mar 1-2, 3). As the chief spokesperson for her school, Eastlake has now taken on the role of educating outsiders about the school’s mission, goals, and needs. She has learned to be an advocate for her school, bringing representatives in to clarify the work being done, as well as extending herself outside of the school to take “the political temperature.” In addition to her responsibilities as a principal, Eastlake has taken on the task of being politically savvy, staying current with legislative activity and taking every opportunity she gets to “let the [politicians] know that these are your constituents; the children are your constituents because the children belong to the parents who vote for you” (Mar 1-4).

The proliferation of charter schools in the city of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina meant that there was a steep learning curve for all involved—school leaders, governance boards, community leaders, and state officials alike. Eastlake is learning to cross boundaries in a diplomatic, “gentle” way to both educate others and advocate for her school community. She spoke of the task of getting the school opened as a “battle.” Her encounters with state and local forces outside of the school illustrate the confusion surrounding control of resources that ensued following Hurricane Katrina. So many entities were involved in getting schools up and running that school leaders and
their governing boards were required to cross into unfamiliar territory and establish mutually supporting relationships beyond those that would ever have been required before Katrina. The state had acted to take over the majority of schools, yet little information was available about which schools were to be closed, which might be available to open, which ones were minimally damaged and whether or not the OPSB or the state had the authority for decision making.

As a school leader, Eastlake establishes the boundary between the work of the school and the work of the parent. It is clear that the school expects parents to partner with them in getting the work of schooling done. She works to “make sure that we are responsible to the parents. We make sure we send home study guides that they can understand, that the parents can handle, and that the parents in turn can help” the students (E-1-27). Her awareness of parent needs and the need to make materials both accessible and understandable in order to include parents in their children’s school life provides evidence of a leader able to build coalitions through words and actions that reach across boundaries.

As the leader of a charter school, Eastlake emphasized that with choice comes responsibility. By choosing to put a child in Fairlane, Eastlake believes that the parent is making a commitment to both the child and the school to be responsible and accountable for their education. She takes a strong leadership stand in speaking out across the school/parent boundary. Significantly, it is clear that she does not see the school and its educational ideals as an island apart from accountable parenting (Schlecty, 2005).

Watson, at Mid-City, expressed that from the start confusion existed regarding her school’s status as a conversion charter school and its association with the former district.
When applying for grants or programs, she frequently found that lags in communication were due to misunderstandings regarding district control boundaries and charter school entities. Paperwork she expected to be sent directly to her would end up at the district office. Students and their families would go to the district office to apply for her school, even though it was no longer under the district’s direct control.

Watson found herself engaged in boundary spanning activities that are far removed from her former role as a principal. She became a fundraiser, seeking and accepting funding from various organizations throughout the city and from philanthropists outside of the city. As the school has become more firmly established after Katrina, Watson has been able to unite with the health care and leisure industries in the city and establish agreements to promote student internships and exposure to career pathways.

When working to secure a new roof for her badly damaged building, Watson entered into a competition with other charter schools for solar panel installation that required her involvement with the district, with the grantor, and with her board in order to keep the school’s needs in the forefront and “win” the roof. The number of organizations and entities with which Watson has found herself interacting and pursuing connections ranges from the energy company to the water company to janitorial and garbage services to construction crews, to a presidential advance team that wanted to use the school as the backdrop for President Bush’s post-Katrina speech.

Watson revealed two boundary incursions that weigh on her time and energy. The first centers on tensions between the school and the authorizer. She revealed that the “authorizer still considers us a high-risk school, even though we are one of the best
performing schools in the city…we are now getting pressure…to have all of our teachers certified when the original charter agreement said 75% had to be certified… they are trying to hold us accountable for something not in the original charter agreement… The relationship with our authorizer is becoming cumbersome (W-4-8). As authorizer, the OPSB requires yearly audits of the charter schools under their auspices. These audits delve into the fiscal soundness of the school and the school’s accountability to the promises made in its charter agreement. Schools must demonstrate improvement in student achievement based on standardized test scores, as well as gains in attendance and graduation rates. The authorizer won a recent victory when the legislature approved the withholding of 2% minimum, up to 3% negotiable, of each charter school’s municipal funding monies for administrative fees

The second boundary incursion revealed by Watson deals with the school leader’s relationship with the governing board. Watson serves at the pleasure of the board, as do all charter school leaders. The board has the final say on how school funds are spent, including the Municipal Funding Program which contains tax dollars for public schools. Watson and the board do not always agree. For example, the physical structure of the school is in need of significant capital repairs. The Board wanted to use a “rainy day” fund for maintenance and repair, but Watson saw that money better used another way: “We need a lot of that money because we now have a great many computers; we have more computers and more technology than any other public school in the city. We will need to upgrade; we need to repair and recycle these machines” (W-3-10).
Watson’s narrative exhibits concerns about financial sustainability. “My concerns are about the financial stability and not the academic… can we, without a major financial backer, be financially sound and head in a sound direction over the next five years?” (W-4-8). This question is of serious weight. It remains to be seen if the authorizer’s quest to increase administrative overhead costs will continue and succeed, thereby limiting the amount of money that can be directed toward student learning.

The work in which Watson engaged as school leader required significant management bandwidth on her part. The number of organizations external to the immediate work of improving student achievement, including meetings with grant organizations, fundraisers, contractors, auditors, etc., impeded her ability to establish and maintain vision and direction for the school (Schlecty, 2005, p. 187). She and the board face significant challenges of vision setting, along with operational concerns of maintaining a building in a time of shrinking fiscal resources. Ultimately, the board will have the final say regarding the use of funds and Watson’s tenure as school leader.

**Principal Perceptions and School Change**

The principal participants in this study were called upon to lead in a time of unprecedented life interruption and societal upheaval following the devastation of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Responsible for shaping the structure and culture of the school via instructional leadership and overall school management, conversion charter school leaders are in a unique position to influence change in school. Beabout’s (2008) thesis on principals’ perceptions in the turbulent year immediately following Hurricane Katrina touched on the importance of principals’ roles in school change when he proposed that “the perceptions and actions of educators, particularly school leaders…may
well determine the future course” (p. 8) of education in the city of New Orleans. The narratives of the participant school leaders were mined to explore their perceptions of changes in the grammar of schooling in their respective schools.

**Leaders’ perceptions.** All three participants held principalships under the district-controlled OPSB for three or more years prior to Hurricane Katrina. All three had worked for the district for 15 or more years prior to its dissolution and their subsequent positions as leaders of conversion charter schools. Thus, they were familiar with the organizational grammar of schooling in their respective schools as well as that of the greater central office organization of the OPSB. Their new leadership roles changed the scope of their responsibilities in different ways.

In introducing themselves, each of the school leaders presented a distinct description of his or her role and function as a charter school leader. In beginning his narrative, Gillbeau described himself as “the principal of Harp High School” and stated unequivocally, “I don’t want to be CEO; I want to be principal and there’s a reason for that. The more you become CEO, the less contact you have with kids and teachers and you find yourself becoming boxed in—at least that’s my impression” (G-I-16). Gillbeau wanted to continue engaging in activities that kept him directly connected with Harp students: “going to games… having time to cry with the kids or laugh with them…” He also acknowledged being “two to three years away from retirement,” and given that his “professional mortality” was nearing, “why change horses this late in the game?” With back office support from the Algiers Charter School Association, he did not feel the need to take on the role or title of a CEO as did the other two principals. In fact, he
emphatically rejected the CEO role as one that would cause him to be removed from what he saw as his primary work.

This is notable in that previous studies of charter school leaders indicate that their leadership challenges are amplified and extended beyond that of traditional district principals (Lake & Hill, 2005). Unlike the other two participants in the study, Gillbeau has been able to forego certain administrative and managerial tasks that other charter school leaders have assumed. The fact that his school is governed by an association that oversees nine schools and maintains a support staff through which payroll and building maintenance are overseen has freed him from the operational complexities the other two principals contend with daily.

Eastlake opened her narrative by introducing herself as “CEO and Principal at Fairlane Elementary Charter School.” She distinguished the role of CEO as comprising not only “running a business,” but also one requiring her to be “involved in politics” (E-1-2). Eastlake is clear about the duality of her title and candid about the expanded function required of her. Politics are involved and she is attuned to the external forces that affect the school. She has entered a new arena and role, finding that she now has to “educate the public and educate the politicians, the people who make the decisions above you” in order to “present what’s best for children” (E-1-4). Eastlake engaged in boundary-crossing, demonstrating reflective leadership, intentionality, and transparency in her work as a school leader (Schlecty, 2005). She is developing new skills as she becomes an advocate for children and her school organization. In her previous school leadership role she was “the principal,” responsible for “building the curriculum and doing shared leadership” (E-1-4). Now, as a charter school leader, she has “taken on the
things that central office once did… from budgetary concerns, getting the best price on things, to vendors for the cafeteria, to buying refrigerators… to hiring custodians, to equipment… to security, to everything it takes to run a school‖ (E-1-5). Eastlake has become responsible for significant administrative and managerial work previously delegated to the district’s central office staff. Her expanded role and her narrative regarding the acceptance of her new role demonstrate that she is a leader capable of learning and adapting.

Watson identified herself as “the Principal at Mid-City [Charter High School]. You know, I took CEO off. I keep putting it back on every time the board asks me to do more” (W-1-7). She characterized herself as “overworked and underpaid,” intimating that had she truly known the scope of the job she “would not have taken on such a heavy task” (W-1-7). Watson was frank about the fact that upon accepting the leadership role, she also accepted her pre-Katrina salary—without comprehending the scope of her new job. She “thought [the job] was principal, strictly principal, you know, but now I know it is the CEO of a small business… and I’m not a small business when I manage over a thousand people” (W-1-8). Her ready acceptance and assumption of what she believed would be a “principal” position indicates an assumption that the role would be similar and the pay commensurate with the role. This proved erroneous and taxed her energy, limiting her ability to plan and engage others in visioning for the school’s future.

It appears that neither Watson nor the board understood the responsibilities that would be required in the new leadership position. Neither anticipated the scope of the work that would be involved in the operational, administrative, and management oversight of the charter school setting. Both she and the board appeared to have imagined
the role as that of a principal overseeing the instructional work of the school. Neither had considered that they were entering into a model of schooling where a need for management and administrative skills paralleled those of a business model. Watson was hired as a high school principal and soon found herself removed from the instructionally related middle-school principal work with which she was familiar. She stated emphatically that her new role was “on-the-job training.”

The three school leaders perceived their leadership roles in different lights. Gillbeau’s narrative offered a picture of confidence and satisfaction in his role as principal. He understood that there is an endgame and was also aware that his job is based upon performance. Eastlake’s narrative reflected a school leader prepared and poised to take on the multi-faceted work involved in operating the conversion charter school. She understood the scope of the work and embraced the political aspect of her job, suggesting that other charter school principals had best not fool themselves that politics play a role in their existence. Watson’s perception was one of unanticipated work beyond the scope of the job she believed she was hired to do. There was a current of conflict between her and the governing board, and an expression of being overwhelmed.

Both Eastlake and Gillbeau serve as leaders in schools they previously led prior to conversion status. Having worked at Mid City High School as an assistant principal for six years earlier in her career, Watson took on a leadership role in a familiar setting, but at higher grade level—high school—than the middle-school level she had led as principal before the storm. The learning curve for Watson appeared to be significantly more demanding. Given the impediments she faced in her new leadership role, Watson has
now been able to introduce changes beyond the traditional concept of schooling in her fourth year as school leader.

**Changes to the Grammar of Schooling**

**Harp High School: School as a learning organization.** Reviewing the audio tapes for emotional nuances and mining the transcripts for evidence of Gillbeau’s perceptions of changes in his school organization revealed a picture of a school leader engaged in creating a learning organization guided by systematic attention to instructional practice and identified student needs. He told a story of a school significantly different from the one he oversaw as a district principal before the storm. He conveyed a change regarding his role as an instructional leader, as well as a shift in his epistemological stance in emphasizing that school choice and open enrollment schools must continue to go hand in hand. This is particularly important coming from a principal whose previous work was as the leader of a magnet junior high and high school.

The degree to which he was now involved in the instructional development of his teaching staff bears “no comparison” to the work he did in his prior role. While the introduction of TAP is a charter agreement stipulation for the schools governed by the ACSA, it was Gillbeau who led its implementation and clearly champions its impact as changing “the level of the adult conversation within the building” (G-2-1).

As the leader of a conversion charter school, Gillbeau has intensified the level of services—both academic and psycho-social—for his students. His authorization of and active role in a third leadership team, the RTI team, involving “the nurse, our two social workers, our four counselors, the administrative team and any other people we need to bring in, including parents and regular classroom teachers” (G-1-6) expanded the
knowledge transmission capacity within the school organization. The work done by this team helped identify and serve “the needs of the students, the needs of the school, the needs of the community” (G-2-5). Knowledge about student needs and development of teachers to meet those needs traveled vertically and horizontally throughout the school. It also extends beyond the school boundaries to include parents and organizations. The transmission of knowledge appears to send consistent and clear messages about goals and objectives. Changes are reflected in the systematic functioning of the RTI Team, curricular offerings, and an expanded counseling office that works with students for goal attainment.

A change in the power and authority system is evident in Gillbeau’s ability to make and influence decisions that directly impact his school. Gillbeau attested to a “hands-off” governing board that allowed “decisions that affect the school environment” to be “made here and… stay here,” including the “authority to hire and fire,” as well as the authority to discipline students who violate rules (G-1-2). Based on identified needs, Gillbeau now makes decisions about “the size of our faculty,” including the hiring of an additional dedicated college counselor and sees that as having resulted in “189 graduates and 3.75 million dollars’ worth of scholarships, and 97% of them were in college this fall… those numbers are better than our magnet school numbers” (G-2-4).

Gillbeau also characterized the professional development that is taking place in his school as “hugely different.” Crediting his TAP leadership team with making determinations about instructional practice and evaluations of teachers, he spoke enthusiastically about the level of trust and professionalism in the building: “…we all have training… we don’t want inflation….The bottom line is, it’s an issue of trusting
people you feel real comfortable with to… have a fraternal sense of where they’re going” (G-2-5).

Gillbeau’s story revealed an epistemological shift from that of his prior experience. He talked about rethinking all aspects of schooling to meet the needs of his community. He utilized new structures such as TAP and leadership teams to distribute the responsibility of instructional leadership throughout the building. In the conversion charter school he now leads, he expressed an ethos of increased levels of collegiality, collaboration, trust and responsibility.

In sharing his perceptions, Gillbeau told a story of a learning organization engaged in discovery and practice of what is best for the school-wide-community. He created enabling support structures comprised of three leadership teams that overlap, confer, and engage in problem solving regarding instructional practice, programming, and student needs. These enabling structures have promoted trust and built capacity toward improved teacher practice and student achievement. Gillbeau’s story described a leader who experienced a change in his outlook regarding what he and his staff can do for the many children who enter the doors of Harp, now that he has the opportunity to select and develop staff, craft complimentary learning opportunities via curriculum, and build support structures that allow those “closest to the problem” to make decisions with flexibility and speed in response to the needs of the school community. Evidence exists therein of changes in Harp’s organizational structure toward 21st century organizational success factors identified by Ashkenas (2002). Hoy and Sweetland (2001) found that schools with enabling structures encouraged cooperation, flexibility, problem solving and broad professional autonomy.

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Fairlane Elementary: School as community. Eastlake’s narrative emphasized significant stakeholder (Banathy, 1996) participation in efforts to establish Fairlane as a charter school prior to Hurricane Katrina. She articulated that there was collective action toward chartering: “We just felt like, the teachers and I, we could do some incredible things and really create the kind of environment that we wanted for our kids” (E-1-2). She spoke candidly about the perceived disconnect with the district and the fact that she and the stakeholders, including parents and teachers, “had come to a decision that [chartering] would be the best thing for us, so that we could really help our kids soar, and more importantly, design the high-quality school community that we thought we could provide for our children” (E-1-1). While converting to charter status was expedited in the wake of the storm, the conversion and re-start took place under the most challenging of circumstances.

The administration and faculty shared a common vision of shaping the whole child and have structures in place to make that vision a reality. Using the metaphors of the “eagle’s nest” and ”soaring eagle,” Eastlake and her team created a school environment designed to expose students to thinking and planning on college attendance in the elementary grade levels, to teaching etiquette and self-advocacy, as well as offering students the opportunity to join clubs that many underserved students had never experienced. She saw the organizational practices as having an effect on students that transfers to life-long learning and skill development. She believed in the social skills aspect of her school affirming that “a lot of times if you get that part right, the other part will come” (E-1-14). An ethic of caring has been demonstrated through the academic acknowledgement of individual student learning styles and a curriculum that provides
teachers with opportunities to target student learning. In creating a school that values the whole child and provides opportunities for them to engage in ways beyond the classroom, Eastlake and her team created a sense of community among the students, faculty and parents.

From a power and authority aspect, Eastlake expressed an epistemological shift regarding her ability to influence the learning environment and advocate for children: “You really get the autonomy. You get the chance to grow a vision, put the pieces together and do it without spending years trying to get it…” (E-1-20). She characterized her experience as a conversion charter school leader as “liberating.” Eastlake expressed an awareness of the change that chartering and the attendant accountability it carried has brought not only to her school, but to others in the city: “If you look at the city now, you see that the schools are making progress. And why is that? Because there is greater accountability… you [have] to produce” (E-2-4). Eastlake’s comment spoke to a proliferation of charter schools across the city, all of which are competing for students and under scrutiny for improving the learning lives of children in the city.

Eastlake credited her staff with professionalism and a ministerial dynamism that shaped their work. They have been “a phenomenal staff of people” she said, asserting that “teaching is like a ministry to us.” Chartering has empowered her with the ability to shape an organization staffed by people who “understand… that this is more than a job or a career” (E-1-14).

Her narrative revealed core identifiable components of the organizational model of the school as community: shared understanding of purpose and commitment to the school community; shared common agenda of activities for pragmatic and symbolic
purposes, and an ethic of caring (Bryck & Driscoll, 1988). In her current role, Eastlake demonstrated that vision, collective will for chartering, and consistency of message all play a significant role in the school’s ability to flourish when removed from the bureaucratic strictures imposed by a central office.

**Mid City Charter High School: School as an emergent organization.**

Watson’s narrative portrayed an organization seeking to define roles and responsibilities and implement structures to meet the constantly changing needs of a new institution located in a city in recovery. Watson’s work as a school leader at Mid City Charter High School has been shaped by several factors: the delayed opening of the school amidst prolonged repairs following the storm; initial enthusiasm and determination on the part of a core group of veteran teachers and alumni energized by nostalgia; and an urgent, unplanned charter application and authorization process that enabled the school to open without an accompanying vision or supporting plan that anticipated the needs of the new setting (Sarason, 1999).

Opening “with the bare minimum of staff” and attendant overcrowding by a new student population, Watson described the starting months as “such a mess.” The charter stipulation to hire veteran staff meant that she would be overseeing a portion of the staff that represented for her teachers she would not have selected. Efforts to implement structures and policies were met with intransigence by some teachers who exhibited an entitlement mentality regarding their jobs. Met with resistance, Watson relied on familiar bureaucratic structures, assigned certain tasks to her AP, and tapped part-time instructional coaches unable to devote full time attention to the overall instructional needs...
of a staff stymied by an entrenched mind-set of the “old way,” and younger teachers with little exposure to high school teaching and expectations.

In the face of this resistance, Watson pressed on, seeking partnerships, gaining celebrity endorsements for the school, and applying for and being awarded grants that would significantly improve the waterlogged facility and put the school in the limelight. Her efforts resulted in the renovation of the auditorium, a new, solar-paneled roof, and eventually, the construction and opening of an on-site health clinic (www.tulane.edu/news/newwave/090310_clinic.cfm). Though she admittedly found it a challenge to “keep up the pace” given the increased scope of her work as a conversion charter school leader, she eventually pushed through curricular changes. With these changes came greater connections with the outside community that hold promise for students to gain real-world experience in nearby industries.

At no time did Watson characterize her experience as a conversion charter school leader as freeing, liberating, or hugely different than her previous role, as did Eastlake and Gillbeau. Watson and her governing board appeared out of sync. Hoy and Sweetland (2001) found that role conflict can undermine efficient school operations by confusing participants. Additionally, as a school leader, Watson had been preoccupied with concerns about financial sustainability. She had also been engaged in a continuous reassessment of program offerings. Watson spoke of a need to “recreate” the school’s vision and has taken steps to infuse technology into the school, as well as to establish links with local businesses.

Watson’s narrative contained evidence of a leader unaware of the scope of her work as a conversion charter school leader, and the challenge to shift assumptions and
gain a new skill set. Her candidness about the difficult school start-up, such as, “we were in survival mode,” and “it was about getting books, making sure the children were in a safe environment” (W-4-5), spoke to a chaotic setting in which the establishment of order and routines took precedence. The reactive nature of her school’s creation seemed to provide barriers to her ability to innovate.

All three school leaders undertook the work of creating schools during a time of incomparable difficulties. Tasked with transforming learning opportunities for underserved students in a city with a legacy of pervasive academic failure, each leader has stayed the course for four years, demonstrating fortitude and perseverance. Their leadership work reveals distinct paths of personal and professional discovery in their attempts to shape schools that accountably demonstrate student achievement.

Conclusions

The experiences of these principals in creating schools during a time charged with turbulence, uncertainty and great enthusiasm for educational change are remarkable. Schlecty’s (2005) systems of schooling provided the framework through which the stories of these school leaders could be examined to understand school change. Their thoughts and actions regarding the circumstances of their school’s conversions, the changes they were able to make—or not to make—and the accountability they acknowledged as leaders of change, speak to changes that are possible within the systems of schooling. They also demonstrate the power of the past.

The experiences and perceptions of the three conversion charter school leaders in this study offered indications of shifts regarding some components of the grammar of schooling. These changes included the implementation of the TAP, the daily work of
instructional facilitators, and the ability to implement and design relevant curriculum. Additionally, the school leaders who had the ability to recruit and hire teachers and build a team of dedicated professionals consequently perceived increased levels of trust and professionalism in their organizations. All three school leaders attested to the fact that building and developing teacher leadership capacity to suit the needs of the school is a means to enhanced professionalism and student learning. Likewise, the school leaders granted the authority to dismiss teachers who failed to respond to systematic professional development saw this as a positive impact for students.

The two school leaders who implemented systems to induct, orient, and provide on-going support and development of teachers throughout the school year perceived improved collegiality and professionalism in their organizations. These leaders expressed satisfaction and confidence in teacher effectiveness and student achievement when instructional practice was guided by trained master or mentor teachers. Gillbeau noted increased graduation rates and Eastlake noted unprecedented student passing rates on standardized tests as indicators of positive change in their conversion charter schools. At the high school level, the ability to change and adapt both curriculum and the time spent on instruction appeared to be an important component of promoting student learning. At the elementary school level, learning-style assessments and on-going professional development through the assistance of instructional facilitators that equipped teachers to craft instruction to meet those styles appeared to promote student success. While unique in their telling and experiences, the stories of these three school leaders shed light on the current school climate of public education in New Orleans. In an era of ever increasing accountability and continued state takeovers of failing schools around the country these
stories provide insight into the hurdles and innovative possibilities that accompany change efforts in general.

**Future Studies**

All of the school leader participants in this study experienced life interruptions and rapid, unanticipated change in their professional lives. This study focused solely on the experiences of school leaders who accepted the challenge of leadership in the aftermath of the destruction and disruptions wrought by Hurricane Katrina. The study did not examine the psycho-social impact of unprecedented life-interruption, nor did it examine the impact of school change on the lives of students and teachers. Further studies examining the impact of life interruption and abrupt change on the lives of students and teachers are needed. While Hurricane Katrina served as a catalyst for educational change in New Orleans, students and teachers around the country are experiencing life interruptions as continued state takeovers of failing schools become the means by which school accountability is enforced.

This study examined the change efforts of leaders of conversion charter schools. In subsequent years, the entry of newly authorized start-up charters in the city—specifically authorized to build individual schools one grade level at a time—has contributed to an increase in the number of school choices available to parents and students ([www.coweninstitute.org](http://www.coweninstitute.org)). Future studies on the changes occurring in schools in post-Katrina New Orleans should examine the perceptions of leaders in these start-up schools.

The Teacher Advancement Program mentioned in this study aims to boost student achievement through the development and evaluation of teachers, and monetarily reward
those teachers who raise student scores. A recent federal grant to promote effective
teaching will expand the TAP to other charter schools and districts in the metropolitan
New Orleans area, throughout Louisiana, and throughout many school districts in the
United States. Further study on effective teacher practices and on the effect of monetary
incentives on teacher accountability is an area ripe for research (http://www.nola.com/

Research into parent involvement in charter schools would also be appropriate
given the lack of parental participation expressed by the two high school leaders. The
collection of data on community involvement in both the start up and support of charter
schools would add to our understanding of how charters gain and sustain acceptance in
urban neighborhoods. A longitudinal study on charter schools in the city and their
sustainability is needed.

As charter schools continue to be formed and cultivated in New Orleans, an
important follow-up to this study will be to research the schools’ impact on student
achievement. New Orleans leads the country in the number and growth of charter
schools as the dominant provider of educational services. Studies of precisely how these
schools are faring in meeting the needs of all students must be undertaken in order to
illumine and inform the school choice debate.

Finally, the small participant sample in this study calls for greater investigation in
to how other school leaders are engaging in the change efforts underway in the city’s
public schools. Five years after Hurricane Katrina, new schools and new leaders are
entering the challenge of improving the lives of students through quality education. It is
important to continue to explore what is being done differently to engage students in learning and to what effect.

**Reflection**

To say that school leadership, particularly leadership in urban settings characterized by student under-performance, is difficult and challenging is to state the obvious. Listening to the stories of the three participants, I became aware of the strength of their respective characters. They are people who responded to a crisis and took on the mantle of leadership in a time of hardship and uncertainty. I feel privileged to have listened to and learned from the school leaders in this study. Theirs were stories of hope, hard work, reflectiveness, perseverance, and adaptability. Leading a school, its teachers, and its students into a new educational era is for some school leaders “like walking a tightrope,” and for others, “liberating.” This research reinforces that a leader’s compatibility with the school’s organizational model, an understanding of the scope of one’s work, and a clear vision of the future contribute to leaders’ perceptions of both personal and organizational effectiveness. There are many more stories to be told, and all of them hold clues to understanding how the learning lives of children might benefit from new schools that have emerged following the storm that exposed decades of neglect.
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### Appendix A

**Glossary of Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACSA</td>
<td>Algiers Charter School Association: An association formed after Hurricane Katrina and granted authorization by the OPSB to oversee the management previously OPSB controlled schools placed in conversion status. The ACSA is led by a seven-member board of trustees.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Advanced Placement: College level classes taught by teachers trained to offer them to students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>Academically Unacceptable: Schools were given four years by the Louisiana Department of Education to raise scores, but failing to progress earned them an “unacceptable” status, making them eligible for state takeover.</td>
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<tr>
<td>BESE</td>
<td>Board of Elementary and Secondary Education: Established as a constitutional body during the 1973 Constitutional Convention of the Louisiana Legislature, BESE became the administrative policy-making body for elementary-secondary schools. In accordance with the Constitution, eight elected members from the eight BESE districts serve on the Board along with three members-at-large appointed by the Governor. The Board sets key education initiatives and strives to provide leadership in setting an education agenda for the continuous improvement of public education as measured by student and school achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CWA</td>
<td>City-Wide Access School: The designation given to Orleans Parish schools identified as “magnet schools” designed to attract and serve high achieving students.</td>
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<td>GEE</td>
<td>Graduate Exit Exam: Standardized exam students must pass to earn a high school diploma in Louisiana.</td>
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<td>GLE</td>
<td>Grade Level Expectation: A statement that defines what all students should know and be able to do at the end of a given grade level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IF</td>
<td>Instructional Facilitator: Delineates the role and responsibility of master teachers serving as classroom instructional coaches, helping develop teachers and oversee curriculum delivery.</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEAP</td>
<td>Louisiana Educational Assessment Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOPS</td>
<td>New Orleans Public Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPSB</td>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board</td>
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**RSD**  
Recovery School District: Created by legislation passed in 2003, this is a special state school district administered by the Louisiana Department of Education dedicated to turning underperforming schools into successful schools.

**SPS**  
School Performance Score: A score awarded to a school based on criteria that include students’ standardized test scores, attendance, and for high school, graduation rate.

**TAP**  
The Teacher Advancement Program: [TAP™: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement](https://www.niet.org/tap), was created in 1990 by a consortium of grant foundations and is now operated by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET). The program assists school districts in attracting, retaining, developing and motivating talented people into the teaching profession.
Appendix B

Principal Interview Protocols

Principal Interview Protocol (Interview I/ Temporal- Present)

1. Please introduce yourself and tell about your work in school leadership.

2. Please describe your present role as a school leader.

3. Please tell me the story of how you came to be in this role.

4. Please describe how you recruit and induct new teachers to your school? Please share a story if you have one.

5. Please tell me about how you organize teacher professional development?

6. Please tell me about your work with organizing scheduling/ curricular and/or programmatic offerings?

7. Please describe classroom instructional practice and tell me about how decisions about classroom instructional practice are made within the school?

8. Please tell me about policies and procedures guiding teacher/student interaction and how these policies and procedures are arrived at?

9. Please tell me about the role teachers play in school decision-making.

10. Please tell me about the evaluation of school personnel.

11. Please tell me about the evaluation of curricular/programmatic offerings.

12. Please tell me about your role in making decisions about your school’s mission and vision?

13. Please tell me about your role in determining how resources are allocated.

14. Please tell me about your role in school efforts to build parent and community involvement.
Principal Interview Protocol (Interview II/ Temporal- Past)

1. When thinking about your current work, what stands out as a different from your former work? Or... In thinking about your current leadership role, are there differences from your previous work?

2. Please tell me about your past school leadership experience in recruiting and inducting school staff?

3. Please tell me about your past school leadership experience in organizing teacher professional development?

4. Please tell me about your past work with organizing scheduling/ curricular and/or programmatic offerings within the school?

5. Please describe classroom instructional practice in your past school leadership role and how decisions about classroom instructional practice were made.

6. Please describe your past leadership role in determining policies and procedures guiding teacher/student interaction and how these policies and procedures are arrived at?

7. Please tell me about the role teachers played in school decision-making in your past leadership role.

8. Please describe how teachers were evaluated in your previous leadership role as a district administrator.

9. Please tell me about the evaluation of curricular/programmatic offerings in your previous district leadership role.

10. Please tell me about your experience in making decisions about your school’s mission and vision in your past leadership role.

11. Please tell me about your experience in determining how resources were allocated in your past leadership role.

12. Please tell me about your experience in school efforts to build parent and community involvement in your past leadership role.
Principal Interview Protocol (Interview III/ Intended Future)

1. Please tell me about your perception of the effect your work is having on student achievement?

2. Please tell me about your perception of the effect your work is having on teacher development?

3. Please talk about what you are learning in your current leadership role.

4. Please share a story about this leadership experience that illustrates a difference in this role compared with your previous role.

5. Please tell me about your future vision for the school.

6. Please tell me about a leadership insight that you have had in leading this conversion charter school.

7. Please share any final thoughts about your experience as a conversion charter school leader.
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

DISertation Research
Title: Conversion Charter School Leaders’ Perceptions of School Change: A Narrative Inquiry

You are invited to participate in a study that will describe the experiences of conversion charter school leaders in New Orleans Public Schools. The stories of these experiences school leaders are the focus of the study.

The study is conducted by Bridget Ramsey. Results will be used in a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy granted by the Morgridge College of Education of the University of Denver, Colorado. Bridget Ramsey can be reached at bridgetramsey@gmail.com or 720-935-0330. The study is supervised by dissertation committee advisor, Dr. Susan Korach, Department of Graduate Education, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, CO 80208. Dr. Korach can be reached at skorach@du.edu.

Participation in this study will consist of a minimum of three interviews scheduled at your convenience during the months of January, February, or March 2010. Each of the three interviews is anticipated to be 1-2 hours in length. Participation will involve responding to open ended prompts regarding your experiences as a district principal and a conversion charter school principal and your hopes for the future. You will be able to review the interview transcriptions for accuracy. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience any discomfort, you may discontinue any of the interviews at any time. Refusal to participate or withdraw from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be identified by code number only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you, and pseudonyms will be used for the schools and people mentioned during your interviews. Confidentiality cannot be assured due to the small number of qualified participants; however, you will be allowed to review the interview transcriptions for accuracy and consent to the publication of your responses. Only the researcher, Bridget Ramsey, will have access to your individual data. Further, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the court order or subpoena. While no questions interview questions address it, I am required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, by law this must be reported to the authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of
Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to either the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208.

Please sign and return this form if you agree to participate and keep a copy for your records.

Signature __________________ Printed Name __________________

Date ______________

____ I agree to be audio taped. ______ I do not agree to be audio taped.

I agree to notify my governing board of the purpose of this study and my participation. Signature ____________________________

I would like a summary of the results of the study to me emailed to me at the following email address:______________________________
Dear _____:

The purpose of this letter is to extend an invitation to you to participate in a research project I am conducting for my dissertation in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Denver Morgridge College of Education. I am researching the lived experiences of conversion charter school leaders with previous experience in district schools so that the stories of their leadership work can be studied for the purpose of understanding school change. I believe this study will contribute to the literature on urban school change efforts and the role played by school leaders in improving learning opportunities for children and young adults. I believe voices like yours are important in gaining a true understanding of this critical topic.

I have attached an Informed Consent Form for you to sign should you agree to participate, along with a postage paid envelope. I will follow up with you with an email and a phone call to inquire about your interest in this project and would be happy to meet with you to discuss the project and your participation.

Sincerely,

Bridget Ramsey