

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:

MARKET CONDITIONS AND POLITICAL
FORCES: CHARTER SCHOOL RESTARTS IN
WASHINGTON, DC

Jessica Greer Sutter, Doctor of Philosophy, 2018

Dissertation directed by:

Associate Professor, Robert Croninger, PhD,
Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy
and Leadership

Charter schools provide public education choices to educational consumers, school-aged children and their families. As independently run and publicly funded schools of choice, charter schools straddle the line between government and private enterprise and are held accountable by a combination of market mechanisms and bureaucratic accountability. Schools that fail to satisfy public standards or consumers may close, causing disruption to students and families. Recently, some charter school closures have resulted in charter restarts, the acquisition of the assets of a closed school by a new, proven or promising school operator serving substantially the same student population. This qualitative case study examines eight charter school closures and five charter school restarts in Washington, DC between 2013 and 2016. The study aims to answer three exploratory research questions: Why are some schools restarted and others closed outright? Who decides which charter schools are closed and which are restarted? How do they make these decisions? The study finds that numerous actors are involved in decisions about charter school restarts, including the boards of closing schools, the authorizer, other government entities, and various private actors. Communities and families, however, lack proactive roles in the decision-making process. Decisions are made based on a varied combination of market and political forces, though there is often more of an illusion of process than an actual one. The study also finds that market factors, a complex set of political interactions and conditions, including varying levels of social capital among actors, and issues of race are all at work in determining why some schools close and others restart.

MARKET CONDITIONS AND POLITICAL FORCES: CHARTER SCHOOL
RESTARTS IN WASHINGTON, DC

by

Jessica Greer Sutter

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2018

Advisory Committee:
Professor Robert Croninger, Chair
Ethan Hutt, PhD
Betty Malen, PhD
Associate Dean, Margaret McLaughlin
Dean, Jennifer King Rice

Copyright © 2018
Jessica Greer Sutter
All Rights Reserved

Dedication

To my students, from Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC: the experience and the joy and of having taught all of you has committed me to the work of improving education, in all the ways I can, for as long as I can.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of the leadership and staff of the DC Public Charter School Board and the broader DC charter school community. To all the individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this study, who spoke with me about the research, and who warmly inquired as to how the writing was going, I owe my profound gratitude. I feel fortunate to count many of you as both colleagues and friends. I would also like to thank my clients and friends who were exceedingly patient with me over the past year, and who never failed to ask for the latest update on my work.

I offer special thanks to a few essential people. To my Committee – Betty, Jennifer, Ethan and Maggie, thank you for your willingness to engage in my research interests and to help me strengthen my writing and my arguments. To my advisor – Bob, thank you for sticking with me through a long process. Your guidance, support and good humor helped make this document a reality. To Katryna, Beth, Cara, Reuben, and Kristin, thank you for all the support and encouragement as fellow Terps. It means more than you know. To Kate, Kendra, Jess, Margaret, Lauren, Sari, Gillian, Maura and Scheherazade, the awesome women of my virtual cheer squad - your encouragement pushed me across this finish line. To Derrell, having one of my favorite writers listen to my musings, read my writing, and help me navigate tangles of complex ideas was truly a gift this past year. To Joanne, I could not have asked for a better mentor and colleague at my side during the dissertation process. To Lindsay, Michael and Jack and to Mom and Dad – your love and belief in me has been a constant in a changeable process. Thank you all.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
List of Abbreviations	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
The Problem of Charter School Closures	2
Charter-to-Charter School Restarts	6
Overview of the Study	9
Significance of Study	11
My Interest in Charter School Restarts	12
Organization of Study	13
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature	15
Seminal Literature on Charter Schools	16
Charter Tensions: Accountability and the Market	20
Literature on Charter School Closures	25
Reasons for Charter School Closures	27
Charter Closures, Traditional Public Closures and Academic Outcomes	32
Effects of Charter Closures on Students	35
Qualitative Analysis of the Dynamics of Charter School Closures	40
Cross-currents Across Studies of Closures	43
Literature on Charter School Restarts	44
Context for Restarts	45
Key Elements	46
Recommendations	49
Framing a Study of Restarts	49
A Conceptual Framework	51
Summary	55
Chapter 3: Methodology	58
Research Design: Case Study	58
Site Selection: Washington, DC	59
Enablers in the Charter Marketplace	63
Market Enabler: Funding	64
Market Enabler: Choice	64
Market Enabler: Transportation	65
Market Enabler: Partnerships	65
Market Enabler: Effective Authorizer	66
Nested Cases: Charter School Closures and Restarts in DC	68
Data Collection and Analysis	72
Data Collection	73

Data Sources and Methods	73
Documents and Audio Visual Records	74
Interviews	76
Analysis: Case Study Database and Chain of Evidence	79
Position of Researcher	80
Credibility of Results	81
Summary	82
Chapter 4: Charter School Restarts in DC	84
The Restarts	84
Septima Clark Public Charter School	85
Impetus and Process	85
Factors Influencing Restart	95
Imagine Southeast Public Charter School	97
Impetus and Process	98
Factors Influencing Restart	103
Arts and Technology Public Charter School	104
Impetus and Process	105
Factors Influencing Restart	111
Options Public Charter School	113
Impetus and Process	114
Factors Influencing Restart	120
Dorothy Height Community Academy Public Charter School	122
Impetus and Process	122
Factors Influencing Restart	126
The Closures	129
Booker T. Washington Public Charter School	129
Impetus for Closure	129
Factors Influencing Closure	133
Tree of Life Public Charter School	134
Impetus for Closure	134
Factors Influencing Closure	138
Potomac Prep Public Charter School	140
Impetus for Closure	140
Factors Influencing Closure	143
Summary	144
Chapter 5: Cross-Case Analysis	146
The Who: Who Decides on Restarts? Who is Left Out of these Decisions?	146
Boards of Closing Schools: Fired but Charged with Hiring Their Successor	146
Authorizer: Nudging and Encouraging	147
School Leaders and Restart Operator Boards: Business Decision-makers	148
Local Government Agencies: Occasional Decision-makers	149
Private Sector Actors: A “Cottage Industry”	150
Families and Communities: Largely Excluded From the Room Where It Happens	151

The How: How do Actors Decide on Restarts?	154
Boards of Closing Schools: Murky Decision Processes and Unclear Criteria	154
Restart Operators: Considering Market and Political Interests	155
Authorizer: “Nudger” and Approver	157
Government Actors: Opaque Interpretation of the Public Interest	159
Funders and Consultants: Facilitating School Decisions	160
The Why: Why Do Some Schools Close and Others Restart?	161
Market Factors	161
Political Factors	166
Race and Relationships	169
Chapter 6: Discussion	175
Overview of Findings	175
Contributions to the Literature	182
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations of the Study	183
Recommendations for Future Research	184
Appendix A: Interview Protocols	188
References	193

List of Tables

Table 3.1 Charter School Closures in Washington, DC (1996-2016)	p.74
Table 3.2 Charter School Closures and Restarts Included in this Study	p.76
Table 3.3 Overview of Data Sources Used to Address Research Questions	p.77
Table 3.4 Document Evidence (by Case)	p.79
Table 3.5 Semi-Structured Interviews	p.80
Table 4.1 Charter School Restarts in Washington, DC (2013-2016)	p.88
Table 4.2 Charter School Closures in Washington, DC (2013-2016)	p.129

List of Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

p. 55

List of Abbreviations

APrep	Achievement Prep Public Charter School
ATA	Arts and Technology Public Charter School
Booker T	Booker T Washington Public Charter School
CREDO	Center for Research on Education Outcomes
CAPCS	Community Academy Public Charter School
DPrep	Democracy Prep Public Charter School
DGS	Department of General Services
DME	Deputy Mayor for Education
DC	District of Columbia
OAG	Office of the Attorney General
Options	Options Public Charter School
OSSE	Office of the State Superintendent of Education
PCSB	Public Charter School Board
PK3; PK4	Pre-Kindergarten for 3-year and 4-year olds, respectively
SRA	School Reform Act
Septima	Septima Clark Public Charter School
TOL	Tree of Life Public Charter School

Chapter 1: Introduction

When the Arts and Technology Public Charter School (ATA) in Washington, DC applied to its authorizer for renewal of its 15-year charter in 2013, it was met with disappointing news. The DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) declared that the school had failed to meet its performance goals, would not be renewed, and must close at the end of the 2013-14 school year. The school served more than 400 students in preschool through grade 5; the board was devastated. The school had recently renovated its facility and had hired new leadership to address self-identified weaknesses in its academic program. What would become of the promises the board and staff had made to the families of students who chose this unique charter school?

School closures are a hotly contested phenomenon, for both charter schools and traditional public schools (CREDO, 2017). While school closures occur for many reasons, including academic failure, budget cuts, or mismanagement, they are undoubtedly disruptive for staff, students, and families. Nonetheless, according to market-based education theories, school closures should take place whenever a charter school fails to meet the standards of its charter (Manno, Finn & Vanourek, 2001) or fails to satisfy its market (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kolderie, 1990). In the case of ATA, something different happened. Rather than closing the school outright, a different charter operator acquired the school's assets and restarted the school as KIPP DC, thus avoiding some of the disruption but complying largely with the market assumption that failing charters schools should be closed.

In this dissertation, I explore a policy initiative being promoted as an alternative to the outright closure of charter schools: the acquisition and restart of a closing charter

school by a new operator. Charter school restarts have become an increasingly popular strategy for charter school closures in Washington, DC. Between 2013 and 2016 there were eight charter school closures, five of which were restarted, including ATA. In this qualitative case study, I examine each of these closures and ask why some charter schools were restarted and why others were not. I develop case studies for each, in which I describe the decision makers, the decision process and the possible reasons for closing and restarting a charter school. These case studies provide important insights into the various factors that influence decisions to close or restart charter schools.

Before providing more detail about the study, I briefly describe charter schools and the problems posed by charter school closures. I then address the phenomenon of charter school restarts, a relatively new and understudied policy initiative for addressing the problems posed by charter school closures. Next, I describe the purpose of this dissertation study and its potential to advance the literature on charter school closures and restarts. I conclude this introductory chapter with an explanation of my interest in charter school restarts and provide a brief overview of the remainder of the dissertation.

The Problem of Charter School Closures

Charter schools are one of several market-based approaches that have been promoted as a means of reforming public education in the United States. Charter schools, as independently run and publicly funded schools of choice, straddle the line between government and private enterprise. Charter schools provide public education choices to educational consumers – school-aged children and their families. In lieu of tuition, charter schools receive public funding for each child who chooses to attend the school. If consumers do not choose the school, whether because of program offerings, location, or

academic performance, the school might face a lack of demand, subsequent financial difficulties, and perhaps the ultimate closure of the school.

The number of charter schools nationwide has grown rapidly since the first such school opened its doors in Minnesota in 1991. In 2000, 1,542 charter schools served 300,000 students in 29 states and the District of Columbia (DC) (approximately one percent of all public school students). By 2013-14, 6,440 charter schools served more than 2.3 million students in 42 states and DC (just over five percent of students in public schools) (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). Today, charter schools, especially in cities like Washington, DC, represent a fundamental school reform strategy: providing a marketplace within which families can choose alternatives to traditional public schools.

One reason for the growth in charter enrollment may be that charter schools provide an attractive alternative to some traditional public schools in terms of performance as measured by student achievement. A study of urban charter schools in 41 regions of the country showed a positive impact on student learning in both reading and mathematics, on average, when compared to traditional urban public schools. The achievement effects amounted to 40 additional days of learning in mathematics and 28 additional days of learning in reading for students attending charter schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2015).

However, not all charter schools demonstrate achievement gains. The same study noted variations in quality across the country; eight regions saw charter school levels of growth in reading comparable to the public schools in their local district and ten urban regions showed smaller learning gains in reading than their local district counterparts

(CREDO, 2015). The study found similar variation for learning gains in mathematics, with similar levels of growth in four charter sectors and smaller learning gains in 11 urban charter sectors.

An earlier study by CREDO (2013) reported comparable results. It examined student learning gains in charter schools across 26 states. A quarter of all charter schools had significantly stronger gains in reading compared to local district schools but more than half showed no significant difference in gains and nearly one fifth showed significantly weaker gains compared to local district schools. Mathematics results were also a mixed picture, with slightly more than a quarter of charter schools showing significant learning gains compared to local district schools, two fifths showing no difference in learning gains and nearly one third showed weaker gains compared to local district schools. In other words, while on average charter schools demonstrated greater gains in reading and mathematics for students, gains in some charter schools were more likely to be comparable to or worse than those found in traditional public schools.

If charter schools were operating from a purely market-based perspective, where parent consumers make decisions based on student performance measured by standardized test-scores, academically underperforming charter schools would close because of market pressures. Families would seek other higher performing schools in which to enroll their children. But, for a variety of reasons, parents often do not do so. Parents may choose to enroll their children in an academically underperforming charter school because students there share similar interests and characteristics to their own children, because they perceive the school as safer, because they find the school conveniently located, or because they desire a unique curriculum offered by the school

(Glazerman & Dotter, 2016). Parents with students enrolled in underperforming charter schools may feel that the time and effort associated with finding an alternative school is too great or of dubious reward, or they may not have any better choices than their current school. If parent consumers continue to choose schools that do not meet publicly established standards of accountability, charter school authorizers may step in to close low performing schools against parents' wishes. Thus, underperforming charter schools pose a unique challenge to authorizers who must both promote market-based principles and protect public interests and resources.

Since charter schools are publicly funded, state governments regulate the market within which they operate. Charter school operators must petition a state-designated charter authorizer for permission to open. Charter authorizers have authority to open, oversee, and close charter schools within the state. Depending on the specifics of state law, school districts, universities, non-profit organizations, or independent charter boards may all be charter authorizers. If granted a "charter" by an authorizer, operators sign a contract for a fixed term of years. The contract offers the charter school increased levels of autonomy compared to traditional public schools in exchange for certain contractual conditions. Contractual conditions typically require specific levels of academic growth and achievement for students and, in return, give operators autonomy over staff hiring, curriculum selection, and other school-based policies. The essence of the "charter bargain" (Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 2001) between operators and authorizers is simple: perform to the expectations of the contract and the school stays open; fail to meet the expectations of the contract and the school will be closed. Under this formula, it might be

reasonable to expect that a significant number of schools would not meet the contractual terms and would close annually. The closure process is rarely as straightforward.

While not all charter schools have been academically successful, poor academic performers do not always close. According to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), the annual rate of charter school closures has fluctuated, varying from two percent to four percent annually between 2008 and 2013 (NACSA, 2013). Most of these closures occurred when authorizers considered the renewal of a charter contract; the closure rate outside of the contract renewal period is two percent (NACSA, 2013). The rarity of charter school closures makes intuitive sense. School closures of any kind are difficult propositions that result in public outcry and political pushback (Rotherham, 2005). Authorizers may encounter pressure to keep schools open (Osborne, 2012). Authorizers also may think that the lowest performing charter schools may be better alternatives for families compared to local public school options. These pressures might then lead authorizers to seek alternatives to closing a school outright.

Charter-to-Charter School Restarts

In 2013, the year ATA applied for charter renewal, 57 charter schools operated on 102 campuses serving more than 40 percent of public school students in DC. After announcing the decision not to renew the charter of ATA, the Executive Director of the PCSB met with the school's board of trustees to offer an alternative to shutting the doors of their school building forever. Prior to the vote, PCSB had encouraged the school's board to consider an "asset acquisition," a term PCSB uses to refer to charter-to-charter restarts. PCSB offered the ATA board a chance to issue a request for proposals (RFP) to identify charter school operators in DC who might be interested in taking over the school

building, its mortgage and other debts, in exchange for all the school's assets: its equipment, its privately fundraised dollars, and all its students. ATA would cease to exist, its board would dissolve, and its staff would not necessarily keep their jobs, but the school would continue to operate for the students and families currently coming to the building each day.

What PCSB calls an “asset acquisition” fits the emerging national definition of what others call “charter-to-charter restarts” (Doyle & Field, 2013). According to this definition, a charter school restart is the acquisition of the assets of a closed charter school by a new, proven or promising school operator, which runs a school for substantially the same student population (Doyle & Field, 2013). The authorizer typically grants the new school permission to operate in the same location as the closed school. The charter school restart allows for a failed charter school to face the ultimate consequence of closure but immediately replaces it with a new school, in the same building, operated by new management. The charter restart option, at least in theory, avoids some of the difficulties associated with closing charter schools – the loss of material investments in schools, universal dismissal of staff, and the large numbers of families who must find a new school for their children to attend.

Charter restarts may be a kind of evolution, or at least a further modification of the market model. According to the theory of school choice, successful schools flourish and struggling schools fail and close (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kolderie, 1990). While the description of the market model for schools does not traditionally include mergers and acquisitions for distressed schools, corporate markets surely include these exit strategies. Restarts seem to incorporate mergers and acquisitions as another means of exit from the

marketplace for struggling providers, an exit that addresses factors that can hamper outright closures. In a charter school restart, a failing charter school can seek a “buyer,” another charter operator, for its valuable assets: school facilities, an established student population, or a niche in the marketplace. Prospective buyers can quickly acquire assets that might otherwise take years to build from scratch, and enter the marketplace with some positive optics, such as having prevented students and families from being put out of a school building. Restarts may provide a plausible solution to some of the more negative aspects of closing charter schools while maintaining the “horse trade” expectations of the “charter bargain” (Manno, Finn & Vanourek, 2001).

However, the appearance of charter school restarts may also be a mark of economic and political forces at work that go well beyond addressing the disruptions caused by closing a school. As charter school markets mature, tensions may develop within the marketplace. Many operators are vying for limited resources, such as a customer base of students and families, suitable and affordable school facilities, and public dollars to operate their programs (NACSA, 2017). Charter school restart may be a way for top charter operators to expand their share of the market without stretching resources too thin (Doyle & Field, 2013). Operators can expand via acquisition of lower quality competitors, rather than opening new, “fresh start” schools. Restarts also might appeal to charter authorizers who have a regulatory responsibility to monitor the quality of their charter school portfolio (Doyle & Field, 2013). Rather than closing a poorly performing school and hoping that the next new school they authorize will be successful, authorizers can expand a proven provider to replace the closed school and immediately improve the quality of the portfolio. Operators’ and authorizers’ interest in expanding the

market share of top providers also may be a force behind the emergence of charter school restarts.

Overview of the Study

The national debate about charter schools has focused on academic achievement rates and characteristics of students enrolled in charter schools as compared to traditional public schools. Far less attention has been given to the fate of *underperforming* charter schools and what to do with them. While there is a substantial literature on how to “turn around” underperforming traditional public schools, there is no comparable literature about how to address underperforming charter schools – in part, because such schools are supposed to be allowed to fail through market pressures or be closed by charter authorizers. Few studies have investigated the role of the charter school market and its regulators – charter authorizers – in dealing with schools that do not succeed academically.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the emergent phenomenon of charter school restarts. I was particularly interested in understanding why charter school restarts have emerged as an alternative to outright charter school closure, to explore who makes decisions on whether a school restarts, and to understand what factors – economic and political – influence the decision to restart. By examining the factors that influenced the decision to close outright or restart an underperforming charter school, I also hoped to understand the role played by the charter authorizer in decisions about charter school restarts. Policy makers and advocates are paying increasing attention to the role authorizers play in managing charter marketplaces, especially as charter market share grows in various jurisdictions (NACSA, 2017). I wondered whether the new

opportunities for acquisition of struggling schools and the role authorizers played in these acquisition transactions might represent a significant evolution in the functioning of charter school markets, especially in well-established marketplaces with growing enrollment and numerous operators competing for resources.

Washington, DC has a rich charter school marketplace – a marketplace that Finn and Manno (2015) might even describe as vibrant, with a well-organized authorizing structure including rules and regulations to guide school closures. Within this marketplace, charter-to-charter restarts have emerged as a tool for addressing charter school closures. But, not every school that closes restarts. Between 1998 and 2012, twenty-seven charter schools in Washington, DC closed. Three of these schools attempted restarts. One succeeded in completing a transaction that transferred assets, including some students, to another school; the other two schools were unsuccessful in the attempt and closed outright.¹ Between 2013 and 2016, five charter school closures resulted in restarts. It is sometimes said of an idea that “its time had come.” For the idea of charter school restarts in Washington, DC, 2013 seems to have been “its time”.

I developed a qualitative case study of these charter restarts in Washington, DC to answer one exploratory research question: Why are some schools restarted and others closed outright? I also asked two questions which I expected would help me with my exploration of the phenomenon: Who decides which charter schools are closed and which are restarted? How do they make these decisions? I sought answers to these questions by reviewing a variety of public documents related to the closure and restart of these schools. I also spoke with staff and board members of the charter authorizer, governing

¹ I was unable to find any official written record of these restart attempts, but multiple informants confirmed the number and outcomes of these efforts in their interviews.

board members and leaders from charter schools that closed and those that restarted, and with local organization leaders and government officials familiar with charter school restarts. From this base of evidence, I was able to generate some insights on my research questions and a deeper understanding of the emergence of restarts as a policy alternative to closure in the Washington, DC charter marketplace.

Significance of Study

As the charter school movement nears its 30th year, the conversation about whether charter schools perform on par with or better than traditional public schools is not the only conversation of importance. The field needs research that moves beyond simply comparing the effectiveness of charter schools and traditional schools by achievement and enrollment characteristics and, instead, investigates the implementation of various charter school policies. Researchers have recognized this gap in the literature and have made calls for research on charter school oversight and closure (Teske, Schneider & Cassese, 2005) and for “meso-level research that examines how policies are interpreted and implemented at district levels” (Weitzel & Lubienski, 2010, p.225). The field needs empirical research on both charter closure and restarts to better understand how and why the restart concept has taken hold, what role authorizers and other actors play in closures and restarts, and how decisions are made regarding restarts. While proponents of charter school restarts have made multiple claims about its benefits, very little is known about the process of an alternative operator acquiring the assets of a struggling charter school.

As charter schools continue to expand, charter school authorizers are likely to recognize the need for additional school closures, particularly if authorizers are

committed to guaranteeing a high level of school quality in the school choices that they offer students and families. It seems likely that the use of charter school restarts to address low-performing charter schools may expand. At present, little scholarly literature addresses charter school closures and no peer reviewed literature addresses charter school restarts. Studying the phenomenon of charter restart and the various competing interests at work in the closure and restart process will add to the literature in the field. By examining charter school restarts in a mature, well-developed charter school marketplace, this case study stands to provide an important contribution to the research literature on an emerging trend in charter school policy and a potential evolution of the market model in public education.

My Interest in Charter School Restarts

For the past three and a half years, I have worked with the authorizer in DC, the PCSB, to manage the closure of several public charter schools. In my role as a contractor, I am charged with ensuring that schools whose charters have been revoked or not renewed by the PCSB successfully complete the “wind-down” process required by the authorizer. I am also responsible for managing a temporary staff of enrollment specialists, hired by PCSB, to assist families affected by school closures in finding new schools for their children. As part of this work, I have seen the effects of school closures from an up-close-and-personal perspective and have heard a great deal of sadness, frustration, and confusion from school staff, parents, and students alike.

During the first year of my closure work with the PCSB, the authorizer approved its first charter school restart, what the PCSB formally calls an “asset acquisition.” I was directly involved with the meetings held to notify parents of the acquisition of the school;

with the review of the legal documents describing the acquisition; and with the policy discussions held between PCSB, the closing and acquiring schools, and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

I have many questions about the process of both outright closures and charter restarts after three and a half years of participating in both. I am also left with a deeper curiosity about what else may be at work in the decision to actively pursue additional restarts before data are available with which to judge the effects of charter restarts on student academic outcomes. My curiosity about the work and continuing connection to the authorizer has lead me to want to study the phenomenon in greater detail and to do so in a way that might contribute to future policy decisions about restarts in DC and that may contribute to the body of research on charter school policy. These interests are the primary motivations for my study.

Organization of Study

This dissertation aims to shed light on the use of charter school restarts and to provide insights into how charter school restarts fit into the broader literature on charter schools and charter school policy. The second chapter reviews the existing literature on charter school closures and restarts and introduces a conceptual framework for examining charter restarts in DC. Chapter three describes the selection of the case of Washington, DC and outlines the methods used to study the closures and restarts of schools within the city's charter marketplace. The fourth chapter explores the closures of eight DC charter schools between 2013 and 2016, and the subsequent restart of five of the schools by new charter operators. Chapter five offers an analysis of the closures and restarts considering the research questions using a framework of both market and political forces. The final

chapter provides a discussion of the research findings and their possible implications for research and charter school policy.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

While charter restarts are a nascent topic for research, other research literature on charter schools is helpful to understanding the phenomenon of restarts. As publicly funded and independently operated schools, charter schools straddle a line between public and private, between the government and market spheres. Understanding the theoretical literature which considers this public-private tension seems important to making sense of the way charter school actors will behave when deciding whether to restart a charter school after its closure. But the reasons charter schools close also may have bearing on whether they subsequently restart, so I also considered the empirical literature on closures and restarts in my review.

To situate my study amidst the existing research literature, I first reviewed the theoretical literature on charter schools. Several seminal texts (Budde, 1988; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kolderie, 1990) describe the theoretical charter school model and how it might be implemented in policy. Two additional texts examine, from two different angles, the political and market tensions present in the territory between public and private sectors that charter schools occupy (Henig, Holyoke, Lacireno-Pacquet, & Moser, 2003; Hess, 2001;). I then conducted an open-ended search for literature on charter school closures and restarts. Literature on both topics exists, but it is limited and fragmented. Charter school restarts are new and relatively rare, so the lack of research on the phenomenon is understandable. Charter school closures are less rare, but have not been studied as thoroughly as charter school performance or student enrollment and demographics. The existing literature on charter school closures examines the reasons charter schools close, the role of academics in closure decisions, and the effects of

closures on students. One study I found examines the dynamics involved in the act of closing a school. Together, the theoretical and empirical literature helped me construct a framework to explore charter school restarts in Washington, DC.

Seminal Literature on Charter Schools

The first charter school opened in 1991, but people raised the idea of using markets to improve productivity and efficiency in public schools decades earlier. Several seminal texts oft cited by those seeking to describe the origins of charter schools include writings focused on pure market reforms (Friedman, 1962), such as vouchers, as well as those describing schools operating on contract, those which we now call charter schools (Budde, 1988; Kolderie, 1990). The theoretical literature on school choice describes minimal public regulation of the choice marketplace and, notably, does not account for regulation of school closures.

During the 1960s, Milton Friedman (1962) described a school system in which publicly funded schools were run outside of government control and worked on an economic model of supply and demand. Friedman proposes a universal voucher system that disconnected the provision of educational programming from its source of financing. Friedman advocates for publicly financed vouchers that would give families a choice of educational institutions, all privately operated.

More than twenty years later, a professor of education, Ray Budde (1988) outlined a proposal for reforming school districts by allowing teachers autonomy to propose and run their own schools. Pulling from a variety of reports, Budde suggests reorganizing the local school district to facilitate the potential for long-term progress in American education reform and outlined a ten-year process of superintendent-led change

in a fictional school district. He describes “substantial changes in the roles of teachers, principals, the superintendent, the school board, parents, and others in the community” (p.16), including greater autonomy and agency in teacher decision-making and strengthening grass roots leadership that would give parents new roles as representatives on school councils and as school selectors. While Budde frames parental school choice as essential to his vision of systemic school reform, his vision does not include market-based reform or a means of forcing competition on schools. Nonetheless, Budde’s proposal shares some attributes of contemporary charter schools, such as schools being granted greater autonomy via agreements between school leadership and district leadership, making it an early expression of the charter concept.

In contrast, Chubb and Moe (1990) focus squarely on parental choice as the driver of systemic reform. The pair arrive at this conclusion after analyzing the organization of American public and private schools in the 1980s along four dimensions: personnel, goals, leadership, and practice. They found higher percentages of effectively organized schools within the private school sector; these findings led them to conclude that families as education consumers were more successful drivers of effectiveness than the bureaucracy and current system of democratic control governing public schools. They present a model of the education marketplace with parent consumers as the primary agents of change on a pathway to more effectively organize schools. Chubb and Moe advocate parent choice as an accountability model unto itself with school operation left to a variety of private providers funded publicly.

Ted Kolderie (1990) echoes Chubb and Moe in centering the failures of American education reform on the “exclusive franchise” for operating public schools held by school

districts. Kolderie offers four assumptions to ground his radical proposal: “(1) school restructuring has limited potential; (2) school districts’ monopoly on public education is the heart of the problem; (3) the states are critical actors in revitalizing education; (4) a competitive school system requires a variety of agencies that are free to charter new schools” (p. 1). For Kolderie, breaking the monopoly on public education is the key to systemic change, and it is the role of the states to do so, by creating new schools that operate under contract to a state-appointed entity. Kolderie differentiates his reform from the reforms offered by Friedman (1962) or Chubb and Moe (1990) as a “new public system that operates through contracts rather than vouchers” and is preferable for “public accountability, since a public body would set the objectives and monitor performance” (p. 16).

Kolderie outlines a baker’s dozen worth of elements of the proposed contract system: allowing “a wide variety of organizing groups” to propose schools; having more than one chartering body per state; allowing schools to “take whatever legal form” including that of a corporation; dual accountability to both the approving authority, via a contract, and to families, via choice; giving “all applicants an equal chance of being admitted”; making sure good information is available, both to potential school operators and to families seeking schools; keeping “traditional requirements” to a minimum; establishing a process for approving schools; tying accountability to student performance; allowing schools to lease space wherever they can; paying contracted schools “full price” for the cost of educating a child; letting the school organize the school day, year, and instructional program in whatever way it wants to do so; and letting current district-run schools have the same opportunity to withdraw and operate on contract (1990, p.17). This

list of elements closely tracks the elements listed in the “model charter law” from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools as well as the contents of many current state charter laws.²

The concepts outlined by the above authors alter traditional models of public school governance and, to varying degrees, provide parents with choices as active consumers of education products. Lawmakers combined these concepts in various ways to create the current charter school marketplaces established in state laws. Vouchers and other free market choice efforts remain the goal for some education reformers, but the charter concept, as outlined by Budde and Kolderie, has emerged as a moderate embodiment of the kind of market-based reform envisioned by Friedman and Chubb and Moe. The charter school movement has generated a broad base of political support by appealing to an interest in increased choice for families, while retaining a public designation which ensures that public funds remain in secular schools with government-sanctioned oversight.

While much of the seminal theoretical literature on school choice describes minimal to no public regulation of the choice marketplace (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962), in reality, all markets require some form of public regulation. Glaringly absent from the literature envisioning new kinds of schools and governance arrangements is any discussion of the mechanisms by which schools would be closed if they failed to achieve excellence, to meet the promise of innovation, or to satisfy consumer demands. While ignoring the process for a public sector role in school closure may be understandable for the private school choice marketplace associated with vouchers, the

² It is worth noting that Kolderie was inducted into the inaugural class of the National Alliance’s “Charter School Hall of Fame” in 2007.

lack of attention given to what would happen with public assets or student enrollment arrangements in contracted public schools is concerning. Closures necessitate, at least, the involvement of public authorities to keep track of student records; to ensure compliance with federal, state, and local regulations protecting students; and to reclaim public funds and assets from the closing school. Although these topics have received little to no treatment in the school choice literature, several studies have discussed the tensions between public accountability and market principles that might shape the decisions made by public and private actors about closing and restarting charter schools.

Charter Tensions: Accountability and the Market

The originators of the charter concept clearly believed that market forces would predominate and regulation of charter schools would be minimal; charter schools would close because they failed to meet the obligations of their charter and because parents found educational opportunities afforded elsewhere more attractive. Two articles examine that expectation from the perspective of the early days of charter school implementation. Henig, Holyoke, Lacireno-Pacquet, and Moser (2003) address the behavior of charter schools as entities straddling public and private spheres. Hess (2001) considers the impact of both market and regulatory forces on charter school closure.

Henig et al. (2003) describe the “dualist theory” of expected behaviors for private versus public actors. Private actors operate in market arenas, respond to consumer signals, seek to maximize profits, and are primarily regulated via competition. In contrast, public actors, such as those within government institutions, seek to maximize power, protect bureaucratic privilege, and attain purposeful goals within elaborate rules and regulations. Dualist theory suggests that these two patterns of behavior are separate and

distinct, with public actors in one domain and private actors in another. Henig et al. posit that this dualist theory is incomplete for a time when public-private partnerships are increasingly implemented to allow private actors, often non-profit organizations, to provide public services, such as public education. The authors suggest that the line of demarcation is more blurred in such arrangements and that private actors engaged in the provision of public services are likely to engage in political behavior when it suits their interests. Charter schools are particularly likely to be “hybrid actors” (p. 39), because they are simultaneously exposed to and responsive to both market incentives and government-induced norms. Henig and colleagues note that proponents of charter schools regularly emphasize the hybrid nature of charter schools in discussing accountability but neglect political assumptions about actors that might influence charter school behavior. Henig et al. highlight the public nature of charter schools as more than being held accountable by bureaucracy; charter schools are actors within a public political sphere.

In their study of charter schools in Washington, DC, Henig et al. (2003) set out to test their hypothesis about the overlap between markets and politics and the potential for adverse conditions to push charter schools from market to political behaviors.

Schattschneider (1960) contends that any interest which fails to achieve its goals in one decision-making venue will try to shift decision-making to a more sympathetic environment. Henig and colleagues offer evidence from both individual schools and advocacy organizations that indicates charter schools engage in such venue shopping and systemic politics to allow them to “exercise power and influence” and to gain “tactical advantage or [initiate] system restructuring” (p. 45). Henig and colleagues conclude that, in seeking better outcomes or more efficient delivery of public services, the “recourse to

market approaches does not eliminate the exercise of politics and power” (p. 52). Indeed, the authors suggest that,

In spite of the market metaphor within which charter schools are most frequently analyzed, it appears that their viability may depend less on their ability to win over individual education consumers through the quality of their product than on their ability to play the games of interest politics in multiple public sector venues. (p. 52)

According to the study, charter schools in Washington, DC behave as both market actors and political players, shifting back and forth from one to another as dictated by situational conditions. This venue-shifting behavior suggests limitations to viewing charter schools as predominantly market actors and highlights the inevitable role of politics in the charter school marketplace.

Hess (2001) interrogates a different duality in the charter school model – the pure market regulated by parent accountability and the regulated market, which he contends emerges out of a fear of market failure. Since markets, he notes, may be “slow to discipline or close poor schools” (p. 141) and families may select schools for reasons independent of academic outcomes, school choice may result in consumer-favored schools that provide a low-quality education. Thus, regulation is meant to address democratic concerns of the majority and to provide protection for what the larger public deems is adequate or acceptable for schools. Regulation ensures that the majority can restrict the use of public funds by parent consumers who disagree with what the majority finds acceptable. Regulation also can limit the choices available to families who may be deemed unable to recognize what the majority deems a “good” school by restricting

choice among schools which meet a quality standard. While Hess acknowledges the “widespread agreement among advocates and the larger public that some policing of charter schools is necessary and appropriate,” (p. 142) he also cautions that “any system of charter schooling will force us to compromise some goals for the sake of others” (p.143).

While one goal of charter schools is to provide choices to families, another goal is to offer a public education product that will yield high academic outcomes, ideally better than those currently achieved by existing public schools. To accomplish this latter purpose, authorizers must implement two types of regulatory procedures. Authorizers must set quality standards for charter schools and then close schools that fail to meet the expected standard of quality. Hess contends that people favor market choice for their own students but prefer high standards of regulatory accountability for the masses. From this assumption, he posits that it will be relatively easy for authorizers to close schools that commit egregious violations of community norms, such as financial malfeasance or the promotion of blatantly racist ideologies. However, “the ability to close academically mediocre, but otherwise inoffensive schools” (p.146) will be difficult and especially open to political pressure from opponents of such closures.

Hess (2001) and Henig et al. (2003) delineate important considerations for examining charter school closures, including two different conceptions of the role of politics. Hess (2001) explores the idea of political pressures affecting charter school closures and calls out uneven influence of various political interests, by noting that “Democratic interests do not weight evenly the preferences of all voters...The political process permits those with strong preferences to exert disproportionate influence in a

number of ways” (p. 146). Uneven political influence may manifest itself in several ways with respect to charter closure. First, charter communities with strong stakeholder support are likely to lobby hard against closures regulators may try to enact. While charter schools may shift to political arenas when it best suits their interests (Henig et al., 2003), charter consumers also may make that shift and move from exit to voice (Hirschman, 1960) as a means of achieving their desired ends. Thus, families and communities may choose to stand by a closing school and fight to prevent regulatory closures, rather than leaving for other options. Such public pressure, especially if exerted by influential stakeholders, may prevent or forestall charter closures. Second, elected or appointed officials may intervene to protect charter schools they value, or that are of value to their constituency. An authorizer may feel pressure to respond to calls from such officials who would find the closure of a specific school politically damaging. While Hess (2001) examines the role of individual actors, Henig et al. (2003) focus on charter schools as institutional actors that may shift venues and tactics to gain political advantage. Rather than examining education consumers as political stakeholders, their study looks at how school leaders interact with formal and informal political structures to secure advantageous positions for their schools.

Taken together, Hess (2001) and Henig et al. (2003) offer a compelling set of orienting expectations for my empirical study of school closures and restarts. Charter schools may establish standing within the marketplace via market behaviors or may use political tactics to secure power for themselves. Charter schools may close for market or regulatory reasons, and when faced with closure, may adjust tactics or shift venues from the marketplace to the political arena to try to remain open, or to insulate their

stakeholders against the negative effects of closure. Individual stakeholders, including parents and elected officials, may also adjust their tactics and venues to prevent school closures which would negatively impact them. Given the framing by both authors and the snapshot of charter behavior in DC offered by Henig et al. (2003), I suspected that charter schools facing closure would demonstrate behaviors consistent with institutional actors in both the private and public spheres. That is to say, I expected that both market and political factors would play a role in decisions charter school actors make in the face of closure. Authorizers, governmentally sanctioned entities, might also encourage such venue-spanning behaviors, explicitly or implicitly. I also anticipated venue shifting behavior from closing schools' stakeholder groups, including parents, staff, and community members. In conducting my study and trying to understand why some charter schools restart and others do not, I anticipated finding both market and political explanations.

With these explanatory possibilities – market factors and political factors– for charter school restarts in mind, I reviewed the existing empirical literature on charter school closures. As I will demonstrate in the review, most studies rely on quantitative analyses and archival data to examine the reasons for charter school closures; very few studies I found examine factors that might influence the process by which a school closes. Only one study directly addresses the restart of charter schools, further demonstrating the need for empirical studies of this emerging charter school practice.

Literature on Charter School Closures

Given that charter schools are still a relatively “hot topic” in education policy, a variety of advocacy focused organizations conduct research on charters. To ensure

exclusion of research with a clear ideological bent, I focused my review of literature on studies that were likely to have undergone a form of peer review before publication. I limited my search to articles from peer-reviewed journals and studies published by university research centers, where some form of pre-publication review by other scholars was likely to have occurred. A Boolean search for “charter schools” and “closure” or “closures” in the EBSCO database yielded 39 peer-reviewed journal articles and five university published reports. Reviewing abstracts led me to exclude articles that did not specifically focus on charter school failure or closures. I eliminated two reports, one based on content and one because it was later published as a journal article which I had already included; these cuts reduced the total number of relevant works to 20. After carefully reading each of the 20 studies, I identified 11 that were relevant to understanding the frequency, causes, and consequences of charter school failures. The remaining nine studies mentioned charter schools only in the context of the closure of traditional schools, either as the perceived cause of such closures, or as the recipients of school facilities following the closure of traditional schools, and were thus not relevant to my review for this study.

The 11 studies I included provide a limited and fractured picture of charter school closure; they offer only glimpses into the rationale for charter closures, policy conditions influencing charter closures, and consequences of charter closures for stakeholders. Most of the charter school closure studies are quantitative and primarily focus on post hoc analysis of why schools closed. Analyses most often use extant data sets from states and charter authorizers. Several studies compare charter school closures with closures of traditional schools and others compare closures across states. One study employed a

mixed-methods approach, adding a qualitative inquiry to the large-scale quantitative analysis. Two studies used a qualitative approach.

Reasons for Charter School Closures

Studies examining the reasons charter schools close comprise one segment of the literature. Ascher, Echazarreta, Jacobowitz, McBride, Troy, and Wamba (2003) conducted a qualitative study of the kinds of accountability employed by the three New York State charter authorizers during the early years of implementation of the state's charter school law. The bulk of the study examines ways in which each of the three authorizers implement performance-based, contractual, and regulatory accountability to assess the performance of the charter schools they authorize. The authors find that, of the 48 charter schools authorized in the first three years of New York's charter law, one charter was rescinded before the school opened, one was placed on probation, and one was closed. According to the authors "in the latter two cases, low test scores as well as operational and fiscal mismanagement played a role" (p. 26). These reasons are borne out as common in Wilkens' commentary on charter school closures a decade later.

Wilkens (2013) provides a summary of major reasons for charter school closures across the country during the first 18 years of the charter school movement. The article draws heavily from Consoletti's report on charter school closures (2011), published by the charter advocacy organization, the Center for Education Reform (CER).³ Using data from both CER and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), Wilkens examined 1,036 schools that have closed since 1992. Wilkens identifies two major

³ Much non-peered reviewed research on charter schools is carried out by various charter advocacy organizations, or by think tanks provided funding by charter advocates or philanthropies which advance the cause of charter schools. For this reason, I decided not to review the Consoletti piece as a separate piece of literature.

reasons for charter school closure: mismanagement (financial and organizational) and academic underperformance. While Consoletti disaggregated financial difficulties and organizational mismanagement, Wilkens combined them into a single category and argued that the distinction between the two “may be more apparent than real” (2013, p. 227) as financial problems are a form of mismanagement. In Wilkens’ categorization, “ultimately, mismanagement –financial and organizational – comprise almost *two-thirds* of charter school closures over the past 20 years” (p. 229). Another 19 percent of charters, or about 200 schools, closed for academic poor performance. Wilkens speculates that, given political pressure from the U.S. Secretary of Education and an increasing focus on performance management, it “seems likely that this rate will increase over time as a percentage of all closures” (p. 229). While Wilkens does not explain the reasons for the remaining 15 percent of charter school closures, Consoletti (2011) attributes 11 percent of closures to a combination of facilities and local school district obstacles and the remainder to “other/unknown” causes (p. 8). Although the study provides descriptive data on charter school closures, Wilkens (2013) provides little additional context or data beyond that reported from the Consoletti (2011) dataset.

Paino, Renzulli, Boylan, and Bradley (2014) add to the literature a mixed-methods, two-part analysis of how accountability mechanisms contribute to charter school failure and what “macro” and “micro-level processes” are at work in closing charter schools in North Carolina (p. 500). They find a complex set of allowable reasons for closures in the state statute. North Carolina law cites six allowable reasons for closure: failure to meet student performance requirements outlined within the charter; failure to meet generally accepted standards of fiscal management; violations of law;

material violations of any terms of the charter; request by two-thirds of the school faculty and staff to revoke or non-renew the charter; and “other good cause identified” (p. 503). However, the accountability section of the law allows charter authorizers discretion over the kinds of documentation required of a charter school for accountability purposes and only financial audits are specifically required of all charter schools within the state. The authors call out the inconsistency between the sections of the law by citing the six allowable reasons for closure, only one of which is financial, and the accountability provisions, which heavily focus on financial accountability.

To understand reasons for the 24 closures which occurred in North Carolina, the authors first reviewed the reasons as reported in a 2006 report from the Center for Education Reform (CER, 2006). The CER report cited three reasons for charter closures in North Carolina: facilities issues, mismanagement, and financial issues. These reasons are consistent with Wilkens’ (2013) findings; the researchers note that these reasons are also consistent with the field from which they draw their analytic approach: “Population ecology would suggest that it is not the market (e.g., through active parental choice, *per se*) that influences the rate of charter school closings, but that closure is instead the effect of environmental conditions,” such as the availability of funding (p. 514).

Paino et al. then conducted an event history analysis of the closures. They ran three different analytic models considering four types of accountability identified by Garn (2001): performance, market, bureaucratic, and financial (Garn, 2001). According to the authors, performance-based accountability focuses on student achievement, usually measured by standardized test scores. Market-based accountability is based on the choices made by parents to select a school or not. Bureaucratic-based accountability is

rooted in state and local laws and policies, such as the racial-balancing provisions in North Carolina. Financial accountability is based upon the “proper usage of public tax dollars” by individual charter schools (p. 501). While the authors decision to use Garn’s typology, rather than the six reasons for closure allowable under state law, is not explained, the categories of accountability are consistent with others described in the literature (Ascher, Echazarreta, Jacobowitz, McBride, Troy, & Wamba, 2003; Hess, 2001). The event history analysis provided strong evidence to suggest that a charter school’s poor financial condition increased the likelihood that it would close, while market and bureaucratic accountability played a more minor role in charter school closures. These state-level findings are also consistent with other findings in the literature (Ascher, Echazarreta, Jacobowitz, McBride, Troy, & Wamba, 2003; Wilkens, 2013).

To examine the relationship between finances, academics, and closure, and to “gain insight into the micro-processes of closure” (Paino et al., 2014, p. 520), the authors conducted two case studies of schools that had closed within the state. In examining LIFT and PHASE Academies, schools which closed in 2000 and 2001, respectively, Paino et al. discover academic deficiencies in both schools, despite the schools having been closed for serious and substantiated financial mismanagement. They did not find mention of the academic challenges of either school in the local news coverage nor in the court documents related to the closures. The authors contend, “Based on these examples...although academic accountability is part of the political rhetoric, financial instability provides the real impetus for revoking charters” (p. 527). The authors state that the totality of their evidence indicated that a concerted effort may be underway within the state to address academic weaknesses via a more easily defensible financial case. “Taken

together, these two analyses suggest that North Carolina investigates and revokes charters due to ‘finances’ as a formal explanation, but perhaps tries to isolate academically poor charter schools in order to ‘weed out’ those that are ineffectual” (p. 529).

In a different study, Paino, Boylan and Renzulli (2017) used a quantitative analysis with a critical race perspective to examine the relationship between race and charter school closure. The authors began with two orienting assumptions. First, charter schools enroll a higher than average percentage of black students than do traditional public schools, and charter schools employ the threat of closure as one feature of a “rational strategy intended to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of traditional public schools” (p. 749). Second, that “policies that may appear race neutral, particularly in a neo-liberal context, are designed to benefit the franchised, not the disenfranchised” (p. 751) and such policies may mean that charter school closures are harming, rather than helping, the educational outcomes of black students who attend them. Thus, the authors frame their study in the context of competing visions of charter schools – places where students of color might thrive as a result of schools competing for quality performance and student enrollment and places where students of color might be disproportionately disadvantaged by school closures. The authors conducted an event history analysis of charter school closures using a national data set of charter school demographic data from CER, supplemented by district-level data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) collected by the National Center on Education Statistics, and academic performance data from state departments of education and individual charter school websites.

The authors find that charter schools which enroll more black students are more likely to close, even when other factors such as academic outcomes, contextual factors,

the age and size of the school, and interactions between these factors are taken into account. The study also finds little connection between academic outcomes and school closures and notes that the likelihood of closure decreases as schools increase their years of operation. While the findings on race and rates of closure are borne out by other studies (CREDO, 2017), the study has significant limitations. The authors explain that, since academic measures vary by state and grade level, they create “an average percent proficient of the school across all grade levels that it serves” and use “the average percent proficient of the school on reading and math tests in a given year” (p. 753). While the authors “do not find a significant relationship between math or reading achievement levels and the likelihood of a charter school closure,” (p.753) they do not provide any explanation of how their aggregate measure of achievement might affect the analysis. They cite “low achievement does not appear to be promoting accountability by leading to closure” but do not explain their construct for the meaning of “low” nor variations in state accountability systems. While other studies did not find academic outcomes as a significant determinant of closure, some of these same authors note that academics is a likely underlying cause in closures labeled otherwise (Paino et al., 2014).

Charter Closures, Traditional Public Closures and Academic Outcomes

Other studies used quantitative methods and extant data sets to examine the question of whether charter school closures were connected to academic performance. Often these studies compare closure rates for charter schools and traditional public schools with similar academic outcomes. Chingos and West (2015) examined the performance of Arizona charter schools in comparison to traditional public schools. Arizona has the highest charter market share of any state, with 13.3 percent of all public

school students attending public charter schools. The study looks at the academic performance of elementary, middle, and high schools in four subjects from 2006-2012 and finds that charter schools exhibit wide variation in effects on student achievement, but are modestly less effective, on average, than are traditional public schools.

Arizona closed 64 charter schools during the period of study: 34 were revocations, 14 closed voluntarily, and 16 closed for other reasons, “such as converting to another kind of school or being unable to find a suitable facility” (p. 130S). The researchers do not indicate specific reasons (i.e., financial problems) given for the revocations or voluntary relinquishments. During the same time period, Arizona closed 58 traditional public schools. The 64 charter schools that closed during the period of study were considerably less effective in all four subjects than those charters that remained open. The 58 traditional public schools that closed were modestly less effective in writing and equally as effective in mathematics, reading, and science as the traditional public schools that remained open.

Chingos and West conclude that Arizona “charter schools that have closed in the past six years were markedly less effective than those that remained open, a pattern that is not evident among [traditional public schools]” (p. 121S), which they note is “at least suggestive evidence that the charter sector provides a better mechanism for weeding out poorly performing schools than the traditional sector” (p. 131S). What is unclear from the study is whether the “better mechanism” described is the market force of educational consumer choice, a strong accountability system used by authorizers to close low-performing schools, or some other mechanism entirely.

Stuit (2012) examined the rates of turnaround and closure of the lowest performing schools within both charter and traditional public school sectors in 10 states from 2003-2009. The states included in this study were home to 71 percent of all charter schools operating in the country during the 2003-04 school year. Stuit considered “if one school sector had done comparatively better than the other at addressing chronically low-performing schools” (p. 40).

Only 1.3 percent of all low-performing schools in both sectors were successful “turnarounds.” Turnaround, in this study, was defined as a school moving “above the 50th percentile in its state by the 2008-2009 school year, based on its average combined 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 reading and math” proficiency scores (p. 45). Only 26 of the 2,025 low-performing schools were successful turnarounds; only one of those schools was a charter school. The rate of success, or more accurately, the lack of success, was comparable across both sectors when it came to raising the schools reading and math proficiency scores. On the other hand, low-performing charter schools were twice as likely to be closed by 2008-2009.

Though “neither sector has cause for celebration,” (p.49) 19 percent of low-performing charters were closed compared to 11 percent of low-performing district schools. Of these closures, 81 percent of charter and 84 percent of district closures were classified as “academically beneficial,” a designation denoting “the average proficiency of the neighboring schools was higher than the proficiency rate of the closed school” (p. 46). This high rate of beneficial closures across both sectors matters because “part of the premise for school closures as a reform mechanism is that students will be better served because they will be dispersed to higher performing schools in the community” (p. 46).

The study does not address the enrollment trajectory of students in the “academically beneficial” closures, nor does it examine the interventions undertaken in successful turnarounds, but it does provide helpful context for the scope of the problem of low-performing schools and the abysmal success rates of efforts to turn around such schools in both the traditional and charter sectors.

Effects of Charter Closures on Students

While Stuit (2012) did not track student outcomes resulting from “beneficial closures,” other studies in the literature did examine the effects of charter closures on the students who attended the closed schools. Although my study does not look at the effect of closures or restarts on students, one foundational assumption of the charter school restart concept is that restarts will mitigate any negative educational effects of school closure on students. It seemed reasonable, therefore, to see if the charter closure literature might offer any insights about the possible consequences of school closure.

Carlson and Lavertu (2016) used a regression discontinuity design to examine the effects of the mandatory charter school closure law in Ohio. Ohio’s law states that all charter schools making lower than expected annual gains must be closed by their authorizer. Using a dataset from the Ohio State Department of Education, the authors analyzed data from 6,000 individual students across 36 charter schools “at risk of closure on the basis of their gain scores” (p. 31). The authors find that students enrolled in “at-risk” schools at the time they were identified for closure experienced statistically significant gains in academic achievement three years after the identification. Since Ohio’s law uses the “at-risk” designation to close the lowest performing schools, including charter schools, the authors assert that it can be assumed that all students

leaving these schools moved to schools that were at least relatively higher-performing than the ones that closed. While the study findings lend support to policies designed to close academically low-performing schools, the study does not address concerns raised by other studies in the closure literature, such as differences in the effects of closure on the basis of student age, gender, race or other demographic characteristics.

Bross, Harris and Liu (2016) conducted analyses of interventions, both charter school closures and “takeovers,” in New Orleans and Baton Rouge between 2008 and 2014. The authors find that different interventions affected different measures of student outcomes in various ways. In this study charter takeover is defined dually: a) district-to-charter takeover as the closure of a traditional school and the subsequent takeover of that school by a charter school and b) charter-to-charter takeover where “control over a school is transferred from one charter operator to another” (p.3). Charter-to-charter takeover is a form of restart, except that the authorizer decides on both the closure and the operator who re-opens the school. Since most schools in New Orleans during the period of study were charter schools, most of the closed schools included in the analysis were charter schools. The authors included a total of 31 closed and restarted schools in the study, and they examined the effects of closure and restart on student achievement, high school graduation, and college entry.

Using a matched differences-in-differences design, Bross, Harris and Liu (2016) find that closures and takeovers had positive effects on both elementary and high school students in New Orleans, as measured by student achievement, and positive effects on high school graduation rates for high school students in New Orleans. High school students in Baton Rouge experienced negative effects of closures on both outcome

measures. The effects of both closures and restarts were more positive for students in New Orleans, who ended up in higher quality schools as a result of the interventions. The authors note that the schools closed in New Orleans were consistently the lowest performing, while the closed schools in Baton Rouge were not always the lowest performing. Finally, the authors find that students who stayed in the school building, as a result of a takeover rather than a closure, experienced slightly more positive effects on high school graduation and college entry, but the results were not statistically significant. The authors' key point of discussion from their findings is that "the key to making closures and takeovers work is to ensure that directly affected students end up in better schools after the intervention" (p. 8).

Glazerman and Dotter (2017) used data from the 2014 unified enrollment lottery, MySchool DC to conduct a study of parental choice in the DC school marketplace. This enrollment lottery was the first-time parents could complete a single application, with ranked preferences, for a chance to enroll their student in either charter schools or DCPS schools of choice.⁴ The study used an estimated rank-ordered logit model to infer preference weights that led parents to rank schools as they did. The authors find that parents placed value on convenience of the school location, the demographic composition of the school, specifically in relation to the racial make-up of the school and the race of their own child, and on the school's academic outcomes. While these study findings are interesting for parental choice decisions, they are less relevant to the literature on charter school closures. However, the authors also used their dataset to conduct a simulation

⁴DCPS allows students to apply for lottery-based enrollment in any school that is out of boundary, that is, outside of their residential catchment area. The MySchool DC lottery also included enrollment in DCPS magnet schools for language immersion and for competitive enrollment high schools.

using the Index of Dissimilarity to “better understand the implications of this pattern of preferences” expressed by parents (p. 26). One simulation showed that, if the lowest-performing schools were removed from the choice set, existing parent preferences would result in enrollment patterns that would produce “the lowest levels of stratification of all the policy options considered” (p. 28). Additionally, the authors find that, “expanding school choice capacity by making more spaces available at each campus would lead to additional movement of students toward schools with reputations for higher levels of academic achievement beyond that induced by the status-quo school-choice process” (p. 28). In other words, both closing the lowest performing schools and adding capacity at high performing schools, given the existing parental preferences, would lead to less stratification by race and class and to greater enrollment of students in better schools.

CREDO (2017) conducted a large-scale examination of the effects of school closures, both traditional and charter, on students. Using longitudinal data from state departments of education across 26 states, CREDO looked at 1,522 closures, including 318 charters, over a six school-year period from fall 2006 to the summer 2013. The study covered four broad areas: (1) an effort to build a national picture of closures, (2) consideration of whether “equivalently performing schools faced comparable treatment across the country” (p. 2-3), (3) examination of the trajectory of school enrollment for students who attended closing schools and, (4) the impact of school closure on student academic progress. Given the size and scope of the study, researchers used a variety of methods to achieve these purposes. Descriptive analyses and tests of differences were used to compare closing schools and to identify and explain where displaced students ended up after school closures. CREDO used its own virtual control record (VCR)

method to create matching “virtual twins,” demographically and academically identical students who did not attend a closed school, for the purpose of comparison. While this method has been critiqued when used in previous CREDO studies (Hoxby, 2009), the authors note that “the VCR matching protocol has been assessed against other possible study designs and judged to be reliable and valuable by peer reviewers” (p. 3).

Several of the study findings are consistent with those of the smaller-scale studies above. The authors find that closures of low-performing schools, both charter and traditional, were increasing throughout the study period, but were not equally distributed, either geographically, by school grade level, or by demographics of the school student population. Closures were more concentrated in urban areas, more likely to occur in elementary schools, and “were not blind to socioeconomic status or race/ethnicity of the students who were enrolled” (p. 4). This finding, that low-income and minority students are more likely to be affected by closure lends support to the findings of Paino et al. (2017). The authors also find that the rate of closure of low-performing charter schools was higher than for traditional public schools and that charters that were closed tended to be lower performing than traditional public schools that closed. The authors note the significant variation across states in the link between performance and closure, both within and across school sectors, and note that “decision-makers in the charter and TPS arenas exercised varying degrees of political will and drew on different approaches when they determined how to deal with low performing schools” (p. 4).

In examining the impact of closures on students, the authors find that fewer than half of students enrolled in closing schools ended up in better schools, and while this consequence was true for both sectors, “a higher share of displaced charter students

ended up in better school settings” (p. 4). Finally, “the quality of the receiving school made a significant difference in post-closure student outcomes” (p. 5) with students making greater academic gains when they subsequently enrolled in higher performing schools. The CREDO findings extend and bolster some of the smaller-scale studies of student outcomes post-closure (see Bross, Harris & Liu, 2016; Carlson & Lavertu, 2016) and echo concerns about inequitable impact of closure on black students (see Paino et al., 2017). The authors caution that their findings do not suggest that closing schools will automatically lead to better student outcomes and call for the design of additional policy options, such as the opening of new schools to replace closed schools, so as to increase the supply of “better” school options for students displaced by closures. These suggestions echo those made by Glazerman and Dotter (2016).

Qualitative Analysis of the Dynamics of Charter School Closures

Largely absent from the current literature on closures is a rich set of qualitative examinations of schools that closed. Karanxha (2013) provides one window into the policy and human dynamics at work in a Florida charter school as it struggled and eventually was closed. Karanxha’s case study of a failed Florida charter school (2013) offers some interesting insights into reasons and justifications for charter school closure, the role of governance, and the consequences of school closure for children. It also offers additional support for the idea that schools which struggle academically may be closed for financial reasons, because such closures seem more defensible against possible appeals (Paino et al., 2014).

In this case study of the struggles and ultimate closure of Voyager Charter School, a clear pattern of mismanagement led to a financial crisis, but the school also exhibited

academic difficulties. When the school district, which authorized the school, revoked the charter, it named fiscal insolvency as the reason. One school district official offered her understanding of why the district authorizer chose the fiscal issues as the stated reason for revocation:

You know it says that you can close a charter school if they [sic] don't meet their academic objectives. You wouldn't win an appeal for that. You know you would have to really have some strong cases. So we seem to concentrate on the financial solvency of the school, because that's something that's in black and white, you can . . . you can show raw data that's accurate, you can show histories, patterns.
(p. 598)

Even in cases where an authorizer might find the school's academic achievement problematic, it can be difficult to uphold that criterion for closure in the face of legal appeals or parental pleas for leniency on behalf of the school. Fiscal failure or fiscal impropriety can be more easily justified, legally, as a reason for closure (Paino et al., 2014).

The Voyager case also offers insight into the role of charter school governance. Karanxha differentiates between internal school governance, by a non-profit board of trustees, and external governance, the oversight role of the charter authorizer. In the case of the Voyager school, both the school's board and the local school district authorizer were expected to hold the school's management accountable. The school's board of trustees struggled with this role. Karanxha finds that the board of trustees hired, and subsequently fired, four principals in the first two years of the school's operation; two of these principals misused the school's money. The school district, as authorizer, should

ideally have been aware of these improprieties at the time they occurred and taken steps to intervene. Karanxha notes that governance did not work as a safeguard against failure in this case because “these accountable actors,” such as the authorizer, “are not necessarily responsible actors” (p. 580). In the case of Voyager, the school had a board of trustees as called for, but the board was not effective in its oversight of the school’s leaders. The authorizer granted a charter to the school’s board of trustees but failed to adequately monitor the progress and outcomes of the school thereafter.

Finally, this case illustrates several consequences of closure. One major consequence is the way in which students shoulder the burden of transitions after a charter school closure. They deal with multiple aspects of attending a new school— new commuting patterns, new peer groups, new teachers, new rules and routines, and in the case of many charter schools, new curricula or thematic programming. In the case of the Voyager closure, students faced a particularly tough aftermath:

When the new school year started, 20 percent of the children enrolled and attended two other charter schools in the district. The district closed those two within a year as well. Approximately 5 percent enrolled in private schools, 5 percent moved out of state, less than 3 percent went to another school district, and 67 percent returned to public schools in the district. Overall, 50 different public schools received the “Voyager children.” (p. 599)

While Karanxha does not offer evidence that the district schools were academically worse, the study findings do note that families chose to leave their district schools for a variety of reasons and felt left with few other options besides returning to those very same schools. Karanxha paints a vivid picture of one school closure, and highlights

elements that deserve further examination: actual reasons behind closures versus the public justifications for the closures; the role of internal school governance and external oversight in both operating a school and closing it in an orderly fashion; and the burden of closure that falls directly on children and families.

While case studies of individual schools like Voyager are unique, the insights they offer into charter school closure are essential to the field. The interaction of policy expectations and practical reality is essential for understanding policy and practice around charter school closure.

Cross-currents Across Studies of Closures

The limited and fractured empirical literature on charter school closures suggests a few common factors influencing closure. Most charter school closures are regulatory, rather than based on market factors, and most charter schools close for financial or management reasons rather than academic underperformance. However, the lack of closures for academic reasons does not point to high rates of success for charter schools as judged by academic outcomes. Rather, the literature suggests that it may be easier for regulators to justify closures based on measures such as financial insufficiency or compliance failures (Paino et al., 2014). Regulator preference for clarity neatly aligns with Hess's (2001) contention that it is easier, politically, to justify egregious failures to the public, than to provide a convincing nuanced argument justifying closures for academic underperformance.

The literature also suggests that effects of charter school closures on students may be uneven. While Carlson and Lavertu (2016) find positive effects for students exiting the lowest performing schools, others find more mixed student outcomes (Bross, Harris &

Liu, 2016; CREDO, 2017). Existing research also suggests that low-income and minority students face greater adverse effects from closures (CREDO, 2017; Paino et al., 2017). Several studies also suggest that policy changes might increase positive effects of closing low performing schools, in terms of both student outcomes and racial integration (CREDO, 2017; Glazerman & Dotter, 2016). The literature suggests a recognition of the need to attend to the divergent impact of policy changes by race, aligning with existing work on the deep connections between race and school reform (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 2001; Orr, 1999).

The literature on charter school closures does not offer any insights on why some schools restart and others do not. While Stuit (2012) discusses rates of “turnaround,” restarts are never mentioned. Bross, Harris and Liu (2016) include evidence related to charter-to-charter restarts, but do not disaggregate the data from findings on closures and charter takeovers of district schools. Given the absence of empirical data on restarts in the closure literature, I searched both the peer reviewed literature and the education research literature more broadly construed, for any mention of charter restarts. The next section discusses the limited available literature on charter school restarts.

Literature on Charter School Restarts

While the literature on charter school closures is thin, the literature on restarts of failed charter schools is singular. I found no peer-reviewed pieces written on the topic in any of the journals, including the journals specifically dedicated to school choice. While primarily descriptive, Doyle and Field (2013) provide the most comprehensive treatment of charter school restarts to date in their report for Public Impact, a non-profit research organization. The authors profile charter school restarts in five different cities: New

Orleans, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Trenton. The report contains three sections: an introduction to restarts in the larger context of accountability for charter schools; a discussion of the “key elements” of the five profiled restarts; and a set of recommendations for charter school board members and authorizers.

Context for Restarts

Doyle and Field briefly discuss the accountability mechanisms used by most authorizers to deal with struggling charter schools – turnaround and school closure – and the limitations of both approaches. According to the authors, turnarounds are rarely successful and closing schools, while “safeguarding both students and parents” (p. 6) against continued failure, can require lengthy processes and cause disruption to the closing school and other schools that might be required to absorb large numbers of new students. The authors then describe “accountability through restart,” which they call “another path to success” (p. 6) for dealing with failing charter schools. This accountability option, as defined by Doyle and Field, consists of closing the failing school and selecting a new operator and a new governing board to run a school serving the same students. Accountability through restart stands to offer benefits not available via internal turnaround or school closure, according to the authors. These benefits include minimizing disruption for students; providing “a high-quality option for *all* children attending the charter school;” and increasing “the overall quality of the charter sector by replacing low-quality seats with high-quality seats,” while maintaining the “commitment charter schools make to public school accountability” (p. 8). The authors identify a set of conditions or which “experience suggests” (p. 9) are likely to lead to successful restarts. These conditions include a supply of operators interested in restarting schools, an

authorizer with the authority and capacity to approve and oversee restarts, a closing school whose board is “committed to facilitating and supporting the restart,” conditions which allow a restart operator to “leverage existing school assets,” and stakeholders who support the restart (p. 9). Doyle and Field stress that while restarts may be initiated by authorizers, those that arise from a “proactive, board-initiated strategy,” in which an existing school board leads the restart process, sometimes before a closure is even initiated, “have the potential to give students access to better educational outcomes more quickly than an authorizer-initiated restart” (p.10).

Key Elements

Doyle and Field profile five school restarts which occurred between 2011 and 2013 in five different cities. The authors provide brief descriptions of each restart and compare all five across seven dimensions: the selection of a restart operator, board of governance, re-enrollment of students, status of charter, transfer of assets, retention of staff, and transition process and timeline.

The authors first consider three key characteristics of the restart: the selection of a restart operator, the board governance of the new school, and the re-enrollment of students from the closing school into the restarted school. In three of the five restarts, the board of the closing school selected the new operator; the authorizer did so in the other two cases. Two closing school boards sought recommendations from trusted sources for new operators, while the third used a request for proposals (RFP) to solicit interested operators. In the case of Harlem Day, the authorizer also used an RFP to select a new operator; the authorizer in New Orleans appointed a new operator without an RFP. In all five cases, the entire governing board of the school was replaced when the new operator

restarted the school. Student re-enrollment varied across the five restarts, with only 40 percent of students in New Orleans returning to the restarted school and 95 percent of students returning in Chicago. The authors offered some explanations for low re-enrollment rates, but, beyond general statements about parent satisfaction, did not identify specific factors that led to higher rates of re-enrollment in some restarts than others.

Next the authors compared three “related restart elements” (p.16): the status of the charter, the transfer of assets, and the retention of staff in the five restarts. In two of the restarts, new operators were granted a new charter by the authorizer; in the other three, the charter was transferred from the old governing board to the new board. The authors do not offer an explanation of the legal context of each of the cities nor an explanation of what benefits might convey with a new charter versus a transferred charter or vice versa. They do note that transferring the charter allowed for some additional transfer of assets to a new operator, such as a bank balance, but also required that the new operator assume all liabilities of the closing school. Providing a new charter allowed for full transfer of assets in two of the schools and did not require assumption of liabilities. Notably, all five of the schools profiled leased their facilities, so the lease, and its conditions, represented the most significant asset transferred between schools. As with the student re-enrollment rate, the rate of staff retention varied widely across the five restarts. The new operator replaced the principal in four of the five restarts. Two of the restart operators kept more than 80 percent of the staff while the other three replaced most or all of the closing school staff. The decision about whether to replace staff was based on the perceived potential of the staff by the new operator, according to the authors.

Next the authors compared the five restarts on the final dimension: transition, including the timeline, the process for assessing assets, and communication with families. The timelines for restart varied, but all took less than a year. One restart operator received approval from the authorizer and began working in the new school a mere two months after the closing school board initiated the restart process. In another case, it was just over seven months after the board initiated a restart that the new operator began working in the school. The authors describe four of the five restart operators assessing the staff and auditing the finances and operations of the closing schools; they do not provide any information about whether the fifth operator, selected by the authorizer as part of an authorizer-initiated restart, was able to engage in such activities. Doyle and Field explain, “Nearly all of the school operators noted that they prioritized community engagement and communication early in the restart transition, in part because it was so critical to ensuring that students reenrolled—a major goal of the restart strategy” (p. 22). However, the report does not address whether or not families were involved in selection of the restart operators and does not elaborate on the statement that “Community members were often disheartened by the decision to restart and apprehensive about the future” (p. 22). The authors conclude the second section with a note that it is “too soon to know whether these restarts have been a success, as measured by sustained improvements in student academic performance over time” (p. 23) but cite “encouraging signs” (p. 23) of high student re-enrollment in three of the schools, high rates of attendance, and early academic gains in the first year of testing at all five restarted schools.

Recommendations

Doyle and Field encourage “existing school boards” (p. 27) to consider restarts as a means of school improvement, including as a strategy to proactively transfer operations of the school to a new operator before closure is mandated by a school authorizer. The authors also encourage school boards considering restarts to augment the talent and capacity on the board to better facilitate the restart process. Such augmentation might include adding new board members with project management talent or hiring consultants to assist the board with aspects of the restart and associated transactions. Doyle and Field also recommend that existing boards “champion the restart publicly to build support for it in the community,” including parents with students currently enrolled (p. 28). Authorizers, meanwhile, should encourage the boards of struggling schools to pursue restarts. Doyle and Field also suggest that authorizers establish a “transparent and rigorous process to evaluate and approve restart plans” and a clear process to implement restarts once plans are approved (p. 29). The authors do not provide clear conceptual framing for their study, nor do they explain assumptions upon which they base claims about ideal conditions for restart or their recommendations for authorizers. While the lack of a framework makes it difficult to evaluate the merits of the authors’ claims, the study provides significant descriptive information about charter school restarts and the elements described by the authors are helpful dimensions to begin understanding the concept of charter school restarts.

Framing a Study of Restarts

Doyle and Field’s report offers a few compelling insights for framing my study of restarts. First, the authors describe potential benefits for students, families, and school systems in comparison to the consequences of an outright charter closure. Given multiple

potential benefits, Doyle and Field (2013) conclude “charter restarts hold compelling promise for providing students with a high-quality educational option when their current charter school does not, and surrounding schools offer no better” (p. 35). However, despite the potential benefits they highlight, Doyle and Field note that there is not enough evidence from the five schools profiled to draw conclusions about the demonstrated effects of restart on student achievement. Thus, while the authors support the “promise” of restarts as an alternative to closure, they offer no evidence of academic effectiveness as support. The recommendation suggests that factors other than academic effectiveness may motivate authorizer and governing board decisions to pursue restarts. Second, Doyle and Field provide a glimpse into the process by which five schools restarted, but do not offer any counterarguments. Since the authors do not profile any schools that did not pursue restarts, there is a gap in information about the reasons why some schools are restarted while others are not. My study’s design, which includes case studies of three schools which closed and did not restart in a city where multiple restarts occurred in the same time frame, will help address this gap in information.

While I found no other published studies or reports on charter school restarts, some within the education reform community have paid increasing attention to the phenomenon as charter authorizers have permitted, and in some cases encouraged, these transactions within their portfolio of schools. Recently, education bloggers (Emerson, 2013; Hassel B., 2013; Wexler, 2013) and philanthropists (Patel, 2013; Rybka, 2015) have written about charter school restarts and ways in which they might be scaled. In 2016, Public Impact released a Restart Guide, aimed at authorizers that might wish to consider restarts as one way of managing the quality of their school portfolio (Public

Impact & EdPlex, 2016).⁵ Additionally, the National Association of Public Charter Schools hosted three sessions (of 122 total) on charter school restarts at the annual National Charter Schools Conference in 2016, compared to only one each in 2014 and 2015 (NAPCS, 2014; NAPCS 2015).

Given the limited and fragmented current literature on charter school closures and restarts, the topic necessitates further research to develop an understanding of this key aspect of charter marketplaces.

A Conceptual Framework

Charter schools originated as a market-based policy idea with parents as the key market consumers. As I demonstrated in the review of the seminal literature on market-based education reforms, theorists believed that parent demand for schools would drive supply and operators would respond to these consumer interests in designing and managing schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1964; Kolderie, 1990). Government regulation would be minimal. Parent choice would weed out ineffective schools because parents would rationally choose to leave schools that were not effective (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kolderie, 1990). The literature on charter school restarts (Doyle & Field, 2013) also suggests that market forces predominate amongst the reasons why some schools restart, though Doyle and Field's study of five charter school restarts treats charter school operators as the main market actors making choices rather than parent consumers. The marketplace of charter school restarts, then, is focused on schools as both consumers and providers. This focus on market factors in both charter school theory and restart research might lead to a supposition that economics would drive charter school restarts.

⁵ I served as a consultant to both EdPlex and Public Impact on the content of this report and am thanked in the acknowledgments.

The current research on school closures, however, suggests that regulatory factors, in the form of charter authorizers, rather than economic factors, are responsible for initiating charter school closures (Chingos & West, 2015; Paino, et al., 2014; Wilkens, 2013). Several studies of closures (Bross, Harris & Liu, 2016; CREDO, 2017; Glazerman & Dotter, 2016) offer evidence to suggest that regulatory factors, including the use of policy to promote racial and socioeconomic integration or to avoid the inequitable impact of closure, might also encourage restarts. While recent studies have examined student race in relation to charter school closures (CREDO, 2017; Glazerman & Dotter, 2016; Paino et al, 2017), there is no evidence from the existing literature to suggest that race may factor into restart decisions, though it seems worthy of investigation given its role in closures.

The literature I reviewed above outlines how markets and regulation are both present in the operation and closure of charter schools. Some literature suggests that both market and regulatory factors also may play a role in charter school restarts. Henig et al. (2003) characterize charter schools as market operators that may enter political arenas when it benefits their interests, including, perhaps, in cases of charter school restarts.

My study asks three questions: Why are some schools restarted and others closed outright? Who decides which charter schools are closed and which are restarted? How do they make these decisions? I hypothesize that a mix of factors, including both market and political factors, play a role in determining why some schools that close are restarted, while others are not. Figure 1 illustrates the framework I used to analyze and understand the data I collected on charter restarts in Washington, DC.

The rectangle on the left side of the figure represents the market factors I expected to be at work in the DC charter restarts. These market factors included the assets of a closing school, such as a school facility, the enrollment market share of a closing school, and whether a closing school occupied some niche, such as an otherwise underserved neighborhood or a specific program offering unavailable elsewhere in the city. I suspected that market factors mattered for assessing the “value” of a school as a possible restart and I hypothesized that the presence of certain market factors would add value to an individual school, making it more likely to restart. This hypothesis was informed by the work of Doyle and Field (2013) and their findings related to the transfer of assets between closing schools and restart operators. For instance, a school that owned its own school facility, or which had a long-term lease that could be transferred to another charter school, would be valued more highly in the marketplace than a school that did not have such assets. A school that also had a large student population and was in high-demand, perhaps as evidenced by a waiting list for available seats, would increase in value in the marketplace, and be a more likely candidate for restart after being closed for regulatory reasons. On the other hand, a school lacking these, or other valued market factors, would be less likely to attract an interested operator to restart and would, thus, simply close.

The rectangle on the right side of the figure represents political factors, including the actions of regulators. As Henig et al. (2003) and Hess (2001) make clear, both individual and institutional actors within the charter marketplace are influenced by political forces. Paino et al. (2014) and Hess (2001) highlighted the role of politics in how regulators classified reasons for closure; regulators found closures for fiscal reasons easier to justify and defend to the public than closures for poor academic outcomes.

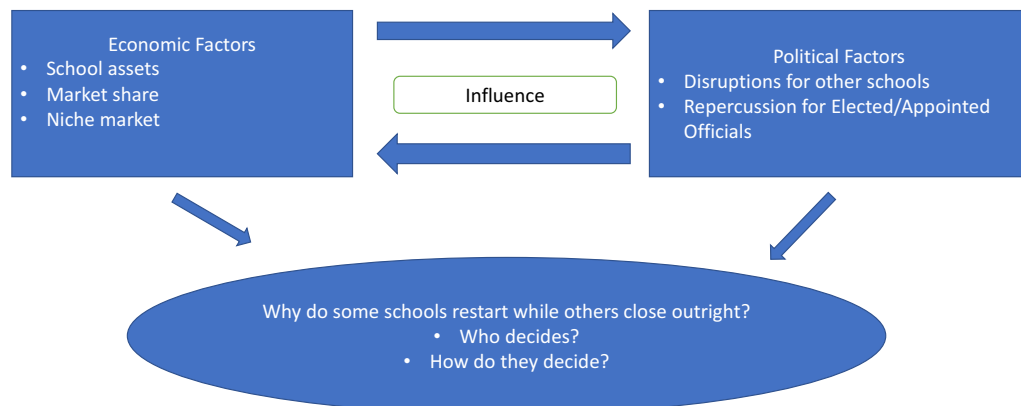
Given the role of politics in other aspects of charter schools, I expected politics might factor into restart decisions as well.

Political factors I expected to influence restarts included the potential disruption of a closure for other schools within the city, the repercussions of a closure for elected or appointed officials, the membership of closing school's boards, and the political and social capital of those boards. I expected that certain political factors might make restarts more likely. For example, if a specific school closure would cause disruptions for powerful actors within the city, the authorizer might be more likely to encourage a board to pursue a restart. I also expected that individual actors, both those associated with closing schools and those who stood to be affected by specific closures, might seek to use their social or political capital to influence decisions about restarts.

I did not expect either political or market factors to influence restart decisions in isolation. The arrows between the rectangles represent that political and market factors are interconnected. As Henig et al. (2003) found in their study of DC charter schools, I expected that actors would shift between economic and political arenas to pursue their interests. The arrows extending from the rectangles to oval with my research questions represent my hypothesis that both sets of factors would influence decisions about charter restarts. While I did not include other factors in my hypothesis about how restart decisions would be made, I did wonder whether other factors not clearly aligned to political or market forces might matter in decisions about restarts. I decided that I would begin with this preliminary framework and might later amend it based upon my research findings.

Using this preliminary framework, I conducted an exploratory case analysis of charter schools, comparing schools that closed and restarted to those that simply closed outright. I examined patterns in the factors that resulted in the closure, and those that led to restarts. I used the work of Doyle and Field (2013), Hess (2001), and Henig et al. (2003) to guide my examination of the factors, considering both market and political influences on the outright closures and restarts. Throughout the course of the study, I remained open to the influence of other factors affecting restart decisions.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Summary

While the limited literature on closures and restarts lacks coherence, it does offer some important insights on the current state of policy and practice. Charter schools are typically closed by regulators for financial instability and management failure, specifically (Paino et al., 2014; Wilkens, 2013). Increasingly, academic

underperformance is also used as a reason to close schools, both by charter authorizers and other state entities (Chingos & West, 2015; CREDO, 2017; Stuit, 2012). And while early charter school theory posited that market forces, such as consumer demand, would predominate to regulate the schools, I did not find literature which discussed closures that occurred as a result of market factors, such as under-enrollment. Consequences of charter school closures may vary by race (CREDO, 2017; Paino et al., 2017) and are dependent on other factors, such as the availability of better schools (Bross, Harris & Liu, 2016; Carlson & Lavertu, 2016; CREDO, 2017; Glazerman & Dotter, 2016). Charter schools, in many jurisdictions, serve a higher proportion of minority students, and research is emerging to look at the varied effects of charter school closures on students by racial group (CREDO, 2017; Paino et al., 2017). Charters as implemented have proven to be affected by political forces in ways that are similar to those affecting public institutions, and to have actively availed themselves of political tactics to protect and extend their interests, rather than using the market alone to gain advantages (Henig et al., 2003). Charter restarts seem to introduce market factors at a new, institutional level, providing charter operators with opportunity to expand their influence through the acquisition of new assets, in the form of new schools.

The tension between market forces and regulatory reality, the venue- and tactic-shifting behavior of charter school actors between markets and politics, and the interaction of market and political forces on charter schools provides a framework for examining empirical data on charter school closures and restarts; this framework can help make sense of why some schools restart and others do not. In the chapter that follows I

describe my study in greater detail, including the case study approach used, the justification for selecting DC as a site, and my data collection and analytic methods.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes my empirical exploration of the phenomenon of charter school restarts. I designed and conducted a qualitative case study to answer the following questions: Why are some schools restarted and others closed outright? Who decides which charter schools are closed and which are restarted? How do they make these decisions?

I begin with a discussion of my methodology and then explain my selection of Washington, DC as an “instrumental case” (Creswell, 2007) for investigating the phenomenon, using eight nested cases of charter school closures, five of which are also charter restarts. I outline my approach to data collection and data analysis, including my case study database and chain of evidence. I conclude with an exploration of my own position as a researcher, which is particularly important for this study given my professional connection to charter schools in Washington, DC, and an assessment of the credibility of my results.

Research Design: Case Study

An interpretive approach to research, specifically a case study methodology, yields understandings of “why” and “how” questions (Yin, 2009) similar to those I have posed for this study. Case study is thus a suitable research method for exploring charter school restarts in Washington, DC. In this section of the proposal I describe and justify the use of case study methodology to examine charter school restarts in Washington, DC. I view case study as a form of disciplined inquiry (Schulman, 2007) that requires a rigorous and systematic study design, and clearly defined data collection and analytic methods. However, case study research is contested terrain and scholars differ in their

definition of and understanding of appropriate uses for the methodology. In developing my research design, data gathering, and analytic procedures, I draw heavily on suggestions from Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2007), because their respective approaches to case study are rigorous and systematic.

Merriam and Creswell provide additional justification for the use of case study methodology for my study. Merriam describes a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (2009, p. 40) that offers “a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 50). Merriam also notes that such studies are “particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy” (p. 51).

Similarly, Creswell describes case study research as “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system” (2007, p. 73) and suggests that this form of inquiry helps to provide an in-depth understanding of a particular case or several related cases. Because we know little about charter school restarts and their value as an educational innovation, a case study, with nested examples of charter restarts within a well-developed charter market should prove informative. For this reason, case study research is a natural choice to explore initial empirical research questions about charter school restarts.

Site Selection: Washington, DC

Although the research on charter school restarts is limited, the existing literature suggests several marketplace conditions for the use of charter school restarts as a strategy for addressing potential school closures (Doyle & Field, 2013). These conditions include:

a supply of school operators “who show high potential for success and openness to leading restarts, rather than just creating new schools,” a charter authorizer with “legal authority, willingness and capacity to oversee” restarts, and regulations allowing a new school operator to “leverage existing school assets” (p.9) such as facilities or surplus funding, from a closing school. Only the charter school marketplaces in New Orleans and Washington, DC satisfy these conditions.

Creswell identifies three types of case studies: the intrinsic, the collective and the instrumental. Each type has implications for a case study’s design. An instrumental case study is focused on an issue or concern and utilizes a single, researcher-selected bounded case to “illustrate the issue” (p. 74). A collective case study is also focused on an issue or concern, “but the inquirer selects multiple cases to illustrate the issue” (p. 74). The intrinsic case study is one in which “the focus is on the case itself because the case presents an unusual or unique situation” (p. 74). The instrumental approach seems most fitting for my exploration of charter school restart for several reasons.

Although the phenomenon of charter school restarts is not unique to Washington, DC, the number of jurisdictions employing this policy alternative is low in relation to the total number of charter markets. Relatively few authorizers have experience in closing charter schools, and even fewer have begun exploring alternatives like charter-to-charter restarts (National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2014). Thus, while charter school restarts are not “intrinsic” to the city, the Washington, DC marketplace is a unique situation within which charter school restarts have proliferated. Given that my professional connections in DC offered access to informants and other data sources, I chose Washington, DC as a bounded instrumental case, nesting eight illustrative

examples of school closures within the case to explore the issue of charter restarts in practice.

Washington, DC is home to nearly 675,000 people, approximately 100,000 of them school-aged children. The city boasts 115 traditional public schools, 120 charter schools, and 47 private schools, both secular and religious, which participate in the federally funded DC Opportunity Scholarship voucher program. This wide range of school choices, coupled with free public transit to school for all children, makes for a vibrant education marketplace.

DC is ten miles square, so it provides a compact geographic footprint. The city is home to two rivers, the Potomac forms the western border and the Anacostia forms an economic border, separating two of the cities eight wards from the rest of DC. Wards Seven and Eight are collectively referred to as “east of the river” and are home to majority African-American neighborhoods, many of which have high rates of unemployment and violent crime and lack access to basic services such as banks, grocery stores, and hospital facilities. Ward Three, often referred to as “west of the park,” is the only city ward without a charter school. Collectively, traditional public schools in Ward Three have the highest scores on state mandated assessments in reading and mathematics; Ward Eight has the lowest scores. Charters across all wards, on average, have outperformed the traditional public schools in the proficiency and growth rates in reading and mathematics of low-income students (OSSE, 2016).

The history of charter schools in Washington, DC is unlike that of other states. In 1996, the DC Board of Education authorized the first six charter schools in the nation’s capital; the first charter schools opened their doors in DC in 1998. But the impetus for the

creation of charter schools in DC was not locally driven (Carter, 2007). Washington, DC is in a unique position as a city-state over which the United States Congress retains considerable legislative control. All local laws passed by the DC Council are subject to passive approval by Congress; Congress also can generate legislation unique to Washington, DC that affects local public policies.

In 1995, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, and Representative Steve Gunderson (R-WI) attached a rider to the DC Appropriations Bill. The provision sought to institute a system of vouchers and a mechanism to create charter schools in the nation's capital. At the time, DC spent \$9,000 per child on public education, more than \$3,000 over the national average. Yet, on a range of academic outcome measures, DC ranked 49th among 51 jurisdictions (Carter, 2007). Fueled by a desire to implement market-based education reforms in the District of Columbia's Public Schools (DCPS), and bolstered by the poor performance of local public schools, Congress passed the DC School Reform Act (SRA) of 1995 (Carter, 2007).

While a plan for vouchers was removed in committee before the bill was signed into law by President Clinton, the Act established rules for the creation of public charter schools in the nation's capital and named two authorizers for such schools: the elected DC Board of Education (BOE) and a new entity, the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) (Carter, 2007). The BOE was subsequently dissolved as part of the 2007 mayoral takeover of schools, but PCSB continues to authorize public schools in DC and is entitled to approve up to 20 new schools annually.

Since 1995 and the passage of the SRA, charter schools have become an essential component of the public school system in Washington, DC. As of the 2017-18 school

year, 65 public charter schools operate on 120 campuses in DC. These schools serve more than 40,000 students in grades PK3-12, or more than 44 percent of all public school students in Washington, DC.

Enablers in the Charter Marketplace

Charter schools are one piece within a larger educational ecosystem. Charter advocates call this ecosystem, including the charters within a common jurisdiction, a “charter market” (see, for instance, David, Hesla & Pendergrass, 2017). This name, like much of the language used to describe elements within the marketplace, is similar to that used to describe private industry. Authorizers talk about the “supply” of high-quality charter schools they oversee within their “portfolio” (see, NACSA, 2015). Authorizers and funders both use waitlists for charter schools to determine “demand” for additional schools (see, DCPCSB, 2017). The number of students enrolled in charter schools becomes the “market share” (see, Mead, Mitchel, & Rotherham, 2015) and information to help parents learn about and select from among the school choices is treated as “consumer education” (see, Campbell, Heyward & Gross, 2017).

As further extension of the market language, Finn and Manno (2015) write of the “market enablers” that have emerged in places where charter schools are thriving, and describe various conditions present in places where many charter schools are operating. Finn and Manno’s market enablers are a collection of policies and practices that promote choice. Many of the enablers are present in the DC charter marketplace. According to advocacy organizations, DC has one of the strongest charter laws in the country and is consistently rated as one of the “healthiest” charter “states” (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015b). Advocates make the case for the strength of the law based on

several factors which overlap with the enablers described by Manno and Finn. These enablers are discussed in more detail below.

Market Enabler: Funding

Adequate funding is key as a market enabler because it provides incentive to attract charter schools to operate in the marketplace. Charter markets that provide equitable funding for charters and traditional schools have proven more attractive to charter school growth (Mead, Mitchel, & Rotherham, 2015). DC has one of the highest per-pupil allocations of funding in the nation. According to one national analysis, the cost-adjusted revenue per pupil in DC is \$18,933, an amount 59 percent higher than the national mean (EdBuild, 2016). The Office of the State Superintendent⁶ (OSSE) distributes funding to traditional public schools and charter schools on a per-pupil basis via a weighted formula, recently reengineered to include an “at-risk” weight for students with educational challenges. Public charter schools in DC also receive a facilities supplement of approximately \$3,000 per student per year, which allows them to lease or purchase school facilities and to leverage that funding to make improvements and renovations to school facilities (Bhat, 2015). While some charter advocates argue that local government provides DCPS services outside the funding formula, charter schools in DC receive the same annual per-pupil funding disbursement as traditional public schools.

Market Enabler: Choice

Other market enablers are policies and procedures meant to inform families about choice and support the choices made by families. PCSB publishes a Parent Guide to help families interpret the various performance reports for charter schools, including PCSB’s

⁶ While DC is not a state, DC government agencies often use the term “state” to refer to certain entities and programs within DC.

primary accountability framework – Performance Management Framework (PMF). The OSSE maintains the LEARN DC website and MySchool DC, both of which provide families with information about traditional public and charter schools in DC. The three-year old MySchool DC system also provides families with a centralized set of enrollment procedures, including a lottery to determine admissions to both participating charter schools and DCPS out-of-boundary schools, and a hotline to help families navigate the lottery and enrollment process in the city. Eighty-eight percent of charter schools participate in the common lottery (MySchoolDC, 2016).

Market Enabler: Transportation

While DC does not require charter or traditional public schools to provide transportation, the DC Council and then-Mayor Vincent Gray created a Kids Ride Free program for both Metro Bus and Metro Rail within the city. By providing all students with free access to public transit for purposes of getting to and from school, charter schools are relatively accessible to families in DC. Although transportation may still be a challenge for families with younger students, or for families who reside at a significant distance from their school of choice, the Kids Ride Free program provides families with a broad range of plausible school choices in the DC marketplace.

Market Enabler: Partnerships

The DC marketplace also has developed, over time, a web of partnerships with community groups, professional associations, advocacy coalitions and philanthropic foundations that help to support the charter school sector. Multiple human capital organizations help to build, train, and certify new teachers and administrators; such organizations include Urban Teachers, DC Teaching Fellows, New Leaders for New

Schools, the Achievement Network, TeachPlus, and Teach for America. Local non-profit organizations, including the DC Special Education Cooperative, Charter Board Partners, and EdFuel, provide technical assistance and consultation. Two advocacy coalitions, Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS) and the Association of DC Chartered Public Schools, work to advance legislation to achieve funding equity for charter schools, to secure access to public facilities and to prevent regulations that threaten charter school autonomy. Many of these organizations, and the schools they support, receive funding from local and national philanthropic organizations, including the Walton Family Foundation, New Schools Venture Fund (NSVF), Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP), the CityBridge Foundation, and the Flamboyant Foundation (see, for instance, KIPP DC, 2017).

Market Enabler: Effective Authorizer

Another major enabler in the DC marketplace, and perhaps the most important for this study, is the capacity of the sole authorizer, the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB). NACSA has described PCSB as a “model authorizer,” largely because of the Board’s reputation for the rigor with which it examines new charter applications and the Board’s willingness to close schools that have not met the conditions for success set forth in their charter agreements (NACSA, 2014b).

Although PCSB has used a range of education and organizational indicators to hold schools accountable for their charter agreements, in 2011 it launched a new, more comprehensive accountability system for public charter schools. The new system, known as the Performance Management Framework (PMF), was designed to “assess schools in a systematic and fair manner against each other and themselves” and includes five

performance indicators – Student Progress, Student Achievement, Gateway Measures, School Environment, and Mission Specific Measures (PCSB, 2016). Individual metrics and targets have evolved over time, such as the change in the state standardized tests in 2015 and the development of an early childhood scorecard in the same year, but the categories have remained constant. Student Progress measures growth in student scores over time, while Student Achievement evaluates student proficiency on the state assessment in a given year. Gateway Measures evaluate student achievement on specific measures seen as predictive of future academic success, including 3rd grade reading and 8th grade mathematics. School Environment metrics are non-academic predictive measures, including student attendance and annual student re-enrollment rate. Mission Specific Measures are tailored to each school’s design and programming and are agreed upon by the school and PCSB as part of the charter contract.

Results of PMF assessments are released annually in the fall, typically in October or November. Using the framework, PCSB classifies schools in one of three tiers of performance. PCSB classifies high-performing schools as Tier 1; mid-Performing schools as Tier 2, and low-performing schools as Tier 3 (PCSB, 2016). Low-Performing Tier 3 schools are in jeopardy of closure. While this classification is similar to accountability policies used by many states, DC does not empower the state education agency (OSSE) to close schools. While all public schools, including public charter schools, may be designated by OSSE as “Priority” or “Focus” schools under ESEA, OSSE has never closed a school. DC Public Schools neither publicly identifies nor categorizes schools according to academic performance and growth. The PMF, however, has been used twice to formally invoke closure proceedings outside of a renewal decision since its inception,

and several additional schools have voluntarily closed one or more campuses based on academic deficiencies identified as part of the PMF evaluation (see Table 3.1).

While PCSB has closed at least one school annually for the past 14 years, most of the schools it opens remain open. PCSB also allows for a relatively swift process for successful local schools, those characterized as Tier 1 on the PMF, to expand and replicate on new campuses, and PCSB has created an expedited application process for “experienced operators” that operate charter schools in other cities and want to open a campus in DC. Having these processes in place to expand quality school programs also means that DC has a rich supply of quality charter schools, as characterized by their PMF scores, including several willing to and interested in taking over low-performing schools. Such a supply facilitates opportunities to restart closing charter schools.

Nested Cases: Charter School Closures and Restarts in DC

While the charter market has grown in DC, and schools have, on average, historically outperformed DCPS on mandated assessments, not every charter school has done so. Charter failures and subsequent school closures have happened with regularity in DC. In this section, I discuss the rationale for selecting the nested cases for the study.

Table 3.1 lists charter school closures from 1996 through spring 2016 (PCSB, 2016). The first column gives the year of closure; the second column lists the type of closure and the number of schools closed; and the third column provides the stated reasons for closure. PCSB classifies closures as either revocations, when the authorizer required the school to close, or relinquishments, when the school voluntarily surrendered its charter. Under DC law, charter schools are local education agencies (LEAs) and may be single campus or multi-campus LEAs. In 2011, PCSB allowed for the revocation or

relinquishment of a single campus within a multi-campus LEA; these closures are italicized in the table. Prior to 2011, all campuses associated with a charter LEA were closed if the charter was revoked or relinquished.

Table 3.1. Charter School Closures in Washington, DC 1996-2016
¹

Year	# of schools closed	Reasons given
1998 ²	1 revoked	Management deficiencies
1999	2 revoked	Financial and management deficiencies (x2)
2002	3 revoked	Financial and management deficiencies (x3)
2003	1 relinquished	Voluntarily relinquished, due to issues surrounding effectiveness of special education program
2004	1 revoked	Financial and management deficiencies
2005	1 revoked	Failed to meet academic and governance standards upon its five-year review
2006	2 revoked	Financial and management deficiencies; Failed to meet academic and governance standards upon its five-year review
	1 relinquished	Voluntarily surrendered after their five-year review resulted in a 180-day probationary period
2007	2 relinquished	Voluntarily relinquished after PCSB initiated revocation process, due to academic and governance deficiencies; Low enrollment and subsequent financial deficiencies
2008	1 relinquished	Financial and management deficiencies
2009	1 revoked	Academic, governance, and financial reasons
	3 relinquished	Low enrollment leading to financial insolvency (x2); Financial and management deficiencies
2010	2 revoked	Academic reasons; Financial, academic and management deficiencies
	3 relinquished	Voluntarily relinquished charter (x2); Low enrollment
2011	1 revoked	Academic reasons
	2 relinquished	Financial reasons; Low enrollment
	<i>2 relinquished campuses</i>	<i>Academic reasons (x2)</i>
2012	<i>1 relinquished campus</i>	<i>Academic reasons</i>
2013	1 relinquished	Academic reasons
	<i>5 relinquished campuses</i>	<i>Academic reasons</i>
2014	2 revoked	Academic reasons (x2)
	2 relinquished	Academic reasons (x2)
	<i>2 relinquished campuses</i>	<i>Academic reasons (x2)</i>
2015	2 revoked	Fiscal mismanagement; Academic reasons
	1 relinquished	Fiscal mismanagement
	<i>1 relinquished campus</i>	<i>Academic reasons</i>
2016	1 revoked	Academic reasons
TOTAL	18 revoked; 17 relinquished; <i>11 relinquished campuses</i>	

¹This does not include seven schools that were authorized but not opened (1996-2008).

² The authorizer did not close any charter schools in 1996, 1997, 2000, or 2001.

Between 1998 and 2016, 36 charter LEAs closed in DC. Of these, 18 had their charters revoked by their authorizer, either PCSB or the former BOE. The other 17 LEAs voluntarily relinquished their charters for financial, enrollment, management, or academic reasons. Another 11 charter LEAs relinquished one or more of their campuses from 2011-2016; in these cases, the charter contract remained intact and the LEA continued to operate one or more other campuses under the oversight of PCSB. According to PCSB, all campus relinquishments were the result of academic reasons.




As displayed in Table 3.1, prior to 2010, “academic reasons” are never the sole reason given by the authorizer for the decision to revoke a charter, nor for a school to voluntarily relinquish its right to operate. From 1998 to 2010, academics were mentioned five times among other reasons for closure; academics were mentioned alongside governance reasons four times, twice with financial reasons, and once with management reasons. However, 2010 appears to be a key turning point for the primacy of academic reasons for closure. Since 2010, academic reasons was the sole cause for nine closures. Beginning the following year, academic reasons also resulted in the closure of a single campus within a larger charter LEA or in the closure of part of a school program, such as a high school or middle school in a broader educational program.

While 2010 and 2011 were consequential years for changes in how PCSB handled charter closures, 2013 was the first year in which a school relinquished its charter and subsequently restarted with a new operator. In 2014, two of the four LEA closures resulted in restarts, one revocation and one relinquishment. In 2015, two additional school closures resulted in restarts, again, one revocation and one relinquishment.

This pattern of closures and restarts, beginning in 2013, led me to select the time period of 2013-2016 for the cases of closure I explored in this study. Table 3.2 lists the eight cases I selected; this set includes five schools which closed and subsequently restarted and three schools which closed outright. The first column lists the names of each of the schools that closed. The second column lists the names of the new, acquiring schools. The third column lists the names of the three schools which closed, and did not restart.

Many charter relinquishments, such as those which occurred every year from 2006 through 2015 (see Table 3.1) may be market-driven closures, when charter operators voluntarily close in response to low-enrollment or financial pressures. The 2013 relinquishment I explored fit this description. Other relinquishments are more complicated. The two relinquishments I explored in 2014 and 2015 were the result of negotiated agreements between the charter operators and PCSB. Each of these instances is further discussed in the context of specific cases in Chapter 4.

Table 3.2 Charter Closures and Restarts Included in this Study

Charter Closures	Restart Sites	Outright Closures
Septima Clark	Achievement Prep	
Arts & Technology	KIPP DC	
Imagine SE	Democracy Prep	
Options	Kingsman Academy	
Community Academy	Friendship	
Booker T. Washington		Booker T. Washington
Tree of Life		Tree of Life
Potomac Prep		Potomac Prep

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected a wide range of data about each of the cases included in my study. I describe the sources for these data, which included organizational documents, audio visual records, and in-depth interviews with individuals knowledgeable about charter

school closures and restarts. I then provide a brief description of my analytic strategy and how I structured the chain of evidence to answer my research questions.

Data Collection

I followed three key principles of data collection recommended by Yin: I used multiple sources of evidence; I created a case study database; and I maintained a chain of evidence (2009). I explain each of these aspects of my data collection in turn.

Data Sources and Methods

Table 3.3 Overview of Data Sources Used to Address Research Questions

Research Questions	Data Sources
Why are some schools restarted and others closed outright?	<p>Documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published board meeting minutes from closed and restarted schools • PCSB board meeting and public hearing minutes • Transcripts from public hearings • PCSB staff memos • School accountability documents (i.e., PMF reports, School Quality Reviews; Applications for Charter Renewal) • Official notices to closed schools issued by PCSB • Approved asset acquisition documents • Notes from board-to-board conversations <p>Audio Visual Records:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video of public hearings <p>Interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with PCSB staff and board members • Interviews with DME and DME advisors • Interviews with philanthropists and advocates
Who decides which charter schools are closed and which are restarted?	<p>Documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published board meeting minutes from closed and restarted schools • PCSB board meeting and public hearing minutes • PCSB staff memos <p>Audio Visual Records:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video of public hearings <p>Interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with PCSB staff and board members • Interviews with DME and DME advisors

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with board members of closed and restarted schools • Interviews with philanthropists and advocates
How do they make these decisions?	<p>Documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published board meeting minutes from closed and restarted schools • PCSB board meeting and public hearing minutes • PCSB staff memos <p>Audio Visual Records:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video of public hearings <p>Interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with PCSB staff and board members • Interviews with DME and DME advisors • Interviews with board members of closed and restarted schools • Interviews with philanthropists and advocates

I collected three basic types of information: documents, audio visual materials, and interviews. Table 3.3 outlines the variety of data I collected to answer each of my research questions.

Documents and Audio Visual Records

For each closure and restart, I reviewed publicly available documents: PCSB meeting minutes from the public hearings to consider closure/asset acquisition; audio and video recordings of public hearings associated with the school closures and restarts; school accountability documents for closed, restarted, and acquiring schools; and “notices of concern” issued to the schools that were closed and restarted. I also obtained, via a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, other “public” documents that were not available on PCSB’s website. For each closure and restart, I requested the published board meeting minutes of individual schools, and notes from board-to-board conversations between PCSB and individual school’s boards. For each restart, I also requested the asset acquisition documents signed by both the closed school and its acquirer and subsequently approved by PCSB.

PCSB's documents proved to be a rich source of data on the official decisions related to charter closures and approvals of restarts. However, given that PCSB was the source of the documents and that most of the documents were formal in tone, they did not provide perspectives of school-based actors, nor did they help me understand the informal processes which led up to official decisions. One notable exception was the transcripts from PCSB public hearings with closing schools. Since these documents were literal transcriptions of the voices of everyone who spoke at the hearings, they provided a window into the perspective of school stakeholders, as well as PCSB board members and staff. I used all the documents obtained from PCSB to outline the chronology of individual school cases, to identify appropriate informants with whom to request interviews at PCSB and at the schools, and to create prompts for my semi-structured interview protocols.

The documents I obtained from PCSB formed the bulk of my research database. While PCSB provided me with legal assertion that I received all documents available, there were some requested documents that the authorizer either did not have or could not locate. Several schools had an incomplete collection of annual meeting minutes and others lacked documentation referenced in public hearing transcripts or PCSB meeting minutes. Table 3.4 describes the documentary evidence I collected for each of the eight school closures included in the study. The first column names the case and provides the name of the closed school and the name of its acquiring restart partner school in parentheses. The second column provides a summary of the documentary evidence I used in constructing each case. While I obtained more documents for some cases than others, I

reviewed at least three documentary sources containing no fewer than 100 pages of text for each case.

Table 3.4 Document Evidence (by Case)

Case Name	Documentary Evidence
Septima Clark (APrep)	Public hearing transcript Asset Purchase Agreement PCSB staff memos Board of trustees meeting minutes (for Septima and APrep) PCSB meeting minutes
Arts and Technology (KIPP DC)	Public hearing transcript Asset Purchase Agreement PCSB staff memos Board of trustees meeting minutes (for ATA and KIPP DC) PCSB meeting minutes
Imagine SE (Democracy Prep)	Asset Purchase Agreement PCSB board-to-board meeting minutes PCSB staff memos Board of trustees meeting minutes (for Imagine SE and DPrep) PCSB meeting minutes
Options (Kingsman)	Asset Purchase Agreement PCSB staff memos Board of trustees meeting minutes (for Kingsman only) PCSB meeting minutes
CAPCS (Friendship)	Public hearing video Asset Purchase Agreement PCSB staff memos Board of trustees meeting minutes (for CAPCS and Friendship) PCSB meeting minutes
Booker T	Public hearing transcript PCSB staff memos Board of trustees meeting minutes
Tree of Life	Public hearing transcript PCSB staff memos PCSB meeting minutes
Potomac Prep	Public hearing transcripts (x2) PCSB staff memos PCSB meeting minutes

Interviews

I conducted twenty individual interviews as part of my data collection. Table 3.5 enumerates my study participants, whom I will refer to collectively as informants

throughout the study, and uses broad role categories to maintain the confidentiality of my sources.

Table 3.5 Semi-structured Interviews

Interview Category	Number of Interviews
PCSB staff and board members	6
Deputy Mayor for Education personnel	2
Board members of closed and school leaders of restarted schools	10
Charter advocates and philanthropic funders	2

As part of my data gathering with the authorizer, I requested interviews with staff and current board members of PCSB. My professional relationship with the authorizing agency and its staff assisted me with gaining access; however, I submitted all interview requests through the Director of Communications, per PCSB policy. PCSB granted all six of my interview requests (see the first row of Table 3.5). One of the PCSB informants provided responses that were inconsistent with others from the agency; I used limited data from that interview and only where it converged with other informant testimony. Since documents from PCSB outlined the heavy involvement of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) in both the closure of Community Academy and its restart, I requested and was granted interviews with the Deputy Mayor and a member of her staff.

I used documents from PCSB to identify possible informants from the boards and leadership of all eight closed schools. I used publicly available information and my professional network to obtain contact information for possible informants and sent interview requests to eighteen individuals. I followed up with phone calls when emails were not returned. I connected with thirteen of the eighteen individuals I initially contacted. Two board members from closing schools refused interview. One school

leader from a closed school responded to my emails, but never confirmed a date on which to be interviewed. Two other individuals never responded to my emails and calls.

I conducted a total of ten interviews with board members of closed schools and school leadership of the schools which restarted closed schools. These interviews include school leaders from all five restarted schools and board members from three of the five closed schools. I was not able to interview any school leaders or board members from schools that closed outright.

My ten interviews with school-based informants provided information on philanthropists and charter advocates who had been involved in one or more of the restart transactions. I contacted four possible informants and interviewed two, each with knowledge of multiple restarts included in this study.

Though I am unable to detail the specific school associations of my informants without risking their anonymity, I am confident that the interviews I conducted provided multiple perspectives on each case. I interviewed individuals responsible for decision-making about closures and restarts, including both school-based and authorizer-based decision makers. I also interviewed advocates and funders, individuals outside of the formal decision-making processes, who nonetheless had access to information about the restart decisions. These interviews, in concert with the documentary evidence I collected, provided a base from which I could triangulate my findings. For each closure case, where I was unable to gain access to school leaders or board members, I interviewed between five and six informants from the authorizing board, its staff, and charter advocates and funders about the closure. Since I was able to select informants from both the closing and restarting schools for the restart cases, the restart cases included more interviews.

Nonetheless, for each restart case, I interviewed between eight and eleven informants, including at least one authorizer informant and at least one board member (usually the board chair) or school leader, in addition to DME personnel and charter advocates and funders.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with all informants, seeking to learn from them as first-hand sources. I audio recorded all but two of my interviews and paid a transcription service to have them transcribed for coding; two informants preferred not to be recorded and I took typed notes of our conversations instead.

I began each interview with the same broad inquiry, “Tell me a bit about your experience with charter school restarts in Washington, DC.” From there, I tailored questions to each informant. I asked about a specific restart for those associated with an individual case or about multiple restarts for informants with knowledge of more than one case. I specifically inquired, when it was applicable, about who was involved in discussions of the restart, who made decisions about the restart, how the restart decision was reached, the experience of the restart transaction, and why the school(s) under discussion decided to participate in a restart. I have included all interview protocols in Appendix A.

Analysis: Case Study Database and Chain of Evidence

Throughout the data collection process, I maintained a case study database containing all documents collected, interview protocols, recordings and transcriptions, my notes from all interviews, and analytic memos I drafted as part of my ongoing analysis. This database helped maintain a chain of evidence for the evidentiary base from which I developed responses to my research questions. I used my database and the

conceptual framework described at the end of Chapter 2 for my analysis of each individual case and across the eight cases. I used both pen and paper and Dedoose, a computer software, to code my data and identify patterns within and across the data. I wrote analytic memos to document explanations and lines of argument throughout the analytic process and referred to those memos and notes on data patterns as I drafted each nested case. I employed member checking (Merriam, 2009) of both my raw data and my analysis to help ensure that my interpretations of my data are sound and resonated with those who have experienced charter school restarts in Washington, DC. I also sought out peer debrief opportunities throughout my analysis, to check that my claims and argumentation made sense to those familiar with charter schools, but not familiar with the specific cases under study.

Position of Researcher

As I briefly discussed in the first chapter, for the past three years, I have worked for PCSB as a Closure Specialist. I was responsible for guiding public charter schools through a “wind-down” process after the authorizer announced their closure or the school relinquished its charter. It was through this work that I learned of the first charter school restart process and became curious about the phenomenon. I developed relationships with both the authorizer and the schools involved in the closures and restarts, which proved helpful in conducting interviews with stakeholders, but which posed challenges in terms of safeguarding against my own biases. In an effort to design a study that includes a variety of stakeholder perspectives and multiple types of data to help ensure that my conclusions have a robust basis, I deliberately excluded my own notes and observations from my work with PCSB as a source of data. While a participant-researcher role is

permissible in interpretive research, Yin notes that some of the major problems related to participant-observation in research include the production of biases, the “commonly known phenomenon [to] become a supporter of the group or organization being studied,” and the conflict of time inherent in playing multiple roles within the study (p. 112-113). I worked to guard against such biases by excluding my notes and observations as a data source and ensuring validity in my study in multiple ways.

Credibility of Results

Maxwell (1992) refers to five different types of validity in qualitative research: descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, evaluative, and generalizability. I considered each of these types of validity in developing my dissertation.

To work to ensure descriptive validity, I collected multiple forms of data and reviewed documents prior to conducting interviews so that I could check for accuracy of informant accounts against historical records and written accounts of events. To work to ensure interpretive validity in my data and safeguard against my own biases, I corroborated my findings across multiple types of data, including interviews with multiple informants for each nested case, and sought multiple pieces of evidence for my claims. Maxwell describes theoretical validity as “the legitimacy of the application of a given concept or theory to established facts” (p.292). To enhance the credibility of my interpretations, and seek theoretical validity, I employed member checking (Merriam, 2009), a review of my raw data (i.e., interview transcriptions) and analysis (i.e., analytic memos) by study informants.

Maxwell’s evaluative validity and generalizability are less applicable to my study. I did not design my study using an external evaluative framework nor do I use my

findings to evaluate the merits of charter restarts. Neither is my study meant to generalize to all restarts across the country, but rather to explore the process of charter restart within a mature, highly developed market. Creswell notes that generalizing from case studies is difficult, “because the contexts of cases differ” (p. 74). The market enablers described above provide for a dynamic charter school marketplace somewhat unique to DC. While I do not expect this study to provide broadly generalized findings that can predict what will happen in other jurisdictions, to the extent that other charter marketplaces have or develop similar enablers, the findings may prove informative. My focus in this study is, instead, on analytic generalizations (Firestone, 1993), with an interest in generalizing my results to relevant theories and related constructs that will help the field understand charter school closures and restarts.

Summary

In this chapter I explained the selection of qualitative case study as my research methodology and the choice of Washington, DC as an instrumental case. I offered a brief history of charter schools in DC and described the existence of market enablers that make the city ripe for study of charter school closures and restarts. I identified a specific set of decision events and described my selection of eight nested cases for the study. I then outlined my approach to data collection and analysis, procedures for gaining access to data, and the content of my study database. I concluded the chapter with a variety of methods I employed to safeguard against my own biases in the research and to enhance the credibility of my findings. In Chapter 4, I array the data on the closures and restarts which occurred in Washington, DC during the period of study.

Chapter 4: Charter Restarts in Washington, DC (2012-2016)

The next two chapters examine eight cases of charter closures in Washington, DC from 2012 to 2016. Since 2013, nine charter LEAs have had their contracts revoked, relinquished or not renewed by the authorizer, eight of which are the focus of this study³ In that same time frame, there were five charter school restarts. I focus first on the nested cases of the five schools that closed and subsequently restarted. I use each case to build a chain of evidence to answer my three research questions: Why are some schools restarted and others closed outright? Who decides which charter schools are closed and which are restarted? How do they make these decisions? For each nested case, I provide a brief background of the school and a chronology of events that led up to the school closure. I call out specific actors involved in the decision to restart the school. I then identify the factors that influenced the decision to restart the school, specifically naming political factors, economic factors, and other factors that emerged from my data, and discussing ways in which those various factors interacted in the decision to restart.

The Restarts

Five DC charter LEAs were closed and subsequently restarted between 2013 and 2015. There were no restarts in 2016. Table 4.1 lists each restart and some key characteristics of each school. The first column provides the name of each school which closed, the second column identifies the year the charter school opened, and the third column identifies the year of the closure. The fourth column provides the reason the authorizer (DC PCSB) gave for the school closure and the fifth column indicates whether

³ Hospitality High Public Charter School voluntarily closed at the end of the 2014-15 school year, merging its students with DCPS. Since the school was neither closed by PCSB nor was it restarted by a charter operator, its case falls outside the bounds of this study.

that closure was a voluntary relinquishment or a revocation by DC PCSB. The remaining columns provide descriptive information about each school, including whether the school owned or leased its facility, the geographic location of the school, the type of program offered by the school, the student enrollment, and the grades served. Each of these schools was subsequently restarted by a new charter school operator, as described in Table 3.3 in the previous chapter.

Table 4.1 Charter School Restarts in Washington, DC (2013-2016)

School Name	Year opened	Year closed	Reason for Closure (per DC PCSB)	Relinquished / Revoked	Facility status	Ward	Program Type	Number of students	Grades
Septima Clark PCS	2006	2013	Academic deficiencies	Relinquished	Leased	8	Single-gender	300	PK-6
Imagine SE	2008	2014	Academic deficiencies	Revoked	Leased	8	Traditional	600	PK-5
Arts and Technology PCS	1999	2014	Academic deficiencies	Revoked	Owned	7	Performing Arts	525	PK-5
Community Academy PCS	1997	2015	Fiscal mismanagement	Revoked	Owned 1; Leased 3	1, 4, 5	Traditional	1600	PK-8
Options PCS	1996	2015	Fiscal mismanagement	Revoked	Owned	6	Alternative	350	6-12

I use the rest of this chapter to present each of the five nested cases of charter restarts identified in the table above.

Septima Clark Public Charter School

Next I discuss the impetus for the closure of Septima Clark Public Charter School and the process of the subsequent restart, followed by a brief discussion of factors that influenced the decision to close and restart the school.

Impetus and Process

Septima Clark PCS (Septima Clark) is regarded as the first charter school to pursue a charter restart via asset acquisition in Washington, DC. Septima Clark’s board voluntarily relinquished its charter in response to factors that made continuing to operate

the school impossible. It is the only relinquishment which occurred in DC during the period of study.

Septima Clark was founded in 2006 as the only all-boys public charter school in the city. In 2013, it served 225 students in grades PK3 through 6, more than 80 percent of whom qualified for free or reduced lunch. Septima Clark was founded by an African-American female military veteran and Building Excellent Schools fellow. But the school had significant academic and organizational challenges.

Between 2006 and 2013, the school moved facilities three times. The third, and final, facility rented by the school required the school to “nearly double enrollment in 2010 in order to pay the rent” (Charter Board Partners, 2014, p. 1). Since the city provides schools with facilities funding on a per pupil basis, more students meant more money dedicated to facilities’ expenses. The school also struggled to keep academic leadership; it turned over two principals in three years.

Prior to the 2010 school year, the school had relocated to Ward 8 and sought to make significant changes to try and improve student academic performance. One such effort was contracting with a non-profit to support its board of directors in recruiting new board members and in building capacity of the board to help oversee the school’s finances, operations, and academic programming. The board added two new members, one with significant education experience and one with fundraising expertise and prior board experience. With support from the non-profit, the board also hired consultants to support the school’s academic programming and to create a five-year strategic plan.

Despite these efforts, at the end of the 2010-11 school year, Septima Clark earned the lowest possible rating on PCSB’s Performance Management Framework (PMF) –

Tier 3. In December 2011, PCSB conducted a five-year review of the school's charter and provided it with "continuance," permission to keep operating, but also "voiced clear concerns about the quality of the school's academic program" (DC PCSB, 2011, p. 4).

The school's board redoubled its efforts to improve, but solutions proved to be difficult. Septima Clark had hired a new principal for the 2011-12 school year, but by the spring, the Head of School and the principal clashed, and the principal did not return. A consultant working with the school raised concerns about the ability of the Head of School to effectively lead Septima Clark, but the board worried about the viability of the school if they fired the founder. Said one board member,

We definitely had some concerns about what was happening in the school. At the same time...She was the founder. She was a dynamic leader. We trusted her. We believed her. We thought what we were hearing [were] things that were going to improve the school.

Another board member characterized the leader's charismatic approach as both a blessing and a curse. "It was a blessing in that she devoted every bit of her energy to the school," said the informant. "It was a curse because in ways it robbed her of her objectivity about just how well the school was doing and whether action needed to be taken, particularly actions that were beyond her capability."

The board enlisted outside partners to assist the school in improving. Building Excellent Schools performed a "culture audit" of the school in spring 2012, and identified school culture as a "major issue" needing attention (Septima Clark PCS, 2012c). NewSchools Venture Fund invested in Septima Clark as part of an "Instructional Capacity" pilot to improve struggling schools with support for diagnostic assessments,

staff and leadership coaching, and participation in a community of practice with other funded schools (Septima Clark PCS, 2012). But, by March 2012, both the leadership and board of Septima Clark were frustrated with the NewSchools pilot and contemplated how the relationship might be dissolved (Septima Clark PCS, 2012b). A board member said, “I call it the perfect storm. There was [a lot] happening at once and one of the things that was happening was that we needed to find a new location.”

The board of trustees held a retreat in April 2012 to discuss the school’s academic future and to consider the need to move facilities again. The 2010 move co-located Septima Clark in a charter school incubator, a facility owned by the facilities-focused non-profit Building Hope and leased to charter schools not yet able to afford a full building on their own. Septima Clark shared the Birney School building, a former DCPS facility, with Excel Public Charter School, an all-girls charter school. The Birney building was the school’s fourth home in its seven years of operation. Building Hope, the landlord, advised the Septima Clark board of trustees that the school would need to leave Birney at the end of the 2012-13 school year because Excel PCS would be assuming the lease for the entire building to accommodate its growing student population. Unable to negotiate terms with Excel to remain co-located, the board began looking for other facilities. In January 2012, the board was working with Building Hope to attempt to purchase an old Catholic school building in Ward 8, but by March, the Archdiocese indicated it was not in a hurry to sell the building and Septima was discussing another lease with a non-profit in Ward 8 and commercial properties (Septima Clark PCS, 2012b).

The board struggled to find lenders willing to finance a permanent, owned facility because of the school's struggling academic outcomes. While the school had a strong financial position, it could not purchase a permanent building without a mortgage. Though Septima Clark was not officially under consideration for closure by PCSB, its PMF accountability ratings were low enough that experienced lenders in the charter school market knew that the school might be in danger of closure, and thus loan default, in the not-too-distant future. "Because we were ranked as a Tier 3 school, we were having a lot of doors closed around loans and real estate," said a board member.

At the retreat, the board discussed three options for the future of Septima Clark: an internal academic turn-around, led by the current Head of School; an academic turnaround led by an external specialist or school improvement organization; some form of "merger" with a high-performing charter school seeking to operate in Ward 8. Relinquishing the charter and voluntarily closing the school was an option of last resort. The board decided to pursue all three options in parallel. The school administration pursued internal academic improvement efforts while the board formed a special "task force" to pursue the other options. The task force consisted of the board chair and a small group of board members who spearheaded the effort to find external partners and hired a consultant to work with them on this effort. Notably, the task force did not include either of the two parent board members. In June of 2012, the board requested a board-to-board meeting with PCSB to provide them with information on Septima Clark's plans for improvement (Septima Clark PCS, 2012d).

It became clear to the board, in the fall of 2012, that the school had not succeeded in its effort to complete an internal turnaround; only 34 percent of students tested

“proficient” on the spring 2012 state assessments in reading and math. The board had been unable to negotiate an extended stay in the Birney building to allow for adequate time to implement the option to engage an external academic turnaround partner. A board member explained, “that was sort of a knife to the heart because we didn't have a building to operate the school for another year.” At the September 2012 board meeting, the task force provided an update on plans to contract with a consulting firm, TenSquare, to pursue conversations with charter operators about possible mergers. While several board members and the Head of School raised concerns about the price and selection of the firm, the board voted to allow the Chair and the task force to proceed with the contracting process (Septima Clark PCS, 2012e).

In October 2012, the school received multiple pieces of bad news. Septima Clark was under-enrolled by 17 students, which negatively affected the school’s budget (Septima Clark PCS, 2012f). The 2012 PMF placed Septima Clark in Tier 2, but a mere two points out of the “underperforming” Tier 3. At this point, the board task force fully turned its attention to finding a school operator that would be willing to take on its students in exchange for assuming the school’s assets. In partnership with consulting firm TenSquare, the board created an RFP and recruited possible restart operators. Said one board member, “I think we put out the RFP to a total of six or seven different schools, high caliber schools that we thought would be good partners.” According to one account of the process, “the task force evaluated candidate schools using a rubric of high academics, strong leadership, facilities security and culture fit” (Charter Board Partners, 2014, p. 5). Several well-known turnaround charter school operators from the Northeast were among the options the ad hoc committee considered as partners. One operator from

Philadelphia and another from New York offered compelling reasons to be selected, but they did not have a facility that could immediately house the boys from Septima Clark. A board member explained,

We did some interviews with operators, CMOs from other states, and didn't necessarily feel confident that they would be able, even though they had great results where they were, we didn't feel confident that they'd be able to find a space.

Lack of a facility was a problem the board knew well and they felt taking a chance on a proven operator with no building was too great a risk for their liking. A board member recalled that personnel from TenSquare connected Septima Clark with the school which was ultimately selected. "We had conversations with a charter school that, their boys were outperforming their girls," said the board member. "They were a middle school...so it was slightly different, but the conversations we had with the school leader and the academic team really made us think that this could be a viable option."

The board selected Achievement Preparatory Academy PCS (Achievement Prep), a Tier 1 middle school, whose board and leadership agreed to apply to open an elementary school program and act as an "acquisition partner" of the students and assets of Septima Clark. In January 2013, the Septima Clark board voted to relinquish the school charter voluntarily and to merge with Achievement Prep. Said one board member, "It wasn't unanimous... We had four or five board members who voted against it. [The Head of School] as you would expect, and our two parent board members and one of our other board members." But the motion passed and the Septima Clark board forged ahead.

Achievement Prep PCS (APrep) had developed a reputation as a top-performing middle school serving boys and girls in grades 4-8. APrep, as it is commonly known, had contemplated “growing down” to serve elementary grades in the future. When TenSquare approached APrep with the idea of merging with Septima Clark, the school leadership was looking at a new facilities co-location with DCPS that would enable the school to expand in exactly that way. While APrep had not planned to expand quite so quickly, it seized the Septima Clark opportunity and applied to PCSB for a charter amendment that allowed it to serve grades K-3 in a new facility in SY 2013-14. It would later expand to serve PK3 and PK4 in partnership with Appletree PCS, but not until the start of the 2014-15 school year.

While Septima Clark PCS did not have a facility asset, it did have some privately raised philanthropy that it could transfer. Septima Clark PCS also had another asset of considerable value: a student population of 230 boys for whom the board wanted to find an excellent school. Enrolling these boys would permit the new school operator to claim the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF) funds, as well as the Facilities Supplement funds for each child. More altruistically, enrolling these boys would allow a school operator to serve a historically underserved population on the city – African-American males living “east of the river” in Wards 7 and 8.

Septima Clark’s ad hoc board committee moved forward with plans to transfer the school’s real assets to APrep, including working with DCPSB to ensure the right of nearly every student to attend without having to apply through the lottery. Boys in Septima Clark’s PK3 would not be eligible to attend APrep in SY2013-14 because the school would not have PK4; these boys would retain the right to transfer to APrep as

kindergarteners the following year. APrep would receive \$250,000 in philanthropic donations that had been made to Septima Clark and would, in return, provide an annual scholarship to a graduating 8th grader in the name of Septima Clark, the civil rights activist for whom the boys' school was named. The board committee and the APrep board worked out remaining details of the "asset purchase" transaction. While the work between the two boards was described as "very smooth," the ad hoc committee of Septima Clark's board had more difficult conversations ahead.

The committee had done most of its research about school operators and initial negotiations with APrep without advising the full board. They wanted to be able to reach a plan and message it to families once the full plan was known; since both the school's executive director and two parent members sit on the full board, involving the committee of the whole sooner would have required notifying those members. The decision to keep parents out of the loop until the decision was made proved damaging. After the announcement, the founder and Head of School resigned in January. Transcripts of the public hearing held at the school reveal that parents were quite unhappy with having been uninformed about the process.

On February 4, Septima Clark administrators sent letters home with students, notifying parents about the plan to close Septima Clark and to merge with APrep. A meeting for parents was held at the school on February 6. On February 19, PCSB held an informal public hearing in Ward 8 to allow families, school staff, community members, and other stakeholders the opportunity to comment on the proposal. Several informants described this hearing as contentious; one informant explained,

There were many families who opposed [the decision] and they did testify at the charter school board meeting how they felt that their children were safe where they were, that it was a disruption, that they weren't involved in the decision-making and that was true.

By this time, PCSB had not yet voted to approve the planned merger.

On February 25, PCSB formally considered the transaction at its regular monthly meeting. APrep submitted a three page "charter amendment request" to expand its school grades down to PK3 and to partner with Appletree PCS to provide the PK3 and PK4 program beginning in the 2014-15 school year. The amendment request highlighted the school's track record of academic success with the middle school grades and the need for more "high quality seats" in Ward 8, concluding its request as follows:

Looking to build on its recent performance and to fill a demonstrated market need, Achievement Prep is seeking to broaden its impact by increasing its capacity and offering more high quality seats to the children of families residing east of the Anacostia River, specifically Ward 8, by perfecting its organizational and pedagogical models and by offering early childhood and elementary school programs. We believe offering our proven program to children at younger grades can prevent our scholars from even experiencing the achievement gap that historically plaque {sic} our targeted population.

PCSB approved the application from Achievement Prep and accepted the relinquishment of Septima Clark's charter; the authorizer also approved the negotiated agreement between the two schools detailing the assets to be transferred and the rights of Septima Clark students to enroll in Achievement Prep without having to enter a school lottery for

admission. In the 2014-15 school year, however, APrep served less than fifty percent of the boys who had been formerly enrolled in Septima Clark.

Factors Influencing Restart

A complex set of factors led to Septima Clark's closure; an equally complex set of factors resulted in its restart by APrep.

Economic factors played a role in both the closure and the decision to restart. The school closed because it could not secure a facility in which to operate. Septima Clark failed to meet academic goals, but it was not underperforming at a level which triggered PCSB to close the school for accountability purposes. However, the school's failure to perform academically limited the school's options for securing a new facility. According to Septima Clark board members and other informants, the school did not want to lease another space, but the school was considered a poor risk by mortgage lenders, due to its poor academic outcomes. Thus, the loss of the school facility and the inability to purchase a new facility ultimately led the Septima Clark board to relinquish the charter.

Septima Clark did not exhibit any of the economic elements of restarts highlighted by Doyle and Field (2013). The school had no facility nor lease to convey to an acquirer; it could not transfer excess public funds, including an only partially expended OSSE facilities grant, and it was not planning to transfer its physical assets to a substantially mission-similar organization. Septima Clark was an elementary and middle school serving an all-male student population, while APrep served only middle school grades and was co-ed. However, according to informants from both schools, the size of the student population acted as an economic incentive for APrep to acquire Septima Clark's students. Having a ready-made student body, and the public per pupil funding

that would follow them, gave APrep one less thing to plan for in the first year of operation of the new elementary school. It is worth noting, however, that while this was an attractive economic incentive for pursuing the restart, APrep did not ultimately benefit as much as expected from the enrollment of former Septima Clark students. Fewer than 50 percent of students transferred from the closing school to APrep.

Interestingly, the niche market corner occupied by Septima Clark, as the only all-boys charter school in DC, did not seem to influence the school's restart. Septima Clark board members indicated that some operators considered as restart partners were willing to operate as single-gender schools, but the decision to select co-ed APrep was based on their reputation in the city and their access to a facility.

Politics influenced the restart of Septima Clark, specifically in terms of the access to and use of power by the school's board. Despite its many struggles, Septima Clark had a board of directors that had significant capacity, both professionally and financially. Members of the board had both personal and professional relationships with funders and business interests in DC. According to accounts from both board members and other informants, Septima Clark's board leveraged their connections as social and political capital on behalf of the school. Board connections resulted in the surplus philanthropic capital Septima Clark had to transfer to APrep as part of the asset acquisition. Board members used their professional networks to facilitate connections to and funding for the variety of consultants that helped the school attempt its turnaround and to process its asset transfer to APrep after the decision to relinquish the charter. Indeed, one specific board member, an attorney, conducted the negotiation of the "asset acquisition" as a pro-bono service to Septima Clark.

Other factors also influenced the decision to restart. The poor school climate at Septima Clark, including high levels of staff turnover and a weak instructional culture, were cited by consultants as reasons for the school's poor academic outcomes. These climate factors led the Septima Clark board to consider both "turnaround" and restart options and, according to a board member, "the experience showed that schools have a tougher time than you would think of breaking out of a pattern of sub-par academic performance." In light of this recognition, the board worried that Septima Clark families and students might not be able to find other, more effective school options. According to board members and other informants, the fear that closing Septima Clark would result in students attending worse schools motivated board members to pursue a restart with a high-performing operator. One board member cited a "responsibility to the families to deliver on our promise" of an excellent education for their boys as the driving factor in the decision to pursue a restart. Septima Clark board members cited a promised commitment to the Ward 8 community as influential in the selection of APrep, as school that offered that same commitment to its own families. One informant noted, specifically, that APrep was led by an African-American female leader and that Septima Clark families seemed to care about that.

After the successful asset acquisition of Septima Clark by Achievement Prep, four more restarts would follow in quick succession.

Imagine Southeast Public Charter School

In the sections that follow, I discuss the impetus for the closure of Imagine Southeast and the process of the subsequent restart, followed by a brief discussion of factors that influenced the decision to close and restart the school.

Impetus and Process

While the Septima Clark and Achievement Prep transaction was being negotiated, PCSB met with the board of Imagine Southeast PCS (Imagine SE). At the January 10, 2013 board meeting, PCSB voted to initiate revocation proceedings for Imagine SE. The public notice cited Imagine SE's "failure to meet four significant goals and academic achievement expectations and its violation of certain applicable laws over a number of years," as grounds for the decision to move to revoke the charter (DC PCSB, 2013a). PCSB voted 5-0 to initiate revocation proceedings. Seventeen parents, students, and community members attended the meeting and spoke in support of the school. Several cited a concern that students would have nowhere else to go if Imagine SE was closed. PCSB gave the Imagine SE the opportunity to request an informal public hearing, but it did not do so.

Instead, the Imagine SE board responded to PCSB revocation action with a "turnaround plan." The plan included a list of expected improvements that Imagine SE would make during the 2013-14 school year and cited two drastic steps the school would take to change its trajectory. First, the school would close grades 7 and 8 at the end of the 2012-2013 school year; this would require students in 6th and 7th grades to find new schools for the following year. Since neither 7th nor 8th grades are typical "entry grades" for schools in DC, more than 100 students would be left in a difficult position to choose anything other than their neighborhood middle school. Second, Imagine SE's board agreed that if the school failed to "hit certain PMF benchmarks," it would commit to "transfer the school to a high performing operator" (DC PCSB, 2013b) to take over the building and operate a school for the same community, or relinquish the charter

voluntarily and close. According to multiple PCSB informants, the authorizer had serious concerns about the needs of the Congress Heights neighborhood where the school was located and the potentially difficult consequences of closing a school that served more than 600 students. At the February 25th meeting, PCSB voted, again 5-0, to approve the turnaround plan and to stop revocation proceedings.

Imagine Schools, Inc. had a real estate management arm called Schoolhouse Finance, which purchased or leased school facilities and then sub-leased them to individual charter schools, like Imagine SE. The Old Congress Heights School building was home to Imagine SE. It had been a DC Public School, but it was closed in the 1970s and then purchased by the Old Congress Heights Redevelopment Corporation that subsequently leased it to Schoolhouse Finance. Schoolhouse Finance, in turn, sub-leased it to Imagine SE.

PCSB and Imagine SE included an addendum from Schoolhouse Finance in the “turnaround plan” which acknowledged the latter organization’s willingness to terminate its lease with Old Congress Heights Redevelopment Company so that a new operator could lease directly, or, alternatively, to sub-lease the property to a new charter operator “on terms substantially similar to those set forth in the [current] School Sublease” (DC PCSB, 2013b). This provision was important to PCSB because of its perceived need for a “quality” school choice in Congress Heights. Only one other nearby charter school served elementary school students and the nearby DCPS elementary schools were widely considered to be underperforming; Malcom X Elementary, on the block adjacent to Imagine SE, had the second lowest math and reading test proficiency scores in all of Ward 8. Imagine SE’s school building itself is central to the Congress Heights

neighborhood in Ward 8; its auditorium is used by a variety of community institutions, including churches and community organizations. The loss of a school in the space would have an impact that would reverberate far beyond the student population to affect the broader neighborhood community. “This building had just been rehabbed and I think a lot of resources had been sunk into the construction of this facility,” said one informant. “If the operator wasn’t going to be performing up to standards, the question was what can we do to allow this to be a facility in which education is provided in this neighborhood?”

By the following fall, it became clear to PCSB that Imagine SE had not met the agreed upon goals. While its turnaround plan said that it would achieve a score of at least 41 on the 2012-13 PMF, the school achieved only a 26 when PCSB released the scores in early November 2013. Imagine SE’s board meeting minutes from November 2013 indicate that the board decided to pursue a restart, rather than relinquish the charter and close outright. The board began outreach to parents immediately and used an executive session of its meeting to begin the design of an RFP to solicit a new operator to take over the school (DC PCSB, 2013c).

When Imagine SE released its RFP, it sought operators interested in acquiring the school’s assets and re-enrolling all students in grades PK-5, but the school wanted to identify an operator that could grow to serve middle school grades. “We brought them research on the highest performing charter schools locally and nationally...From there, we culled a list for them, but we tried to be really transparent in why we were culling the list in the criteria,” said one informant whose organization worked with the school. “We introduced them, I want to say, to four or five potential partners, that they requested from

that list. They reached out with school visits, invited people to respond to the RFP. They had a very public RFP process.”

In November 2013, PCSB approved Democracy Prep PCS (Democracy Prep), a New York-based CMO, for a charter to serve grades PK-8. The operator was new to DC but had prior restart experience in New York. Democracy Prep completed one of the first charter restarts in the country, in Harlem. Harlem Day Charter School had become Harlem Prep in 2011 and Democracy Prep subsequently made the decision to continue its own expansion via restarts, rather than “new start” schools. Democracy Prep was awarded a federal i3 Grant from the US Department of Education to empower these continual expansions via restart. Democracy Prep applied for charter approval from PCSB through the short-form “experienced operator process” and planned to “begin with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, and then increase one grade per year until the school [served] pre-kindergarten through fifth grade students” (DC PCSB, 2013c). While I found no documentation that Democracy Prep was seeking a DC-based restart opportunity as part of its application, a funder shared that the school was interested in using its i3 grant to support its continued growth via restarting struggling schools in new markets. In addition to gaining access to an existing school-designed facility and an existing student population, Democracy Prep saw the Imagine SE restart as aligned with its mission to serve students who were underserved by struggling charter schools. One informant said of Democracy Prep, they “genuinely have that institutional orientation toward the toughest situations... [they] run toward them, not away from them.”

Per school board meeting minutes from December 2013, the board of Imagine SE selected Democracy Prep to be its restart partner and forwarded notice of this decision to

PCSB; the school notified parents after the holiday break in January 2014. PCSB considered the proposed agreement between Imagine SE and Democracy Prep at its February 2014 board meeting. Since PCSB had already approved Democracy Prep as a new operator and since the authorizer had already expected a potential restart of Imagine SE, questions from the authorizer at the meeting were limited. PCSB members focused questions on the ability of the schools to reach agreement by the July 1 deadline, facilities terms, and the possibility of future expansion to serve middle school grades in the Congress Heights again.

In the last two weeks of April 2014, PCSB held a public hearing for and a vote to approve the charter amendment that would permit Democracy Prep to serve students through Grade 8 and to increase its enrollment ceiling to 675 in its first year of operation, to accommodate all the students currently attending Imagine SE. The amendment request also described Democracy Prep's intention to provide single-sex instruction by classroom, as Imagine SE had done. Adopting this instructional approach was one condition of the asset purchase agreement between the two schools, because it was something the board of Imagine SE thought mattered a great deal to the families served by the school. PCSB voted to approve the amendment request by unanimous vote.

Minutes from the July 2014 board meeting show that Democracy Prep assumed the lease on the school facility from Schoolhouse Finance in June and provided cosmetic updates to the property throughout the summer to transform the Congress Heights campus into the signature yellow and blue color scheme emblematic of Democracy Prep. The school officially opened in August 2014 with 625 students, including approximately 70 percent of former Imagine SE students.

Factors Influencing Restart

According to documents from PCSB, Imagine SE closed for regulatory reasons, both academic and compliance. The school faced multiple instances of non-compliance with governance, special education documentation, and health and safety conditions of the school facility. The academic performance of the school was also quite low, across all grades and subjects. Despite the lack of quality school choices in the neighborhood, only 82 percent of eligible students re-enrolled in the school for the 2012-13 school year, 8 percentage points lower than the PMF target for all charter schools. Though PCSB does not release PMF scorecards for schools in their closing year, PCSB informants shared that the Imagine SE score on the 2013-14 school year PMF would have been the lowest score ever given to a DC charter school. One informant explained, “There's a reason that this was the lowest performing school in the PSCB portfolio and why that last year’s PMF score...would have been the lowest on record...because there were some real needs in the building.” In short, Imagine SE had struggled both organizationally and academically.

PCSB does not evaluate mental health and socio-emotional needs of students in the PMF, but a failure to address these needs may have factored into the closure of the school. “I think the real concentration of need in this building was more than we anticipated. The intensity of the social emotional, mental health needs that were largely being unmet,” struck one informant as key to the academic and climate struggles Imagine SE experienced.

Despite these complex and intertwined reasons for closure, Imagine SE had considerable economic appeal as a charter restart. Imagine SE was one of the few charter

schools in Congress Heights and was able to transfer a long-term lease on a school facility. Despite its low-level of academic performance, Imagine SE had higher rates of student growth and student performance than local traditional public schools. The school had no debt and was highly valued by the community. These favorable market conditions and Democracy Prep’s mission-driven interest in serving high-need students heavily factored into the restart, according to one informant: “[Democracy Prep is] always going to be motivated by the challenge and the need. Given the real profundity of the need in this building...[they] understood that this is really where a high concentration of students needed something different.” The absence of other school options perceived as “quality,” and the large number of students in a facility with a transferable lease made Imagine SE economically attractive for an operator like Democracy Prep.

With no clear alternative options for students, a charter restart was both an economically attractive prospect for a new operator and a politically palatable option for PCSB. One PCSB informant, discussing the prospect of sending more than 600 students in search of new schools, said, “What are the alternatives? If you do just close the school, where are they realistically going to go?” Setting students free of one poorly performing school and right into other equally bad options would not satisfy the goals of an agency designed to increase quality educational options for DC.

Arts and Technology Public Charter School

Art’s and Technology Academy provides a third example of a charter closure and subsequent restart. I provide information about the impetus for the school’s closure and the process of the subsequent restart, and then I discuss factors that led to those decisions.

Impetus and Process

In October 2013, Arts and Technology Academy PCS (ATA) applied to PCSB for a renewal of its 15-year charter. The elementary school, located in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Ward 7, occupied a former DCPS school building in a neighborhood unserved by any other charter school. The school had been formed as a “community school” with an active board, including both parent and community members, and focused intensely on arts programming. The school would produce an annual professional-caliber musical theater production that featured students and teachers across all grade levels, in conjunction with local arts partners including the Kennedy Center. While families were dedicated to the school and the community had a deep and sustained pride in the arts programming, the school had struggled academically.

In 2013, ATA’s board of directors partnered with Charter Board Partners, a local non-profit dedicated to recruiting and training board members for charter schools. It recruited several new board members, including individuals with education and financial expertise. The newly comprised board recognized key academic limitations in the school’s program. The time allocated to preparation for beloved arts performances was detracting from time for classroom instruction in core academic subjects. After a spring 2013 board retreat, the board identified the school leader as an ineffective instructional leader and made the difficult decision to hire a new school leader for the following school year. The board hired a promising leader from another local high-performing charter middle school and anticipated sharing plans for an academic turnaround as part of their renewal request to PCSB.

In mid-November 2013, ATA received PCSB's staff recommendation that the board vote against the request to renew the school's charter. In working with a consultant to prepare their renewal application, the ATA board had considered three options:

...ask the PCSB to allow us to keep all of our grades if we meet certain student performance benchmarks. Option Two would be to keep only PK3 through grade 2, but the Board felt that this would be a disservice to the community. Option Three would be to bring in a new school operator, which has the downside of losing ATA's mission and identity. (ATA PCS, 2013)

One informant explained that the parents played a significant role in the decision to pursue a conditional renewal: "The school was started by parents and the board felt a large responsibility to parents as a result." ATA opted for Option 1 and shared with PCSB their ambitious plans to academically improve the school.

PCSB staff assessed the school's renewal application based on the seven goals in the original charter agreement. According to the staff report, the school had met three goals, had not provided adequate evidence for another two goals, and had failed to meet academic goals in both reading and mathematics. The ATA board shared this disappointing news in a public board meeting with parents, staff members, and other school stakeholders at the end of November, and asked attendees to weigh in on whether the board should request a hearing with PCSB to publicly plead their case for renewal, or whether it should shift attention to a restart option. According to meeting minutes from the November 2013 ATA board meeting, "Various individual audience members, both parents and staff, spoke in favor of fighting for renewing ATA's charter. Support for pursuing the public hearing was unanimous among the speakers" (ATA PCS, 2013). The

ATA board wrote a formal response to PCSB's staff memo that challenged statements about meetings between PCSB and the ATA board, took issue with PCSB's failure to attend to the successes of the early childhood program, and provided evidence for the arts goals PCSB found unsubstantiated. ATA requested a public hearing with the authorizer.

The public hearing was held at the school on December 13, 2013. It was contentious and emotional. PCSB staff reviewed the school's renewal application and the staff recommendation that the school was not eligible for charter renewal. PCSB then gave ATA board officers and school leadership the opportunity to make opening statements before PCSB board members asked questions about the school's renewal application, academic performance, and decisions the board had made, or failed to make, over the past years. The Executive Director of PCSB referenced a meeting he had with board members in January 2013 where he explained that the school was entering "its renewal year with a very negative track record and [might] not be renewed" (DC PCSB, 2013). The Executive Director also noted that he "recommended the school consider alternative charter management organizations" and followed up with written notice of this suggestion (DC PCSB, 2013). The ATA board chair had indicated in her opening remarks that "parents started ATA PCS, and that permitting another charter operator to take over the school would not honor the mission of ATA PCS" (DC PCSB, 2013). PCSB reserved the final portion of the hearing for public comment and featured thirteen stakeholders, including the Ward 7 DC Council member, students, staff members, and parents pleading for the school to remain open. A 5th grade student, winner of the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site oratory contest, delivered an emotional plea to keep his school open and apologized to the audience because he and his classmates

hadn't done as well as they needed to on their math and reading tests to "save their school." Parents, teachers, and students submitted letters of support to the authorizer after the hearing; the letters included handwritten notes and artwork from Kindergarten through 4th grade classes. By all accounts, the school was focused on fighting to remain open and not planning to pursue a charter restart.

On January 8, 2014, PCSB unanimously denied the charter renewal request. PCSB contacted the ATA board after the renewal vote and encouraged them, again, to consider charter restart as an option. By the time the ATA board next met on January 28, the school had solicited proposals from other charter school operators interested in acquiring its assets and restarting the school. "Within the course of a week we had schools pitch and make their case for ATA," said one board member, adding, "If we would have handed over the charter to PCSB and closed, it would have felt like we just dropped the ball." The ATA board put out a request for operators, but according to one operator who responded, "it was not an RFO or an RFP. It was a memo that kind of dictated their interests that we were asked to respond to."

The memo included a list of requirements to which interested parties were requested to respond:

First, the new school operator would take every student at ATA; no grades or classes would be eliminated. Next, the integrated arts program would be retained, both during the day and after-school, including performances at THE ARC and partnerships with the Kennedy Center, etc. All ATA teachers and staff would be given a fair opportunity to apply for jobs with the new operator to ensure continuity with the school as we transition. Of course, the new operator has the

right to decide who they bring on board. The ATA Board also asked the new operators to give a fair opportunity to the administrators at ATA. The ATA Board thought it was important to retain “arts and technology” in the new school’s name. They felt it equally important that the same services being provided to ATA families today be provided by the new school, including before- and after-care. The ATA Board needs to make sure that it chooses a school operator that has the capacity to assume ATA’s current mortgage with M&T bank. Finally, the ATA Board is trying to ensure some governance continuity by having some ATA board members serve on the board of the new school operator. (ATA PCS, 2014)

Eight operators responded and ATA’s board conducted initial outreach but determined that some prospects were not the right fit or would not work given timing constraints. The timeframe to identify and to reach agreement with a restart operator was exceptionally tight. The ATA board solicited and selected a new operator within 6 weeks of PCSB’s non-renewal vote.

KIPP DC and Friendship, both DC-based, and Scholar Academies, a Philadelphia-based operator, all made the “short list.” The ATA board had each operator visit and tour the school, meet with school and board leadership, and meet with the school community to get feedback on their final selection. According to one informant, “They held a meeting at one of the board member’s offices to interview the people that were interested in [the restart] and then they voted. I think they had parent meetings at their school...to get feedback from parents.” ATA ultimately selected KIPP DC, an operator of schools in Wards 5, 6, 7 and 8 which scored in Tier 1 of PCSB’s accountability system, the PMF. KIPP DC was a proven charter operator within the city,

and it had a campus just over a mile from ATA with a significant student waitlist. While KIPP DC did not offer the rich arts programming ATA's board had requested, it did have a presence in the community and could afford to take on the mortgage of the school facility. Additionally, KIPP DC offered a full continuum of grades for ATA families and provided guaranteed enrollment through grade 12. KIPP DC was an academically high-performing operator, which factored heavily into the ATA board decision. "They were very frustrated with their own inability to get the academic performance that they wanted, so they were very clear that they wanted a Tier 1 operator," said one informant. The school notified parents of the decision on January 29, 2014.

KIPP DC was open to re-hiring ATA staff and "offered everybody the chance to interview. [They] ended up offering about 50 percent of people opportunities and about a quarter took those opportunities," according to one informant. One person who stayed on was the ATA school leader, who agreed to lead the new KIPP DC early childhood school. "She was responsible for running out a school year with a really unstable environment," according to an ATA board member, "And she did a great job of doing it...She was this force of stability in helping us keep the right people engaged, helping us keep the families engaged." KIPP DC included a board member from ATA on their board, which was understood by an informant to be a way "to ensure the fidelity of what we said we would do."

On February 19, PCSB considered requests from KIPP DC to make the restart possible – permission to operate in a new location and for an increase to its "enrollment ceiling," the maximum allowable number of students it could educate per its charter. While requests like this were usually handled as a two-step process, a public hearing

followed by a vote in a subsequent public meeting, PCSB consolidated KIPP DC's request into a single meeting. Consolidating the decision allowed the authorizer to decide about the transaction before the common school lottery application deadline of March 3. MySchool DC, the common lottery, was new in 2014 and it posed a challenge for decisions about school closure or restarts; parents who did not apply by the deadline would face long odds of getting into any school other than their zoned neighborhood public school.

KIPP DC received unanimous approval on both requests at the February meeting and opened two schools in the former ATA facility in August 2015: KIPP DC: Arts and Technology Academy, serving grades PK3-K, and KIPP Quest Academy, serving grades 1-5. The school leader from ATA joined the KIPP DC staff as the early childhood school principal and hired most of the ATA teachers who had taught grades PK-K. In the 2015-16 school year, KIPP DC opened a middle school on the same campus site, KIPP Valor, providing matriculation to 6th grade for all KIPP Quest Academy students. Nearly 85 percent of former ATA students re-enrolled in the KIPP DC schools.

Factors Influencing Restart

According to PCSB, ATA was closed for failing to meet the goals of its charter, including academic underperformance in both tested subjects. But a combination of political, economic, and other factors contributed to how the closure and restart happened.

“Failure to meet charter goals” is a broad statement which masks several political, specifically regulatory, factors that led to the closure. First, the board of the school at the time of the charter renewal did not have any of the same members as it did at the time of

its founding. Additionally, its board did not seem familiar with the specific procedural aspects related to PCSB policy about charter goal setting and accountability. A lack of board continuity and capacity meant that the board neither felt ownership of the original charter goals to which they were held accountable, nor did they act to change them.

While multiple informants made it clear that ATA's board was clearly dedicated to the success of the school and its students, it lacked procedural knowledge or simply failed to act when offered information about the process and timing of goal-setting, charter amendment, and charter renewal.

PCSB strongly encouraged ATA to restart; the authorizer saw the school as an "ideal candidate" from a market-based standpoint. According to a PCSB informant,

It had a robust student body, it had fairly affordable and manageable set of operations, it was a fine place...from a school culture perspective, but their academic results were just lagging and lagging and lagging year after year after year.

ATA was economically "hot," said another informant, noting ATA owned its "great building", which sat on a large parcel of land and made it ideal for a school operator interested in expanding to middle school on site. According to a PCSB informant, the school also had "a healthy balance sheet," strong enrollment history, 525 students, a loyal population of school families, and was one of few school choice options in its neighborhood within Ward 7. Many of the ideal market conditions a school might seek in a restart were present at ATA and, according to multiple informants, were what attracted KIPP DC to restart the school.

While both regulatory politics and economic market factors influenced the restart of ATA by KIPP, other factors influenced the closure of the school and the conditions under which it was restarted. The performing arts component of the school influenced the failure of ATA to meet its charter goals and was a negotiation point for selecting a restart operator. Annual performances were a great source of pride to the ATA community; according to multiple informants, the school calendar was adjusted to allot significant time for rehearsal leading up to both the winter and spring musicals. Time spent in rehearsals was time missed from academic subjects and, per informants, significantly impacted student preparation for and performance on standardized assessments. Yet, the school was founded as an arts-focused school and recordings and minutes from the public hearing indicated strong support from the parent community to maintain this specialty focus. PCSB accountability goals allow schools to include two “mission-specific” indicators, but they also require that academic performance and growth be weighted more heavily. While ATA was satisfying its parent consumers with its arts programming and performances, time dedicated to performance preparation reduced time spent on subjects for which it was held accountable. When KIPP responded to the RFP, it was clear in its intention to reduce the focus on performing arts in order to ensure higher academic outcomes.

Two additional restarts began with legal investigations by the Office of the Attorney General.

Options Public Charter School

As just noted, the impetus for the closure and restart of Options Public Charter School is different from the three cases previously discussed. I present information about

the impetus for the closure of Options Public Charter School closure and the process of its restart; then, as with the other cases, I discuss factors that influenced the decision to close and restart the school.

Impetus and Process

Options Public Charter School (Options) served a vulnerable population of 381 students in grades 6-12 in the Kingman Park neighborhood of Ward 6. According to PCSB's staff memo proposing revocation of the school's charter,

68 percent of the population are students classified with disabilities and most of these are classed as level 4 – the highest classification before a student qualifies for a non-public setting. Further, many Options students without classified disabilities have nevertheless been unsuccessful in other academic environments.

(DC PCSB, 2013d)

According to another official report,

18% of students are over-age and under-credited, or at least two years behind their expected grade level given their age...2% are wards of the state, 8% of students are homeless, and in any given week 7 to 10 students are absent because they have been incarcerated. (Options PCS, 2013)

In August of 2013, a comment in a public hearing alerted PCSB that a “number of the senior leadership [of Options PCS] were leaving the school and were forming their own” education management organization. According to a PCSB informant, the departure of leadership led to further investigation, including a forensic accounting analysis because “[we were] concerned about the financial transactions and management of the school.” PCSB shared the results of the analysis with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG),

who further investigated. Ultimately, OAG filed a lawsuit and the DC Superior Court appointed two “Receivers” for the school: one to oversee finances and another to oversee operations and management of the school. Options made headlines in the *Washington Post* in October 2013 for alleged fraud and self-dealing by the school’s board, and the alleged involvement of a PCSB staff member in acts of financial malfeasance.

PCSB notified the newly appointed Options Receivers that the fiscal mismanagement uncovered by the investigation was grounds to begin revocation proceedings immediately. A PCSB informant explained, “We were legally bound to close them. Whenever a school is found to have engaged in financial [misconduct]...I think the School Reform Act is pretty clear. That school will be closed.” At the October board meeting, PCSB staff recommended that the board delay a vote to revoke the charter until the December meeting, allowing the operations Receiver adequate time “to better understand the school and its operations” so that he could “properly represent the school in any revocation proceeding” (DC PCSB, 2013d). The board agreed to delay any action for two months.

The proposal to initiate revocation proceedings was back on the agenda again at the December 2013 PCSB meeting. The meeting opened with public comment; nine speakers from Options addressed PCSB and requested, in often emotional terms, that the board allow Options to remain open. One parent noted that students were blaming themselves for the potential closure of the school; a student offered a petition signed by his classmates which attested to student support for a school he said, “helped him adopt a positive attitude after he was forced to leave other school settings” (DC PCSB, 2013d).

PCSB staff recommended that the board initiate revocation because of “a pattern of financial mismanagement” (DC PCSB, 2013d). Staff noted, however, that if the board voted to revoke the charter, special support would be afforded to all students in finding new and appropriate schools for their needs. While PCSB was careful to note that both charter and DCPS schools could meet the educational needs of Options students, the statement qualified that,

...given the reality of fewer available spaces at charter middle and high schools, it is likely that most of these students would move to a DCPS school. Staff discussed this possibility with DCPS, who have expressed confidence that, with enough notice, they could serve, and serve well, the Options students (DC PCSB, 2013d).

At the meeting, the Receiver presented a status report on Options and explicitly assured the board that “any pattern of financial mismanagement that may have existed has been broken” (Options PCS, 2013). The Receiver also noted that, while the school had come to the attention of PCSB for allegations of financial misdeeds, the academic situation at the school was concerning. He introduced key staff who had joined the school as part of the receivership team, including an attorney with expertise in special education and previous school guidance experience who was assisting in improving compliance and service provision for special education students. The memo made clear that the Receiver did not think charter revocation was necessary nor in the best interests of the Options students, and worried about finding suitable placements for 251 students with disabilities. In lieu of revocation, the memo advocated future school improvement and management under the leadership of the Receiver for the remainder of the 2013-14 school year, as well

as a transition plan to a new Options Executive Director in the 2014-15 school year. Several board members asked about other operators which might be interested in running the school and others asked if the School Reform Act (SRA) defined the required closing date of school once its charter had been revoked. PCSB ultimately unanimously voted to begin revocation proceedings.

Following the revocation vote, PCSB and the Receiver conducted a series of negotiations alluded to in a board memo and in conversations with multiple informants. All parties agreed that more time was needed to sort out the fate of Options. The Receiver requested a public hearing. In preparation for the hearing, the Receiver and PCSB staff drafted a Memorandum of Understanding

that outlines a milestone-based plan to ensure a) students attending Options PCS continue to receive appropriate educational services for the remainder of SY2013-14 and during SY2014-15 and b) the ultimate closure of Options PCS with appropriate transitions for its students. (DC PCSB, 2014a, p. 2)

While PCSB materials from April 23 indicate that such a hearing occurred, I found no record of notes or a meeting transcript.

As part of the process of deciding how to manage the complexity of the situation regarding Options, PCSB hired a new staff member, a Senior Policy Advisor for Special Education. This staff member presented the staff recommendation at the April 29th meeting and advocated that PCSB accept the MOU that would allow the school to continue to operate through 2014-15, under the leadership of the Receiver and his team. The board voted, again unanimously, to rescind its vote to revoke the Options charter.

The deliberation prior to the vote revealed key concerns about closing Options. Board members feared that Options' students would simply drop out, rather than enroll in yet another school if pressed to do so. According to one board member,

The thing about Options was, it served a very specific population of students with disabilities. We knew going in, we do not have a collection of existing operators that have the resources or the capacity to serve a couple hundred students with disabilities. What's going to happen to these students? Where are they going to go? (DC PCSB, 2014b).

Other board members wondered about "the assertion that there should be a school like Options PCS in the city" rather than offering access to a variety of programs to meet students' need and suggested that "all charter schools could do a better job of serving students with special needs, and that it is not PCSB's role to encourage a school where students with disabilities will be isolated" (DC PCSB, 2014b). These questions set the stage for discussions between PCSB staff, the Receiver, and DCPS that would follow over the next few months.

After a series of meetings with DCPS leadership during the spring, it became clear to the charter authorizer that, despite earlier assurances, the public schools were not prepared to handle the return of a significant number of high-needs students, such as those attending Options, to their middle and high school programs. Given the residential zoning of DC's traditional public schools, the return of Options students to their neighborhood schools would have resulted in at least one high school increasing its percentage of special education students from 20 percent to 50 percent. DCPS had previously expelled more than a handful of Options' students and they would not be

eligible to return to the district schools. Additionally, the senior leadership at DCPS did not see a path to assuming the operation of Options in its current state. With that possibility for continuity off the table, the Receiver and PCSB began a process of seeking a qualified operator that could assume the mortgage on the school facility and adequately serve the students enrolled.

The Receiver released an RFP on August 12, 2014 with a deadline for proposals on August 31, 2014; he presented an update on responses to PCSB at their meeting on September 15, 2014. None of the respondents currently operated charter schools in DC, so all interested applicants needed to apply to PCSB for a charter. Two operators applied to PCSB in October: Phillips Program for Children and Families and Kingsman Academy. Phillips Programs, a non-profit operator of private schools in both Virginia and Maryland, had previously applied for and been awarded a charter in DC in 2006, but never opened a school. They were unanimously denied a charter at the November 2014 meeting. Kingsman Academy was a newly formed non-profit, headed by the special education attorney from the Receiver's team. Since the team was currently engaged in day-to-day operations of Options, PCSB board members visited the school as part of their application review. Despite citing concerns regarding "the rigor of the academic program" and the lack of the Kingsman team's "experience running a business, which is critical to running a public charter school," the board unanimously approved the charter. This approval paved the way for an asset acquisition between Options and the newly chartered Kingsman Academy. Kingsman Academy opened its doors with 300 students, including nearly all the former Options students, in August 2015.

Factors Influencing Restart

The closure and restart of Options was highly political. PCSB used regulatory authority to shutter the school, following the allegations of fraud leveled against the school's board members by the Attorney General. PCSB repeatedly referenced, in both board meeting minutes and written memos, the legal requirement within the SRA to revoke the charter of any school with material violations of law. While other, deeply troubling, conditions for students at the school may have been grounds for revocation, the decision to close Options was rooted in the alleged malfeasance of adults. PCSB's decision to allow the Receiver to continue operating Options for a transitional year was, according to documents and informant testimony, motivated by concerns about reasonable alternative schools for the student population. Per informants, these concerns for students were genuine, but tinged with fear about the optics of releasing so many high-needs students from a failed charter back into the education system in the city. These multiple concerns led to the restart of the school by Kingsman.

Political factors also heavily influenced the Options restart. First was concern for the fate of the student population. Students at Options had been unsuccessful in other public school settings and had a broad set of emotional, behavioral, and special education needs. PCSB, DCPS and other government actors shared widespread concern about finding adequate school placements for these students. Political pressure from the traditional public school district further fed that concern. One PCSB informant explained,

We were basically being told directly...by folks at DCPS, 'you cannot just close this school and disperse all the children in this school into DCPS schools.' Not only did [the Options students] have a reputation for being very difficult, high

discipline issues, but many of them, in a sense, were refugees from DCPS. They had been unsuccessful in DCPS schools. The prospect of all those students now going back to the neighborhood schools was really very worrisome to DCPS.

The prospect of sending students back to schools in which they had been unsuccessful and which, multiple informants said, did not want to take them back, was a key reason for pursuing a restart of Options.

Several informants also mentioned fears of losing many of the Options students from school settings entirely and cited fears that a closure would have led to a significant number of dropouts. DC, like many urban jurisdictions, has been focused on increasing high school graduation rates for all students. According to multiple informants, the potential for a significant increase in high school dropouts was a strong motivating factor to find a way to provide continuity for the Options students and to serve them in a school that could meet their needs.

While the push of negative political consequences influenced the restart, so too did the pull of market factors, specifically the assets associated with the school. Options owned a large building. One informant explained,

So, this happens to be a former DCPS school building in a really interesting neighborhood, from a school perspective. It is a residential neighborhood. It is well-located, in terms of it's not too far from a few different metro stops, plus H Street bus lines, so you can get there fairly easily if you're a student.

Options' facility had previously been a school and there was a strong desire by the charter community to keep it in use as a school. According to multiple informants,

continued access to the existing school facility was a strong draw for the team from Kingsman to design their application and acquire the school.

Dorothy Height Community Academy Public Charter School

Similar to the closure of Options Public Charter School, the impetus for the closure of Dorothy Height Community Academy involved concerns about fiscal mismanagement. I provide information on the impetus for its closure and the process of its restart and then discuss factors that led to the decision to restart the school.

Impetus and Process

The Dorothy Height Community Academy PCS (CAPCS) received a charter from the DC State Board of Education and opened its doors in 1998. In 2014, CAPCS served more than 1500 students in elementary and middle school on three “brick and mortar” campuses in Wards 1, 4, and 5. CAPCS served an additional 100 students in an on-line campus, the only such “virtual charter school” in DC. The school founder, Kent Amos, served as CEO until 2004 when he resigned to open and operate a school management organization, Community Action Partners and Charter School Management, LLC (Community Action Partners). The existence of this management company would ultimately lead to the school’s closure in 2015.

While CAPCS operated as a non-profit 501c3 corporation, the management organization was a for-profit, privately held corporation. This corporate structure made the financial records of the management company private, and unavailable to PCSB for examination. One member of PCSB staff explained that,

One of the challenges that we had...was understanding what the school was getting from its management organization, for money that it increasingly over the

years was doling out. We had tried every which way under the law that we could think of to try and get at this information... We were unsuccessful.

Multiple PCSB informants explained that the authorizer had concerns about the management company, but its inability to obtain financial records for the corporation left it unable to substantiate the concerns with evidence.

In June 2014, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) of DC filed suit against Amos and Community Action Partners for financial fraud. Specifically, the OAG alleged of Community Action Partners (referred to as CAPSCM in OAG documents) “that they caused the school to divert funds from its nonprofit purposes” and that “the diverted funds were used to enrich the company and Amos, to the detriment of the school” (Gest, 2014). The OAG allegations were striking:

OAG alleges that CAPSCM and Amos caused the school to pay CAPSCM more than \$13 million in so-called management fees since 2004, including approximately \$4.4 million over the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, when CAPSCM’s purported management work was largely performed by employees of the school. The lawsuit charges that Amos and the management company “are on track to receive about another \$2 million” for the current school year for work that could be performed by school employees. (Gest, 2014)

When the OAG made records from the investigation public, PCSB used the evidence of fiscal mismanagement to initiate revocation proceedings.

The staff memo presented at the December 14, 2014 PCSB board meeting noted that the findings released by DC Superior Court on October 27, 2014 led them to conclude:

...that the pattern of fiscal mismanagement included the misuse of public funds in two ways. First, CAPCS paid two different entities – Community Action Partners and Charter School Management LLC (“CAPCSM”) and CAPCS staff – for the same services over the course of at least two years. Second, CAPCS paid an unreasonable amount to CAPCSM pursuant to the management agreement given the services CAPCSM performed. Further, staff finds that CAPCS has committed a violation of the SRA because the CAPCS board breached its fiduciary duties by permitting the school to make these double payments and to pay CAPCSM an unreasonable amount. (DC PCSB, 2014d)

This “pattern of fiscal mismanagement” was one of the three conditions under the SRA that PCSB said compelled it to revoke a school’s charter; this was the same rationale PCSB used to initiate revocation proceedings against Options earlier the same year. PCSB voted unanimously to initiate revocation proceedings and held a public hearing on January 27, 2015. Given the size of the CAPCS student population and the number of facilities, multiple informants shared that stakeholders expressed concerns about how this closure would proceed.

While CAPCS leased several facilities⁴ from the city, the school owned one building that carried a \$25 million, city-backed bond debt. Neither PCSB nor the Mayor’s office wanted to see an outright closure occur given the large number of students that would be affected and the significant school facility debt which would default to the city.

⁴ Each campus operated by CAPCS at the time of its revocation was named after the founder – Amos 1, Amos 2 and Amos 5; previous campuses, Amos 3 and Rand, had been voluntarily closed by CAPCS for academic underperformance.

Both agencies played active roles to seek a partner that would be willing to acquire the CAPCS' assets and enroll its large student population. One PCSB informant explained,

In that particular case, you had a school with a \$25 million outstanding bond issue that was being revoked, and it ultimately went to a school that had almost a \$50 million outstanding bond issue. There are a lot of decisions that needed to go into that, not the least of which is how much debt did we as a community, and not just an authorizer, feel comfortable assuming on behalf of the city.

Given the potential financial impact of a bond default and the ripple effects of 1500 students re-entering existing city schools, the Mayor's office worked with PCSB to form a multi-agency team to manage the closure and possible restart of CAPCS.

According to informants from the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), the office "coordinated weekly or more than weekly calls with 20 different people to guide conversation. We sort of tackled each issue as it came, and explored options and proposed possible solutions... We worked hard to tackle these tough conversations together." After a complex series of negotiations between CAPCS, several DC-based charter school operators, DCPS, and the DME, three separate entities ultimately acquired the CAPCS assets. DCPS took back one of the leased buildings and agreed to operate the school with all students currently enrolled and all the teachers and staff currently employed. Friendship PCS, a large LEA with a strong financial position, acquired the Armstrong Building and its bond-debt, as well as the virtual campus and its associated building. Like DCPS, Friendship enrolled all students and hired all the teachers and school-based staff. DC Bilingual PCS acquired the remaining leased building, Keene, and a small number of the students previously enrolled at that CAPCS building. The DME

gave all other students in the Keene building enrollment rights at Friendship or the new DCPS school.

None of the informants I spoke with, including those who participated in the negotiations, had a clear answer as to how DC Bilingual was chosen to participate in the transaction. One informant with knowledge of many of the restarts said, “my sense is that some government folks just figured that out behind the scenes.” Since DC Bilingual relocated an existing campus with a fully-enrolled student body to the Keene campus, its assumption of the lease and acceptance of some students does not fit the definition of a charter restart. However, DC Bilingual was selected, somehow, to participate in the larger restart transaction between CAPCS, Friendship and DCPS.

Factors Influencing the Restart

As with Options, allegations of financial wrongdoing were the driving force behind the revocation of the CAPCS charter. PCSB had not been able to identify the malfeasance until records of the privately held management company were made public as part of the OAG investigation, but once PCSB became aware, it was legally bound by the SRA to revoke the charter. Unlike the other closures, academic factors were not considered as part of the CAPCS revocation decision. While CAPCS had previously closed individual campuses due to poor academic performance, PCSB had renewed the LEA’s charter in 2013 in acknowledgment of adequate academic performance at the remaining campuses.

Three main factors led to the restart of CAPCS: facilities, finances, and the size of the student body. Each factor was a combination of both political and economic elements.

Access to facilities is a constant issue for DC charter schools; CAPCS closing meant three former DCPS school buildings would become vacant. CAPCS leased these three buildings from the city Department of General Services (DGS) on 25-year lease agreements. All three building leases had expired and, per DC law, DCPS could reclaim the buildings for their own use or re-offer them to other public charter schools. CAPCS owned the fourth building pursuant to a bond agreement involving complex financial arrangements.

Charter operators interested in expansion would have quickly been attracted to these buildings, simply by virtue of their availability. Leasing city-owned space is a more affordable facilities option than leasing or purchasing commercially owned real estate. However, DGS, a government agency, manages the mechanism for transferring leases. The regulatory process for facilities disposition is inherently political and typically requires a public RFP process and opportunities for community comment on potential lessees. In the CAPCS closure, the inter-agency team lead by DME directed the assignment of two of the leases to Friendship and DC Bilingual, and reclaimed occupancy of the third for DCPS. The disposition of these leases, specifically the lease to DC Bilingual, was not powered by the typical regulatory process, but was the result of some political calculation. Based on my conversations with informants at DME and PCSB, government actors determined and executed the plan for lease disposition on a quick timeline to maximize opportunities for CAPCS student placement.

Finances, specifically related to the bond on the fourth facility, were the second factor in why CAPCS restarted. Said one informant, “they had a bond with the city, a governor’s bond, so the city had a stake in it, if you will...Since the revenue bond was

backed by the city, the ownership of the building” was important to actors beyond CAPCS and PCSB. Had CAPCS been unable to find a restart partner financially able to assume the bond debt, the city would have been required to assume financial liability. Additionally, had CAPCS defaulted on the bond, it would have made it difficult, if not impossible, for other charter schools to secure bond financing in the future. Given the negative economic and political implications of both scenarios, government actors had strong motivation for involvement in identifying a viable restart operator.

The size of the student body was the third reason for the restart of CAPCS. “It was really an effort to make it least disruptive for the students,” said one person instrumental to the restart. Since the school was not closed as result of academic failure, the size of the student body may have been less intimidating for potential restart partners. Said one PCSB informant,

The academic and cultural environment in the schools was not as terrible or as chaotic as you would often find in a school that we closed for academic reasons.

So, the lift of doing the takeover, certainly with CAPCS, was considerably less. Reducing disruption for students at CAPCS also meant avoiding disruption to other schools within the city. PCSB held the final vote to revoke the CAPCS charter in late February 2015; the My School DC enrollment lottery closed the first week of March 2015. Had DME not brokered arrangements to have other schools absorb the majority of CAPCS students, CAPCS parents would have had less than two weeks to enroll via the lottery and would have flooded the lottery with a significant number of unanticipated applications. While other schools within the city had adequate capacity to enroll the CAPCS students, schools with available space were not necessarily geographically close

to the closing CAPCS campuses and nearby schools had not planned for potential additional enrollment demand.

The Closures

Three schools closed between 2014 and 2016 and did not restart. Table 4.2 lists each closure and some characteristics of each, including the reason PCSB named for closing the school, the school facility status, the school program, and the student population.

Table 4.2 Charter School Closures in Washington, DC (2013-2016)

Year opened	Year Closed	School Name	Relinquished or Revoked	Reason for Closure (per PCSB)	Facility status	Ward	Program Type	Number of students	Grades
1999	2014	Booker T. Washington PCS	Revoked	Academic deficiencies	Leased	1	CTE	125	9-12; AdultEd
2000	2015	Tree of Life PCS	Revoked	Academic deficiencies	Owned	5	Afro-centric	300	PK-5
2005	2016	Potomac Prep PCS	Revoked	Academic deficiencies	Leased	5	Traditional	425	PK-6

Booker T. Washington Public Charter School

As with charter school restarts, I discuss the impetus for a school’s closure, but in these three cases I discuss the factors that influenced the decision to close and *not* restart a school. I begin this section with a discussion of the impetus for the closure of Booker T. Washington.

Impetus for Closure

The DC Board of Education authorized Booker T. Washington PCS (Booker T) in 1999; however, it lost its charter in January 2014 as part of a 15-year charter renewal consideration by PCSB. Booker T operated a diploma-granting career and technical education (CTE) high school program for grades 9-12 and three adult education day and evening programs. When the Booker T board applied for charter renewal in October

2013, its board sought to renew only the adult education programs and offered to voluntarily close its low-performing high school. However, the school faced a variety of problems as part of the renewal process.

PCSB considered the school's application at a board meeting in November 2013 and found it had not met goals for either the high school or adult education programs. In its Preliminary Charter Renewal Report, PCSB recommended non-renewal of Booker T's charter, since the school had met only four of its nine adult education charter goals. The school requested and PCSB granted a public hearing.

PCSB held the hearing in Booker T's auditorium on January 14, 2014. School board and staff were given the opportunity to make a brief presentation, and then PCSB welcomed public comments from students, alumni, staff, and families. The late Jim Graham, the DC Council member from Ward 1, where the school was located, spoke on behalf of the school.

The school argued that the PMF used to evaluate the school's progress was inappropriate for the student population served by Booker T. The Booker T board chair argued that the demographics of the student population, including instances of incarceration, rates of poverty, and previous disciplinary issues, should qualify the school for the Alternative PMF, an accountability tool PCSB uses to assess schools which have been determined to serve significantly "at-risk" student populations. The board chair noted that the school had already been designated as an "alternative education program" by OSSE, the state education agency, and for that reason, the High School PMF was an inappropriate evaluation tool for Booker T. School staff made emotional pleas about how the traditional school model, including standard enrollment and standardized

assessments, failed to serve the needs of the Booker T students. The school's executive director pleaded,

I know what the data are...But I also know where our young black boys and men are. And our mission is to make sure that we give them some upward mobility. That's why we're here tonight, and we are willing to fight for that. That's what we do (DC PCSB, 2014, p. 30).

Various other school staff also noted the rigidity of policy that forced Booker T to adjust its model in ways that did not suit its mission.

The school cited two specific policy structures with which it struggled. First, the school was only paid for students enrolled by and present on an October count date, even if additional students enrolled in February or March. This is standard for all DC charter schools but is difficult for schools which use rolling admissions to accommodate adult or other transient student populations. Second, the school felt pressured by NCLB assessment requirements to give college-prep level work at a trade and technical school. Councilmember Graham offered "Not every school is for every student, and not every student is for every school," and requested that PCSB acknowledge the niche student market served by Booker T Washington (p. 38). One adult education staff member noted that, given the construction boom in DC, she would expect that "no training program that would allow a person to have an opportunity to be employed in any capacity on one of the construction sites would be eliminated" (p. 43). A consistent theme of comments at the hearing was that Booker T was filling an educational need within the city. Many speakers were alumni of the school sharing their successful employment stories and requesting that PCSB not close the school. Local businesses and agencies, including

WMATA, the transit agency which operates the DC Metro, also submitted written comments in support of the school and its programs.

During the Q&A period of the hearing, there were multiple exchanges between the school team and PCSB board members that followed a pattern: PCSB would inquire about missing or conflicting documentation it had requested from the school. Booker T would respond with a point of note to data newly submitted to PCSB on the day of the hearing. PCSB appeared skeptical of the school's explanations, as indicated by repeated follow-up questions from individual board members and repeated topics by multiple board members. PCSB board members expressed confusion about the professional certifications obtained by Booker T graduates and about whether the school had completed the required steps to enable their students to receive career certifications that would follow them into the work world.

On January 28, the PCSB staff published a memo recommending that the Board not renew Booker T's charter for any educational programming. PCSB's decision not to renew the charter, for either the high school or adult education programs, was rooted in accountability language. The school had not met its agreed upon academic goals, as required by the SRA, so PCSB argued that "the law obligates the Board to vote in favor of nonrenewal." PCSB also noted several instances of "conflicting and missing information," including claims of certification by the National Center for Construction Education and Research posted on the school website and promotional materials, despite the school having never received such certification. The memo noted that Booker T had encountered problems in all of its prior charter reviews. The DC BOE reviewed the school after five years and found that it offered coursework in only three of 13 advertised

trades. When PCSB first reviewed Booker T in 2011, the school was found to have committed “violations relating to the education of children with disabilities” and was still only beginning to align trade courses with relevant standards, despite having operated a trade-based school for 12 years. PCSB noted instances of Booker T’s non-compliance with authorizer policies, including failing to report nine board-approved procurement of contracts over \$25,000, and it raised concerns about the financial viability of the school.

Factors Influencing Closure

Several factors seemed to work against Booker T from restarting after its closure. Chief among these was what informants referred to as the “low capacity” of the board. As one PCSB informant noted, “I’m not sure they really ever even looked at restart.” Nor did informants think anyone seem interested in encouraging the school to pursue a restart. The board was not particularly connected to any funder or other “champion” within the city’s educational arena, despite several letters of support presented at the public hearing. Booker T had not received grants from any of the prominent local philanthropies nor were its board members connected to the funder community in the city.

Another factor that seemed to work against a restart of Booker T was the school’s facility. “They didn’t own that building. It wasn’t a particularly good building, so it was not a great lease. In fact, that building is now a WeWork⁵ site,” noted one informant. A prominent DC developer owns the building and several adjacent properties. The entire block changed dramatically shortly after Booker T Closed, with the opening of the co-working space, a coffee shop, a beer hall, and a pizzeria. I was unable to find evidence that the landlord offered a new lease to any other school after Booker T left at the end of

⁵ WeWork is a brand name of a co-working space in Washington, DC.

June 2014. According to multiple PCSB informants, Booker T's lack of a building seen as a viable option for another charter school worked against the authorizer encouraging the school to pursue a restart.

The small size of the student body and the availability of other high school options also factored into this lack of outside nudging. "There wasn't the sense that this was going to be a hugely disruptive experience...to the education community. It wasn't like we were in there pushing the Booker T board to do something," said a PCSB informant. While Booker T was the only charter high school offering trade and technical education, there were comparable options within the traditional public school sector. The DCPS high school at the end of the block on which Booker T was located offered many of the same CTE courses, had been newly renovated, and had space available to enroll all of the Booker T students.

Without an engaged or connected board or a valued facility asset, informants described Booker T as a poor candidate for a restart. The small size of the Booker T student body also seemed to work against the school restarting.

Tree of Life Public Charter School

The Tree of Life presents another example of a charter school that closed but failed to restart. I present the impetus for the closure of the school and then discuss factors that influenced the decision to close and not restart the school.

Impetus for Closure

Tree of Life PCS (TOL) opened in April 2000 and served 300 students in PK3 through grade 8 in Ward 5. The school occupied a converted commercial warehouse

space in an industrial neighborhood off South Dakota Ave NE. Its students came from a variety of neighborhoods and many traveled to school via buses provided by TOL.

In February 2014, TOL amended its charter to adopt the PCSB Performance Management Framework (PMF) as its Goals and Academic Achievement Expectations for accountability purposes. Informants described the PMF as a harder standard than what many charters had previously included in their charter agreement; PCSB permitted, but did not require, charter schools which opened prior to 2011 to opt into the PMF in lieu of their original goals. TOL made the switch to the PMF one year before its charter renewal. This permitted PCSB to use the prior two years of PMF data to review the school's performance and decide whether to grant the school a new 15-year term.

In November 2014, TOL submitted its renewal application to PCSB. In its request, TOL described a plan to continue operating only PK3 through grade 2. The school acknowledged "the academic challenges experienced in the upper grades" (TOL renewal application) and offered to transition all students in grades 3-8 to other school placements. At the time of its renewal request, TOL operated PK3-4 in partnership with AppleTree PCS, a high-performing early childhood-focused charter LEA. It used the Appletree PCS curriculum, professional development, and teacher coaches, but employed the teachers and enrolled the students through TOL. This partnership resulted in strong outcomes for early childhood students, but it also raised PCSB concerns about what TOL could accomplish without such a partnership. As a result, PCSB staff recommended against charter renewal. TOL requested a public hearing.

PCSB held the public hearing at TOL in February 2015. PCSB Board members and staff attended, along with school leadership, the school's board, and many members

of the school community. A court reporter transcribed the event. PCSB staff recommended that TOL not have its charter renewed because the school did not meet “the goals and expectations that the school committed to” (DC PCSB, 2015, p.10) in its charter. PCSB staff acknowledged that TOL met all 10 indicators of its early childhood education (ECE) goals, but staff did not recommend accepting the school’s proposal to operate only grades PK3-2.

TOL’s board chair spoke and addressed a sticking point that various speakers would raise during the hearing – the question of whether TOL was considered one campus under the PCSB “multi-campus policy.” When TOL was chartered, PCSB had no policy about how to describe a school in a single location that spanned multiple grade levels. OSSE, the SEA, gave TOL a single identifier code and the school was considered a single-campus. In 2012, PCSB passed a policy giving individual LEAs the ability to identify as a single campus in a single location or as multiple campuses within a single building. This designation allowed LEAs to apply to have grade spans evaluated separately from one another for accountability purposes, such as the PMF and renewal decisions. TOL did not apply for a change in designation. The board chair declared that the school was unaware that failing to apply for a retro-active designation as a multi-campus school could affect their ability to request a renewal of the charter with fewer grades. While he accepted the blame for missing the policy shift, he asked that,

the Public Charter School Board not punish us, or punish our teachers, our staff, our partners, our parents, our guardians, and of course our children, for an administrative oversight in not filing for a multi-campus LEA and approve our charter for renewal. (p.22)

He cited a precedent, Perry Street Prep, a charter school with a single campus enrolling PK-12, which had been allowed to renew only its PK-8 program and close its underperforming high school as part of its renewal.

TOL's founder and executive director spoke next; she addressed the school's mission as one of only two Afro-centric charter schools within the city and described the ways she had worked to mitigate facilities and funding difficulties facing TOL. She highlighted the many funding partners who supported the school, including several well-known philanthropies – the Walton Family Foundation and NewSchools Venture Fund. She also noted that TOL “had 100 percent economically disadvantaged students and 100 percent black students” (p. 24) and went on to note the critical need in the Ward 5 community for a successful school.

PCSB asked questions next. One board member asked about re-enrollment, a proxy measure for family satisfaction with the school. PCSB operates under the assumption that families that are satisfied with their school will re-enroll, so high re-enrollment rates, along with long waitlists, suggest consumer demand for the school and satisfaction with the product. TOL's re-enrollment rate was 70%. The school leader attributed that to having “very transient families” (p.53). Another PCSB board member asked about the school's plan for students in grades 3-8, if the school was allowed to operate PK-2. The school leader named various actions the school had taken, and planned to take, to support parents in finding other schools. These plans included encouraging parents to enroll in the MySchool DC lottery for charter and traditional, out-of-boundary public schools, and welcoming leaders from neighboring schools, both charter and DCPS, to come and speak with families about enrollment.

Community members, including students, parents, teachers, and staff, spoke to close out the hearing. They offered passionate defenses of the school and its support of them and their children. Multiple students made emotional pleas to avoid closure, using variations on the phrase, “I would like to speak to save my school.” One young man offered this, “And I hope when you deliberate on the renewal of Tree of Life, you don’t only focus on the academic or re-enrollment stages, but also focus on the relationship that the school has helped build long-term” (p.69). Parents spoke of selecting the school for safety, for the feeling that the school had teachers who cared about their students “from the heart,” and for the feeling that their students were academically challenged. Several parents noted that nearby schools were undesirable or overcrowded. Parents, too, made emotional pleas, including this one: “Tree of Life matters because our children matter. If you shut down the Tree of Life, you’re in essence shutting down our children” (p. 89).

Factors Influencing Closure

TOL had many characteristics in common with the DC charter schools that closed and were subsequently restarted. The school owned its building, enrolled 300 students, and had been supported by several prominent funders. However, there is no evidence that the school sought out restart partners.

The Afro-centric mission may be worth consideration among the reasons TOL closed. There is only one other Afro-centric charter in DC and it is rated Tier 2, which would make it more difficult for it to be approved to restart an academically struggling school. Finding an out-of-state restart provider with a commitment to Afro-centric programming would not have been possible on the timeline for new charter approval. The difficulty of finding an operator that could get approved by the PCSB, that could afford to

take on the mortgage debt for the TOL facility, and that was willing to honor the Afro-centric mission of TOL all worked against the likelihood that the school would restart.

Timing was another factor working against restart, and it was fully out of control of the TOL board. The school was up for renewal in the same year as the CAPCS closure. One PCSB informant said, “Honestly, I think we had our hands full with CAPCS. I think that was part of it.” Authorizer informants explained that any energy they had for restarts that year was directed to CAPCS.

PCSB informants also noted the composition of the student body as a factor that worked against a restart. TOL students were bused to the Ward 5 campus from neighborhoods across the city. Since students came from a variety of neighborhoods, the impact of 300 students seeking new schools would be dispersed, rather than concentrated on a single DCPS school or neighborhood.

Various informants also suggested that the board relationship with PCSB worked against the authorizer suggesting a restart. The TOL board was quite angry at the authorizer and informants described board members as disinterested in continuing to deal with PCSB, as would have been required as part of a restart. A PCSB informant put it bluntly: “The board was super pissed off at us.”

Despite favorable market assets similar to those in other DC charter restarts, TOL’s closure was marked by other unfavorable conditions, both market and political, that led to the outright closure of the school. It is worth noting, however, that TOL sold its facility more than a year after the school ceased operations. Academy of Hope PCS purchased the building and currently operates an adult education program serving students aged 18 and older.

Potomac Prep Public Charter School

Potomac Prep Public Charter School (Potomac Prep) was also closed but not restarted during the period of the study. I present information about the impetus for the closure and discuss factors that led to Potomac Prep not being restarted.

Impetus for Closure

Potomac Lighthouse Public Charter School opened in 2005 and served 425 students in grades PK3-8. While the school was located in Ward 5, it served students from across the city and provided school bus transportation for students from Wards 7 and 8. The school had a \$300,000 annual management contract with Lighthouse Academies, a non-profit charter management organization based in Florida. In June 2014, the Potomac board requested permission from PCSB to sever its management contract with Lighthouse Academies and re-name itself Potomac Prep. The school's board planned to self-manage for a single year and to solicit a new operator to manage the school beginning in 2015-16. The PCSB approved this change and the school began to self-manage at the start of the 2014-15 school year.

Potomac Prep was slated to undergo its 10-year charter review by PCSB during this year of self-management. PCSB grants charter schools a 15-year contract but conducts in-depth reviews of schools every five years. PCSB does not grant additional years to a charter term as part of a five- or 10-year review. It can however, offer "continuance," or permission to finish out the 15-year charter term, or it can recommend that the school be closed for any of the reasons dictated in the School Reform Act: failure to meet charter goals, patterns of fiscal mismanagement, or material violations of law.

In November 2014, less than six months after approving the termination of the management contract, PCSB recommended revocation of the Potomac Prep charter based on the results of the 10-year review. According to PCSB, “the school met one goal, partially met two goals, and did not meet 17 goals” agreed to in the charter contract (PCSB minutes, November 2014). The school’s board chair argued that the severing of the management contract with Lighthouse Academies was a step towards a turnaround and argued for consideration of the future potential of the school. The new principal argued that “the school tried to amend its goals, but because it is currently in a ten-year review, it was not allowed to do so,” but a PCSB staff member countered that the authorizer had advised board members of a timeline for submitting amended goals before the 10-year review; the board had not done so (PCSB minutes, November 2014). The board ultimately and unanimously voted to initiate revocation proceedings. The school requested a public hearing and PCSB held one on December 10, 2014.

At the public hearing, PCSB staff shared that 13 staff and board members from PCSB had visited Potomac Prep since the November hearing. What the PCSB team saw on their visits “was promising, and it was different than we've observed in the past years here” (DC PCSB, 2014c, p. 8). Staff noted that the board members are given additional discretion in a 10-year review than they are in a charter renewal. Board members may grant continuance to a charter that would not meet standards for a 15-year renewal. The board chair and principal of Potomac Prep were each given time to share their vision and goals for the school and then PCSB board members could ask questions. The questions centered on the changes Potomac Prep had implemented in special education programming for students, assessment and use of data, professional development for

teachers, hiring practices over the past six months, and changes to align the curriculum with the stated goal of arts infusion. The hearing concluded with 45 minutes of testimony from students and parents touting their love for the school and their desire to see the school stay open.

PCSB voted on the revocation at the monthly meeting on December 15, 2014. A staff memo included in the board meeting materials noted that both the hearing and school visits had provided PCSB with evidence that “the turnaround promised by the school is more than a written plan but is underway” (PCSB Staff Memo, December 15, 2014). The memo also offered an important caveat: “answers given at the public hearing to board questions about details of the academic, professional development, and special education programs were vague. The school has provided little actual data to document the impact of the turnaround” (PCSB Staff Memo, December 15, 2014). Weighing the observations and concerns of the board, staff recommended that PCSB grant “charter continuance” to Potomac Prep, under five annual conditions of academic performance, with annual benchmarks for each year leading up to charter renewal. The board approved the decision to grant “conditional charter continuance” to Potomac Prep.

In December 2015, just one year later, Potomac Prep’s board found itself in front of PCSB again when the board voted on a proposal to initiate charter revocation. The school had not met three of four of the first set of annual goals required for its conditional continuance. PCSB notified Potomac Prep of the decision to pursue revocation on November 23. School attorneys disputed the validity of the data and raised questions about the applicability of the goals given a 300 percent increase in the population of

special education students during the 2014-15 school year. Nonetheless, PCSB voted unanimously to begin revocation proceedings for a second time.

PCSB held another public hearing at Potomac Prep and then scheduled the vote to revoke the school's charter. At the February board meeting, PCSB reviewed all data and documentation that passed between the school and the authorizer, including all additional data analyses PCSB completed at the request of Potomac Prep's board. PCSB voted to revoke the school's charter and began closure proceedings.

Factors Influencing Closure

Like TOL, Potomac Prep exhibited similar characteristics to schools which restarted. The school had a large student population and a long-term lease on a facility managed by a landlord interested in renting to schools in a neighborhood with a need for additional high-quality school options. While multiple informants confirm that Potomac Prep considered a restart, the school ultimately closed without finding a successor.

Several informants made it clear that the school initially considered a restart as part of its transition out of self-management. Multiple informants mentioned that Democracy Prep responded to an RFP released by the Potomac Prep board in August 2014, after the request to terminate the contract with Lighthouse Academies and before the 10-year review. After that initial RFP, the new school team decided it would attempt an internal turnaround. The turnaround failed and PCSB revoked the charter as a result.

After the revocation vote, Potomac Prep began restart outreach anew. According to informants, both timing and a growing selectivity in decision-making by potential restart operators worked against restart. One high performing DC-based operator said, "we looked at [Potomac Prep], it's just, I don't know how we would connect it to the rest

of our network. [We] felt it was going to be a thing that's not like the others." The informant explained that the size and location of the Potomac Prep facility would have limited the operator's ability to replicate its usual school design, so it declined to discuss becoming the restart partner. Friendship also considered the opportunity and held a public meeting with parents and families in January 2016 about the potential for it to operate the school. Despite both conversations with potential restart partners, no operator formally contracted with Potomac Prep to pursue an asset acquisition. However, in 2017, after Potomac Prep closed, another school signed a lease with the school's former landlord. The school, Mundo Verde PCS, also serves students in PK3 through grade 5. The lease allows Mundo Verde PCS to open a new campus and to expand its expeditionary learning, dual-language immersion program which is currently rated as high-performing by PCSB. I could find no record that Mundo Verde had considered serving as a possible restart operator for Potomac Prep.

Summary

This chapter arrayed data on the eight DC charter schools which closed between 2013 and 2016. Five closed schools subsequently restarted under new charter operators. Three other schools closed outright, without successors to acquire their assets or to provide enrollment opportunities for their students.

The schools that restarted shared commonalities. All schools transferred some market assets to the new operator. Four of the schools transferred a school facility to the new operator. The authorizer or funders subtly encouraged many of the schools towards restart, though various informants cited the capacity and engagement of the school's own board as an essential component of each of the restarts. Informants also named city

political interests, including reducing disruption to the traditional public school system and preventing a financial bond default, as factors in several of the restarts.

Charter schools that closed either lacked the factors favorable to restarts, such as market assets, or faced unfavorable political conditions despite possessing valued market assets. Time was a limiting factor to identifying a restart partner for one closed school. Other closed schools lacked board will or capacity to act. All three closed schools lacked champions who stepped in to nudge the schools towards a restart following closure.

Chapter 5: Cross-Case Analysis

My research questions were exploratory, intended to shed light on a new, understudied phenomenon. The eight cases of closures in DC provide a deep look at the recent flurry of charter closures and restarts over a four-year period. This chapter will examine trends and themes across the eight cases and offer evidence in response to my exploratory questions. I begin with the question of who decided whether to restart a school, and who was left out of such decisions. I next examine how various decision-makers considered whether to restart a school, including the processes and evidence used to decide. I conclude with evidence that sheds light on the question of why some schools that closed restarted, while others did not.

The Who: Who Decides on Restarts? Who is Left Out of these Decisions?

My first research question asked about the restart decision makers. In inquiring about who was involved in the decision process, I also learned about those who were excluded, deliberately or incidentally, from the decision-making process.

Boards of Closing Schools: Fired but Charged with Hiring Their Successor

The primary decision makers in most DC restart decisions were board members of the closing school. This was true for Septima, ATA, and Imagine SE. The leadership of the outgoing board is described by multiple informants as essential to ensuring that the restart is conducted as an autonomous school-to-school transfer of assets, rather than a process engineered by the authorizer. One PCSB informant explained,

The willingness of the governing board of the original school is an important part of this...if there's just an unwillingness on the part of the governing board to even consider a process it's very difficult to make happen. I wouldn't say it's impossible

but it all depends on the relationship... If they're just hell-bent on keeping control, and suing us, and just taking a more scorched earth approach [it's not going to work].

Indeed, in the cases of Booker T and Tree of Life (TOL), the anger the outgoing boards had towards PCSB was cited by multiple informants as a likely factor in their failure to pursue a restart.

However, not all informants thought that entrusting the outgoing board with this responsibility was a good idea. One informant explained,

I mean, it was as if, you would fire an employee for low performance and say, 'Your job is to hire the next person.' And we were, many times calling PCSB and saying, 'You guys have to take a stronger role in this. You have to take a stronger perspective. They are setting the terms upon which someone is gonna replace them and they are not qualified to do that because they've just been fired from the job that they had.'

Several informants were skeptical about allowing the closing board to select a successor, specifically the difficulty outgoing board members might have in maintaining a broad perspective on the future of the school.

Authorizer: Nudging and Encouraging

Several PCSB informants acknowledged that the authorizer sees itself informally influencing closing-school boards, "behind the scenes," nudging board members to consider the possibility of restart, or "trying to encourage high performing schools to think about doing takeovers." While nudging was a role many informants acknowledged

PCSB played, those same informants voiced concern about the authorizer taking a more formal or directive role. Said one,

I have real questions if it's good for the long-term health of the sector for the authorizer to be brokering this kind of stuff... If PCSB calls the school and says, "Will you please take over this other school?" Then they're negotiating an amendment to the charter or whatever that says, 'We will be held accountable for our PMF scores at the new school for three years.'... I just don't want them to be in the role of convincing anyone to do it. I also think if they're dictating the terms and it doesn't work out, it's easier for the new school operator to say, "But you said I just had to do x, y and z" or "you told me it would all work out" or whatever. I don't know.

All informants agreed, however, that there was a clear oversight and final approval role for the authorizer in restart operator selection.

School Leaders and Restart Operator Boards: Business Decision-makers

School leaders and boards of restart operators were essential actors in restart decisions. The availability of and interest in restarts by high-performing operators was described as a necessary pre-condition for any restart to occur. Informants described the various considerations potential restart operators needed to consider before positioning themselves to acquire a given school. A general sense of the “viability” of the closing school, or, more precisely, its potential as a restarted school, was a common comment.

Said one informant,

I think the viability of the school's operation is part of it too because at the end of the day a [new operator] has to find it viable to even want to continue. I'm

resisting using the word attractive but somebody who's a potential operator who would take the school over has their own calculations to make.

If operators found a given school “attractive,” they then had to navigate their own internal web of actors to formally pursue an acquisition. In some cases, leaders and board members also needed to consult funders or national partner organizations before responding to an RFP or otherwise pursuing a restart. The determination of what was attractive to prospective restart operators seemed especially reflective of market factors, like location, facility and “mission fit” of schools. In determining the “attractiveness” of opportunities, informants described charter operators acting as individual business entities seeking to maximize opportunities for growth and success (Henig et al., 2001).

Local Government Agencies: Occasional Decision-makers

In specific restart decisions, like CAPCS and Options, DC government agencies were key decision makers. DC Public Schools (DCPS), the traditional public school district, became a key decision maker in both cases. In the case of Options, the significant needs of the student population and the legal obligation of DCPS to accept all students led to early conversations around the feasibility of Options becoming part of DCPS. DCPS raised strong concerns about their capacity to absorb the entire Options student population into neighborhood schools and declined to run a stand-alone program at Options, thus removing one possible outcome from the equation.

DCPS was one of multiple government actors in the CAPCS restart decision. CAPCS operated schools on four campuses. Its assets were ultimately divided amongst three LEAs: two campuses were restarted by Friendship PCS, one campus was re-opened as a DCPS school and the remaining building was acquired by DC Bilingual PCS. DCPS

decided it had both interest in and capacity for re-opening a traditional public school in one of the CAPCS buildings which had housed a DCPS school decades before. This decision provided guaranteed enrollment for nearly 500 students affected by the closure.

Private Sector Actors: A “Cottage Industry”

Informants also named multiple private sector actors as influencers in the restart decisions. Banks played a role in three of the five restarts because of mortgages on school facilities. Said one PCSB informant, “In the case of buildings that are owned by the low performing school operator, the banks that own the mortgage, we’ve seen them get involved.” In the case of ATA, the bank that held its mortgage was also the bank for the selected restart operator, KIPP DC. Several informants suggested that the ease of transferring the mortgage was the ultimate deciding factor in the operator selection, over and above any education-related factors.

A second set of private sector actors are consultants, referred to as a “cottage industry” by several informants. One prominent DC education consulting organization was named as a partner in three of the five restarts and, in one case, counted both the closing school and restart operator as clients. While most people saw value in the services provided by these experts for hire, several informants raised concerns about the effects of their influence. Said one,

I think that's a mixed bag in terms of what services those people provide, how good their advice is. At that point, boards are up a creek. They don't have a lot of choices. They don't really have the knowledge base to make these decisions so they need to hire expertise, but oftentimes I don't even think they know what they

need to be hiring for. I have not always agreed [with] the advice folks have given in these situations.

Local funders were also credited with helping increase the likelihood of restart transactions. Local public funding is not yet available to incentivize restarts in DC and none of the five restarts was eligible for federal school improvement grant (SIG). One restart operator said,

Funding is an incentive to go for it. When we were confident we could pull together the resources to do it for a variety of reasons, NewSchools [Venture Fund] had their like new seat, new student formula and...I appreciated their posture which was like, these are not new students in the world, but they are new students for you.

Operators explained that philanthropic funding paid for supplemental education needs of students in recently closed schools, including the cost of academic interventions and mental health services. While NewSchools Venture Fund was named by several of the restart operators as a key supporter, an informant explained that “Other funders also played a role...funders are on a lot of these boards...on both sides of the transactions. I [saw] donors on high and low performing boards use their funder network to work through some of these things.”

Families and Communities: Largely Excluded from the Room Where it Happens

While communities, neighborhoods and their residents were not identified by informants as having a formal voice or decision role in any of the restarts, at least one community raised concerns about a restart. One informant familiar with the Options restart explained,

The neighborhood community was unhappy with Options. You had at-risk kids who were coming in from outside the neighborhood, who were hanging out before the school opened, and hanging out after the school opened, and this was a neighborhood that had changed a lot, like gentrified, I guess, in the time that Options had been existing in that building. So, by the time Options closed, this was now a very middle-class, upper-middle class, and just kind of upper-class neighborhood. I think a lot of them just wanted to see the school go away entirely, like have no school go in.

Despite community members voicing concerns, Options did restart and Kingsman Academy continues to serve a similar student population. PCSB does not have a formal practice of considering community concerns in restart decisions. Several informants suggested that the kinds of community concerns raised when a new-start charter school seeks to open are also likely to arise with restarts if they become more common.

One group of actors mostly missing from most of the DC restart decisions was parents and families. Neither documents nor informant interviews mention parental involvement in operator selection in three of the charter restarts. Informants knowledgeable about the Septima restart voiced the absence of parent voice as a key regret about the process, while informants familiar with ATA cited parental involvement as essential to the selection of KIPP DC.

The Septima restart decision was made by a small committee of the board, which excluded parent members. One informant familiar with the process explained,

With the possibility of these transactions going on, or the board considering these options, [Septima's board] did not share the conclusions of the task force with the

parent board representatives because the sense was they were likely to go talk to all the parents.

Specifically, informants from the board referenced concerns that parents might decide to leave the school mid-year if they knew the school was planning to voluntarily close, and indicated that they kept the parent board members out of the loop until they were ready to announce the selection of Achievement Prep (APrep). Parents expressed anger and frustration over this exclusion at the Septima public hearing and voted with their feet by failing to enroll in APrep; fewer than 50 percent of Septima boys continued to APrep. “There needed to be more tilling of the soil at Septima with families. Families felt like they were left in the dark on the school being in trouble. Communication was way too short, way too late,” said one board informant.

By contrast, informants described ATA welcoming families into the decision-making process about its restart. Parents were consulted on the decision to pursue a restart and interviewed the two operators selected as finalists by the ATA board, showing preference to KIPP DC in their feedback. One informant explained that the school had struggled with parental involvement but when ATA announced the plans to seek a restart partner “the auditorium was standing room only. It was amazing.”

Informants disagreed on the importance of involving families in restart decisions. Another informant noted that the PCSB was sympathetic to excluding families from the process until a final decision was made, saying “We [asked] the Public Charter School Board [about] that specific issue and they said, ‘We understand exactly where you're coming from and you probably need to maintain your confidentiality’.” Other informants felt that parents deserved to have a voice in decisions about restart. All informants agreed

that there are not currently adequate incentives for schools to include parents in the process. Given that one of the original arguments for charter schools was to provide parental choice (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kolderie, 1990), the exclusion of parents from decisions about restart operators is notable.

In sum, a variety of actors, both those with market interests and political interests, influenced restart decisions. But parents and families, actors considered central to the charter school movement, were largely absent from the transactions.

The How: How do Actors Decide on Restarts?

My second research question asked about how decision-makers came to agreement about restarts. Different decision-makers approached restart decisions differently, both in their motivation and in their processes, or lack thereof.

Boards of Closing Schools: Murky Decision Processes and Unclear Criteria

Though all informants agreed that the boards of struggling or closing schools were the lead decision-makers on restarts, they were less clear on how boards made their decision and how they selected restart operators.

One informant said that the decision to restart was driven by the desire to ensure that students “had some continuity and really make sure that [school] options were good options” after their school closed, a sentiment echoed by many interviewed for this study. Another explained the perspective of a closing school’s board, “A school failing is not the fault of children. [The board’s] attitude was, ‘We had our chance. We tried. At this point it is a disservice to children and we want something better for our children.’” All informants from closing-school boards agreed that outright closure was an option of last resort and one that they wanted to avoid.

A board member informant explained that the solicitation process “has to include the most important mission element of the school...[a board] can then search for the right fit leadership-wise, education philosophy-wise, all of that stuff.” The theme of “mission fit” was consistent across all five restarts and was considered an important element in soliciting and selecting potential restart operators.

While informants agreed that finding a mission-aligned partner was important to restart decisions, the actual ways in which boards solicited and selected operators happened “very idiosyncratically for the most part,” according to a funder involved in multiple restarts. Three of the five closing schools used an RFP process to solicit potential restart operators. Another school counted on its consultant to identify possible partners. The fifth school, CAPCS, had a unique process wherein both its solicitation and selection of restart operators was driven by government actors and facilitated by a personal relationship between the leader of CAPCS and the leader of Friendship, one of the restart operators. Three schools held board votes to decide from among the pool of operators. A funder summed up this variety of approaches, saying,

I think in terms of how decisions get made in terms of what schools get restarted, who the operator is, I just feel like it's been mostly personal and random, and not often based on a set of criteria that yields the best chance of success.

Restart Operators: Considering Market and Political Interests

The process to decide to explore a restart was more similar across the five schools from the perspective of the restart operators. Several themes emerged from the data for how potential restart operators made their decisions. First, was the recurrent theme of mission. One operator said of their decision to take on a restart, “having a call to serve

students and not want to see them displaced, those are all reasons to do this...the ability to right a wrong...these kids have needs.” Other informants suggested that expanding via restart is a way for operators to expand the reach of their mission. One PCSB informant said, “I think most of [the high-performing schools] have missions that compel them to serve more and more kids in order to close the achievement gap or provide college options or whatever their particular mission is.” Another restart operator elaborated,

Schools rise and fall based on what adults do, not on the children who come through your door. Providing children who have been historically underserved with a quality education is our mission and we’re doing a good job...at serving students who were underserved.

Another commonly suggested reason for operators to seek out restart opportunities is the opportunity for strategic expansion of their market share. An informant explained the mindset of operators considering restarts, “They have a proven track record of high academic excellence and...this is another, I don’t want to say easy...but it’s a maybe less boots on the ground way of expansion for them.” PCSB informants and operators both explained that high-performing schools seeking to expand might be able to solve enrollment and facilities challenges associated with opening new schools by restarting closed schools.

Whether for reasons of mission, or reasons of strategic expansion – or both – the decision-making process for operators involved legal and financial due diligence, considerations of their own staffing capacity, and consultation with their board. One operator described the decision-making process like this:

Okay, what would it take? Like, Step 1. Do we have the people? If we don't have the people this is not ... If they don't have the people right now that we can put names on this is a no go. Simultaneously, my finance team was doing some due diligence and figuring out, okay what's the situation with the building? What's the remaining debt? Could we take that on? What improvements would we need to do?

In cases like Potomac Prep, several informants explained that operators who had considered a restart declined after these diligence processes.

While informants described multiple reasons high-performing operators might find restarts attractive, they also named reasons operators might reject restarts. Operators described asking themselves questions like, “Do [we] have the talent? How stable are [our] other schools? Do [we] truly have the capacity to take this on and do it with quality? What’s [our] standing with PCSB and can we even get approved for something like that?” One informant called these considerations, including the age and location of the facility, the ownership or lease status of the building, and the financial terms of the lease or mortgage, “ugly reasons not to do it, but real reasons.”

Authorizer: “Nudger” and Approver

PCSB was occasionally responsible for nudging a school to decide on a restart. Informants description of PCSB’s approach offers contradictory evidence of both case-by-case and systematic approaches by the authorizer. One PCSB informant said, “I think that it really is more a matter of looking at the circumstances of each case holistically rather than trying any sort of predisposition or mechanism to make that decision [to urge a restart].” According to multiple PCSB informants, understanding the viability of a

school in the location of the closure, the need for a school in that community, access to available transportation options, and the status of the closing school facility, were all factors PCSB considered before encouraging a closing school board to consider restart. But, PCSB informants said they also considered the impact of a closure or restart on the supply of schools as a factor in deciding whether to nudge a school towards restart. According to a PCSB informant, "...when you look at some of the new [non-restart] schools we launched, I'm not sure they would have met their enrollment projections if we hadn't closed some schools." So, while the authorizer looked at schools on an individual basis for decisions about closure and suggestions about restart, it also maintained a wider view of the supply of options for the market share of students in the sector.

In addition to promoting restarts, PCSB had a formal role in all restart decisions. It had to legally approve the charters for all restart operators. In the case of Kingsman and Democracy Prep, this meant approving charters for new operators in DC; for APrep, KIPP DC, and Friendship, this meant approving existing operators to locate in new facilities and increase their enrollment ceilings. One PCSB informant described the need to "be both consistent and transparent" in how they decided whether or not to approve each restart operator:

I think it's to have the bar and say you know what, we're not approving this. We did that informally with ATA, they were talking with lots of schools and we're like well you should know that if you come before us with a proposal that certain schools take over the school, we're likely gonna vote against it...I think our role is to be a little more skeptical.

One PCSB informant reflected on the difficulty of their discretion in the restart approval process, saying, “we don’t ever want to let any high-quality provider tank themselves by growing too fast, and this is a particularly hard way to grow.”

Government Actors: Opaque Interpretation of the Public Interest

It would be reasonable to expect transparency and standard procedures in the role of government actors, like the DME, in restart decisions. But, in the case of the restart of CAPCS, there was little transparency or few explicit standards about the process of re-allocating facilities and selecting new occupants. None of the informants I spoke with could recall how DC Bilingual was selected as the recipient of the former CAPCS Amos 2 campus facility. CAPCS did not operate a bilingual program at that location, so the selection was not obviously mission-driven. Informants could cite no formal application process for the lease, nor were there records of public hearings about the availability of the facility. A DME official explained, “It was a complex puzzle that we needed to put together,” and shared that agencies made some decisions for the sake of expedience, capacity and availability. Another official explained,

There was some political pressure...around DC Bilingual and finding them space. They’re relatively high-performing. They’re relatively well-connected. They had some issues where they felt screwed over...There was definitely some of that, ‘We kind of owe them one,’ so to speak.

As described above, families did not play significant roles in four of the restart decisions. However, multiple informants from PCSB and the DME explained that they gave significant thought to what they understood to be “best” for kids and families. Said one official,

...what we see from why parents pick schools is, certainly, they want their students to go to a good school, one that they deem as a good school, that also has a location that is convenient for them in a variety of different ways. My guess would be that the parents would choose to remain at a building that was convenient for them, if provided programming that was what they thought was good for their kids.

Given that officials saw convenience as a key factor for parents choosing schools, encouraging restarts seems logical. A charter advocate lent support to this claim, noting that elected officials might benefit from minimizing upheaval for students and families: “I would say...it’s better than the disruption for kids. I think on some level that’s political. It’s bad for elected officials to have that kind of disruption for their constituents.”

Funders and Consultants: Facilitating School Decisions

The “cottage industry” of consultants, funders and other school partners also played influential roles in how schools decided on restarts. Informants ascribed a “facilitating” role to this collection of actors; one noted that, “in that kind of dynamic, you need these kinds of brokers, market makers, whatever you want to call them. You need people with a very specialized set of expertise, people only need it one time, short term.” Consultants were credited for closing schools by “drumming up” potential restart operators and acting as “connective tissue” to make restart negotiations between schools work. Funders were described as having a “vested interest” in seeing restart transactions succeed.

While motivations and actions varied by groups of decision-makers, a few consistent themes emerged about how restart decisions were made. Mission and market factors mattered to both restart operators and closing-school boards in their decision-making processes about restarts. However, the specific criteria used to make decisions was often murky. In sum, processes for decision-making were often more of an illusion than an actual systematic approach, and this was consistent across school-based actors, the authorizer, and government actors.

The Why: Why Do Some Schools Close and Others Restart?

The crux of my study was an effort to understand why some schools that closed were restarted and others were not. I approached the research expecting that a mix of market factors and political conditions might offer explanations. Both market and political factors appear to have influenced restart decisions, but so too did other factors I had not initially considered. Issues of relationships and race (Orr, 1999) also emerged as factors influencing decisions about closure and restart.

Market Factors

Informants cited several market factors as key reasons why schools restarted or did not. The assets of the closing school, its location, the supply of operators looking to grow or to enter the DC market, the mission-alignment between closing schools and restart operators, and the availability of philanthropic funding to support restarts all factored into decisions. Timing, the availability of interested restart partners, and the perceived viability of the closing school were all market factors that worked against restarts occurring.

Assets, significantly real estate assets, were the most commonly mentioned reason for the restart of closing charter schools. One informant explained, “I think one thing that clearly makes it appealing to people is the buildings,” and further elaborated, “real estate was the key driver in both the KIPP DC-ATA transaction and the Imagine Southeast-Democracy Prep transaction. If a closing school has real estate, it has an incredible asset.” The availability of a building removed a key barrier to entry for schools new to the DC charter marketplace. A restart operator explained,

The existence of a building is something that at least you could not have to invest a ton of time in...if you do have a finite amount of attention to give, like, you're either working on things that are directly going to impact student outcomes or you're worried about things like identifying facilities.

Informants noted that having a building designed to accommodate a school and priced at a level that another school had been able to afford was also helpful for attracting restart operators. One operator explained,

This is a city that is expensive from a real estate perspective. It's very difficult to find a piece of land that is accommodating of a school...and if you could find land or a building that would accommodate a school, it can oftentimes be cost-prohibitive.

Even when a facility required taking on a significant mortgage or bond debt, it was still seen as a worthwhile investment. A PCSB informant explaining the CAPCS facility transaction said, “You have to look at the net asset position...[with] \$20 million of debt against an asset that was widely known to be worth way more than that...it was definitely a net accreted acquisition.” In some ways, the ability to acquire a facility was viewed as

the “sweet” end of an otherwise bitter pill, without which, a new operator might not find any reason to invest in a restart. One informant explained,

So, if you don't have any assets, the biggest asset [of them all] being your facility, it becomes really hard to understand why – what's the incentive for the takeover? What's in it for me, if I'm taking you over and I'm taking over a huge debt with you? And low performance? And turnaround? And potentially really angry families?

Informants agreed that facility assets were attractive for operators considering a restart.

Other informants found non-real estate assets to also be possible incentives for restart. Said one, referencing the amount of per pupil allocation that would be “up for grabs” in a restart, “If you close down a charter operator that has hundreds of students, that's a lot of money involved.” Another explained that the hard cash transfer of philanthropic dollars was also attractive to operators. “Septima Clark didn't have real estate, but we had a lot of cash. And so that can really make a difference in being a driver to put one of these deals together.” The location of a school, whether its neighborhood or its proximity to transit, was also mentioned by several informants as a key asset. One successful operator looking to grow said of the school restart it pursued, “It was in a neighborhood that we are very familiar with and that had the longest waiting list.” In short, the assets of the closing school served as a powerful market-based incentive for operators to pursue restart. Closing schools with significant assets leveraged their facilities, fundraising coffers, or niche locations as means of attracting new operators to restart them.

Operators already in DC saw restarts as means to grow, but often confined their interest to restart opportunities that neatly aligned with pre-determined growth strategies.

Said one operator,

We were looking for opportunities that fit what our model is. And our model is not like one small school here, one small school there. It's really a campus-based model. So, there's some filter that's like, could this fit in?

Operators cited the limits of traditional school growth within a tight marketplace as a reason for pursuing restarts. While enrollment in charter schools has increased annually, the supply of students “new” to the charter marketplace is not infinite. One PCSB informant said, “KIPP reasonably understands that it can’t grow forever by opening new schools but wants to continue growing and serving more people in DC so it saw this as a concept that could help it grow its impact.” Growth via restart was, thus, a way to expand an operator’s market share and impact when conditions were favorable.

Just as market factors were positive forces to enable restarts, assets and the supply of operators also acted as limiting factors. “It’s not possible to do it if there’s not an operator that wants to do it. We can’t twist anybody’s arm” said one PCSB informant. Potomac Prep was cited by numerous informants as such a situation. One informant explained, “when Potomac Prep [closed], they searched for a restart partner and couldn’t find anyone who was interested in doing it.” In other cases, like Booker T, there was not an available supply of operators with the necessary mission-fit and capacity to take on the restart. One PCSB informant said,

If we were going to restart it, we would need an operator that sort of specializes...with probably high proportions of at-risk students... Those are hard

to find anyway... Good luck finding established operators that have a track record of doing that well.

When a closing school could not find an interested and available restart partner, or when it served a niche population not served by many high performing operators, restarts were unlikely to occur.

Restarts were also unlikely when other operators saw the closing school as “unviable.” One PCSB informant put it bluntly, “You can’t do an acquisition of a school that is in debt and doesn’t have real assets.” An operator elaborated, “The enrollment thing is real. If the school cannot be financially sustainable or its reputation is damaged in a way that you just aren't going to be able to attract the kids. That takes [restart] off the table.”

In closure cases where restart did not occur, timing was often cited as a factor. According to one charter advocate, “Sometimes these closures happen, and [PCSB has] done a lot better on this, but sometimes these closures happen so late in the year, it's just not feasible to do a restart.” Closures initiated by PCSB were typically announced in the late fall or early winter, but charters facing revocation or non-renewal are allowed due process including public hearings and appeals processes. A PCSB informant explained,

I think the biggest barrier to successful restart is, if the school’s not closed until February, how the heck do you get someone up and running and ready to go, with the staff and all, by September? We try to make decisions by November-December, giving them an extra month. Hasn’t really worked that way, because it’s usually those schools that push back and use up all the legal days they can, so it forces our vote out.

Forcing the vote out to January limits the time parents have to participate in the school enrollment lottery, and to find new school placements for their children. The lottery typically closes during the first week of March, limiting time closing schools have to explore restart as an option. “You can't decide in mid-February ‘Oh, we might look at school combination transaction.’ It’s too late,” said one board member. “It's important for boards if a school is getting in trouble or seems to be having some problems is to think about a rescue exit strategy.”

Even for boards that successfully orchestrated restarts, timing was a factor. Said one such operator, “We had to work so freakin’ fast to make it happen; it’s not even funny”; another explained, “It was like being in the final minutes of the fourth quarter.”

Political Factors

As with market factors, a variety of political factors influenced restart decisions. Restarts were cited by informants as reducing disruption to students and families and were encouraged by both the authorizer and other government agencies, in situations of potential school closings. Informants described schools that closed outright as not problematic enough to the larger education system to generate political interest in nudging them towards restart. Restarts were used by charter operators as means of expanding their influence, and in some cases, as a means of avoiding conflict and confrontation associated with new school openings in neighborhoods. Charter operators that had political power wielded it in restart transactions.

Many informants stated that restarts were encouraged because they were less disruptive to students and families when a school had to close. One PCSB informant explained in detail:

There are principles that we've always wanted to adhere to as an authorizer that were never part of any formal document or policy. Like, I think the most important one would have been that we never wanted to interrupt a school year, that we always wanted to make sure that we did these in a way that was the least possible disruption to the students involved, and then the families, and then to the community, and to the educators. That was one principle that I think we've always tried to adhere to. Then, the notion of what to do about displaced families and how to minimize that disruption for the best interest of the family...so when we got to a point where it became possible to consider a restart or a different governing group running the schools then we started thinking about it.

PCSB approaches restart as “both, and” when it comes to the charter bargain of closure, and is cognizant of the political positioning of its decisions. Said another PCSB informant, “these schools need to close consistent with our frameworks, but [we recognize] that, in some of the cases, kids would go back into a marketplace where they were not going to get a better option.” The authorizer was also cognizant of the disruption the closure of large schools could create within the larger education marketplace within the city. A PCSB informant said, “It’s very daunting to go, how are we going to place these 400, 500, 600, 700 kids in different schools all over the city.”

For some of the charter closures, especially CAPCS and Options, the potential political implications of an outright closure led to the involvement of government agencies not usually involved in school closures, and clear pushes towards charter restarts. One PCSB informant noted that in the case of CAPCS, “because of their debt situation and the relationship to the city, there were also some broader potential

implications for the city's credit and for the ability of the other charter schools in the city to get credit." If CAPCS had closed and defaulted on its bond obligations, the city would have been required to cover the approximately \$20 million debt, and other charter schools seeking bond funding might be denied as a result of the perceived risk. The possibility of lasting effects for the sector was a key factor in the willingness of PCSB to work with a complex cast of stakeholders to ensure a restart scenario that provided "soft landings" to 1500 students and prevented a bond default.

Options informants described political reasons both PCSB and DCPS pushed for a restart. PCSB informants cited fears that a large percentage of Options students would drop out, if asked to find new schools after struggling in so many prior placements. According to documents and informant interviews, DCPS was concerned about having adequate capacity to accommodate the needs of Options' students, and to do so without jeopardizing the academic progress in its neighborhood middle and high schools.

Unlike CAPCS and Options, the closures of Booker T and TOL were perceived by informants as not significant enough, either in the size of the student population or the potential effects on the rest of the city, to warrant support for restart from either the authorizer or other government entities. While one member of the DC Council did testify at the Booker T public hearing, there was no evidence of follow-up efforts by that official or others to exert influence to seek a restart for the school.

The political factors affecting restarts were less clear-cut than the market factors, but issues of power and influence were decidedly at work within the efforts to restart some schools and to close others. The unevenness of the influence led to my

consideration of another set of factors at work in why some schools restarted and others did not.

Race and Relationships

While I had anticipated both market and institutional political factors to influence decisions about charter restarts, other types of political factors emerged in the eight DC school cases. Relational politics and the uneven distribution of relationships and resultant influence across closing schools was described by informants as key to why some schools restarted while others did not. The connection between relationships, influence, and race was also a theme raised by many informants.

Informants named strong relationships within the charter community as key to restarts. In the case of the CAPCS restart, the longstanding personal and professional relationship between the founders of CAPCS and Friendship was credited with the ease of that element of the complex restart. A PCSB informant explained, “I think Friendship wanted to do it and I think they were the partner...that was most likely to be able to, for a host of reasons, do the negotiation with Mr. Amos and the board to get there.” An official, charged with working across government and school operators as part of the CAPCS restart explained, “You know, there were many people who knew each other, sort of over time, we could work with both groups.”

As one informant explained, other relationships that mattered to successful restarts were intra-school, between school leaders and board members: “the charter school space is still a pretty close-knit community, and I imagine that in a lot of these transactions there's probably some overlap of friends and people and prior business associates.”

Where intra-school relationships were weak, informants attributed that weakness to the failure of schools to restart. One informant said of a closing school's leader, "She was really challenged in that regard. It's hard to have the capacity to think differently and learn from models outside; she didn't really have that exposure." Other informants suggested that boards lacking connections could not activate the necessary funding and support partnerships to facilitate a restart process. One PCSB informant suggested of Booker T's board,

It wasn't a particularly well-connected board... They didn't have anybody who was sort of in the ed-reform social world where someone from Ed Forward or NewSchools could call their friend from the board and have an informal conversation and say let's do this, they were just in a different world. You could say that for institutional reasons or you could say that's the social divide of the city but I think lacking those informal ties I think could've had something to do with why [Tree of Life] or Booker T closed outright.

One restart informant shed light the limits of various relationships. "In DC, it is very political. Who do you know? Who is advocating for you – and who is not? Who you let help you, and who you don't?" Within the "close-knit community" of DC charter schools, people drew distinctions between desirable advocate relationships and others that might be less useful politically.

Other key relationships were between the school and outside financial and support organizations. One restart operator had a strong relationship with the bank that held the mortgage on the facility of a closing school and thought this relationship was key to the eventual restart between the schools. In cases where schools lacked institutional

relationships, such as to banks, connections to other partners served as bridges for building social capital that facilitated restarts. One advocate spoke of playing “matchmaker” between closing schools and potential restart partners, or with consultants who could be helpful with a restart transaction.

As multiple informants pointed out, DC is a small place where there are a lot of relationships, financial and otherwise. The importance of the messy nature of the overlapping circles in influencing how decisions played out cannot be ignored.

Another potential determining factor that emerged in my research was the issue of race. Within DC, there is an often discussed, yet unresolved, tension about the role of “black led” charter schools and those led by other, usually white leaders. This tension was mentioned by multiple informants and referenced in multiple contexts. Nearly all charter schools authorized by the former DC Board of Education were “black led,” while those authorized by the PCSB were more often led by white leaders. All eight schools that closed were “black led;” three of the five restarts were “black led.” This tension about race and education reform is not unique to DC. As Orr (1999) found in school reforms in Baltimore, the social capital of school stakeholders seems deeply intertwined with race in the context of closure and restart of charter schools in DC.

Race was a consistent theme in conversations about factors promoting or limiting restarts, underpinning the strength or limits of social capital for different schools. First, it was noted by most informants that the children and families affected by the eight school closures were people of color; while CAPCS enrolled a marginal percentage of Latino students, nearly all children enrolled in closed schools were black. One PCSB informant explained,

We're talking about, largely low-income kids and families, largely African-American kids, east of the river. Geographically detached from the resources west of the river that we all enjoy...schools that service the least advantaged kids and families, are more at risk to potentially not do well. And therefore, to be closed. Those kids are thrust into what could be a very traumatizing experience of their school being closed, losing peers they're used to seeing, losing teachers they're used to dealing with.

Another theme that emerged was the racial difference between closing school leaders, who were most often black, closing schools' boards of trustees, who were often predominantly white, and funders and financial institution partners, who were also predominantly white. It is worth noting that the leadership of PCSB is also predominantly white, though the voting board is more diverse. Informants noted that school leaders perceived racial disparities in the authorizer's treatment of schools led by leaders of color. One school leader said, "When schools started closing, there was a feeling that there was a focus on schools led by people of color...For a lot of leaders of color, I think there is a big mistrust of the authorizer." Another informant wondered whether the authorizer was "setting up certain schools and certain school leaders to have an unsuccessful experience?" There was broad acceptance amongst informants that PCSB should not mitigate accountability on the basis of race, but there was also recognition by informants that there were conversations that needed to occur, but had yet to happen about race and school accountability. One informant said, "I don't think you should keep a poorly performing school open just because the school leader is black or Latino or

whatever. That's crazy. I'm not suggesting that at all. But [race] is something we should be talking about."

Within a place once informally known as "Chocolate City," race is an ever-present issue. Another PCSB informant acknowledged that closing a school parents chose, when those parents are exclusively parents of color, could be seen as a racially-motivated decision.

When we come in and say, 'We're closing this school,' we're basically saying, 'We don't think you've made a very good choice.' And it's a very racial, can be a very racially charged statement, and it can be a very difficult process, where you're basically telling people, 'Yeah, you know what? I know you love this school, but it's not good enough.' Who are we?... You make a choice, is it okay for someone to take that choice away?

One restart operator described a lack of recognition of racial optics by the board of the closing school. "The first community meeting was too many white people trying to sell an idea to a community of color." Another informant praised diversity on a closing school board for the quality of the decision-making process to select a restart operator. "There was a lot of vigorous debate because we had a diverse board – two parents, four to five African-American members, one to two Asian members and the rest Caucasian. People came from different perspectives. This was a big plus." Other informants forecast concerns about future dynamics of closure and restart decisions, given changing racial dynamics within the city and its schools. One said,

I worry a lot about, does the political pressure...frankly, as more middle class white people come into our schools...they don't like the sense of chaos and

nobody in control. We have a lot of technocratic people who are like, ‘Well, it’s inefficient that you have more seats than there are kids in this neighborhood,’ but you can’t actually have choice unless you have some excess capacity, right?

It was clear from conversations with informants, and transcripts of public hearings from closing schools, that race was an undercurrent in restart decisions and a cause of high emotions for stakeholders faced with school closure and restart.

In addition to the market factors that influenced both the demand for restarts in closing schools and the supply of operators available to take on restart opportunities, system-level political factors such as preventing disruption to vulnerable student populations or to larger, city-wide interests were also at play in whether schools restarted. Finally, other powerful politics concerned with the interpersonal dynamics of power and influence affected whether closing schools had access to the relationships, partnerships, and financial capital critical to facilitate restart transactions. Even when restarts succeeded, race was a constant presence in the perception of why particular schools closed and who was enlisted in restart opportunities.

Chapter 6: Discussion

My study asked three exploratory questions about a nascent topic in the research literature: charter school restarts. Since the literature on charter school closures is predominantly quantitative and the literature on charter restarts is currently thin, my study aimed to offer an additional contribution to the literature by providing a qualitative examination of charter school closures and restarts in Washington, DC. This chapter identifies way in which my findings confirm and extend the research literature, provides several points of discussion for how my findings contribute to the research literature, notes some limitations of my research, and offers recommendations for future research on charter school closures and restarts.

Overview of Findings

I studied eight schools closed in Washington, DC between 2013 and 2016. Two schools closed for financial reasons, facing revocation for fiscal malfeasance. One school voluntarily relinquished its charter after facing years of academic difficulties and resultant organizational challenges, including access to a suitable school facility. PCSB revoked or did not renew the charters of the remaining five schools for reasons of academic underperformance. These reasons for closure lend support to the body of literature that suggests a connection between poor academic performance and charter school closure (Chingos & West, 2015; Stuit, 2012). These reasons for closure also support predictions of earlier studies that regulatory closures for academic reasons would increase as academic accountability policies grew in prevalence (Hess, 2001; Wilkens, 2013).

Even so, my findings also help explain results of studies which conclude that there are weak connections between academic outcomes and school closures (Paino et al, 2017). While PCSB closed five schools for academic reasons, the schools were not always the lowest performing schools in the city within a given year. This happened because PCSB closed schools during deep-review cycles, including 5- and 10-year charter reviews and 15-year charter renewals. Thus, while other schools may have been academically lower-performing in any given year than those that were closed, the lower-performing schools were not at a point in their organizational life-cycle to warrant decisive action by the authorizer. PCSB informants described considering the available school alternatives for students in making decisions about closure. They explained that some low-performing schools might be permitted to persist until better alternatives could be offered to students, such as by chartering a new school nearby. While these processes related to academic closure decisions are specific to the DC context, they suggest that purely quantitative exploration of connections between academic outcomes and rates of closure may mask elements of the policy context which are crucial for understanding accountability as implemented.

Five of the eight schools that closed subsequently restarted. My research questions asked who decided whether to restart a school and how they decided. The board of trustees of the closing school initiated three of the restarts. PCSB preferred and promoted this approach, though it often nudged board towards restart. Per informants, consultants and local funders also nudged schools in this way. A combination of government entities, including the DME, DCPS, and the authorizer urged the other two restarts into existence. Both schools closed because of legal mandates, but the disruption

and chaos that would have been created by a full closure of the two schools led government agencies to allow other arrangements be made for the good of both the enrolled students and the city educational systems at large.

An assortment of actors made decisions about restarts and used processes that ranged from largely transparent to stakeholders to others that were opaque, even to restart participants. Black school leaders led all eight of the schools which closed. The schools all served predominantly black student populations. Black women led three of the five restart operators; white leaders, one male and one female, led the other two. Informants perceived that two of the three closed schools had boards and leaders who were not well-connected and were disinterested in restarts. Informants described the other closed school as interested in restart, but they explained that the school was unable to find suitable operator under time constraints. None of the informants thought the three closed schools posed enough of a disruption to students or the educational systems in the city to have actively pushed their boards to consider restart.

Given my findings from DC, several points about why some schools closed and others restarted warrant further discussion. First is the implications of my findings for the conception of an “education marketplace.” As Hess (2001) notes, there is an inherent tension between offering “choice” schools in a marketplace and maintaining a compulsory system of publicly-funded education. Hess and Henig et al. (2003) wrote about tensions inherent in the charter model at a time when the movement was still young and the traditional public school system served most DC public school children. Charter schools now serve a growing share of public school students. As DC charter schools began expanding in the mid-2000s, the balance of student enrollment across the city

shifted from mostly DCPS, with a few students in charters, to roughly half and half enrollment in each sector. School closures within the mature education marketplace in DC now have repercussions for both charter schools and the traditional public school system.

In 2008 and 2013, the city closed more than a dozen DCPS schools that were under-enrolled as part of an effort to “right size” the school district. This has served to increase efficiency in facilities usage and funding, but also it has reduced the slack in the marketplace. Since schooling is compulsory, all students from closing charter schools must find new places to enroll. Charter schools, by law, do not need to expand their capacity to take more students than they have planned for, but DCPS must take all students within a residential boundary who wish to enroll. When PCSB closed schools for regulatory reasons, they still clearly felt a responsibility for “placing” students in new schools. This was evident in each of the seven schools featured in this study closed by PCSB and is a difficult limitation of the market approach.

Engineering solutions for “placing” students from closed schools blurs the boundaries between the private, autonomous operation of charter schools, and the public responsibility of a government-funded system of compulsory education (Henig et al, 2003). This boundary blurring complicates the roles of actors, such as charter authorizers. Authorizers, like PCSB, may be moving beyond opening schools and holding them accountable for performance to contemplating the effects of their portfolio on the larger city-wide education system. Such an evolution shifts authorizers from a market-regulator role towards a bureaucratic role as a system-administrator. Charter restarts, as illustrated in the five cases in my study, may allow closing schools to orchestrate market-driven

solutions for post-closure student placement and allow the authorizer to shift back towards a market-regulator role.

My findings about restart decision-making extend the work of Henig et al. (2003) regarding the overlapping and porous boundary between the public and private arenas within which charter schools operate. The design of the current process for restarts in DC requires charter operators to operate both as market and as political actors. Successful charters used their mission, their finances, and their human capital capacity – all market factors – as considerations in deciding to seek out restart opportunities. Charter operators also evaluated the market characteristics of closing schools, to determine if the restart might be a good business decision. But, the same operators needed to be politically aware and showcase their academic performance or potential and their reputation to position themselves to be well-received by the authorizer in the formal charter approval process. This was true for both new and experienced operators in all five restarts.

Another point worth discussion is the role of local context in facilitating charter restarts. Some informants felt that the saturation of schools and the availability of high performing operators, both in and interested in coming to DC, makes the marketplace for restarts unique. Those same informants cited the city's fertile ecosystem of schools, funders, and support organizations as the reason for five restarts in four years. Other informants argued that restarts could happen in other jurisdictions if the market enablers (Finn & Manno, 2015) in those contexts were first strengthened or developed. Informants associated with the authorizer suggested that the greatest limiting factor to restarts in other jurisdictions is the capacity and resources of the authorizer. PCSB has a sizeable professional staff supporting its voting board and an orientation towards innovation

within the charter sector. Both the presence of market enablers and the skill and will of the authorizer would seem to be important considerations in whether restarts will take root in other charter marketplaces.

My findings echo recent results of studies of Louisiana charter schools (Bross, Harris & Liu, 2016) which suggest that the supply of available restart operators is important even when the enabling conditions are present within a context. Students in closing schools in New Orleans experienced positive results post-closure and restart, while students in closing schools in Baton Rouge did not; the authors attribute this difference in outcomes in part to the difference in the supply of higher-performing school options in New Orleans (Bross, Harris & Liu, 2016). In DC, high performing charter operators identify a dearth of available facilities as a constraint to expansion but an incentive to restarts. Several of these operators have now shifted into the position of restart operators, restructuring the concept of expansion and maintaining the dynamism of the marketplace. The potential for restarts in other contexts will also depend on the appetite of operators to enter the market or to adapt their behavior within their established marketplace.

My findings extend ideas about which people and power structures within education marketplaces matter to how charter schools open, close, and restart. The market, like all human enterprises, is occupied by people and the various actors and interpersonal dynamics of these actors matters a great deal to understanding why schools close and restart (Henig et al., 2003). The literature outlining charter school theory identified parents as lead consumers in the education marketplace whose demand for excellent schools would drive school supply and accountability (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

My study suggests that parents have been marginalized as choosers in the DC market as it has matured, at least with regards to charter restarts and closures. As Hess (2001) noted, some goals would need to be compromised for the good of others as the charter school movement developed. In DC, it appears that public accountability for school quality and stability within a system of schools may have won out over the goal of parent choice. While the effort to promote restarts appears to be driven, at least in part, by a desire to reduce disruption for students and families, the failure to engage parents in the process makes restarts a more paternalistic approach than the parent-driven choice marketplace envisioned by early proponents of the charter school model (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kolderie, 1990).

My findings also suggest that the relational dynamics of politics, specifically dynamics of race and social capital, matter in restarts, as they do for many aspects of education in DC. Different marketplaces may have other leading factors, based on local racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic intergroup dynamics, but the importance of relationships and resultant social capital in the education marketplace seems to have potential significance for most urban jurisdictions considering charter school restarts. Many of my informants emphasized the role of charter school boards in successful restarts, specifically calling out board engagement and capacity. Boards with strong ties to funders, or those with deep real estate and financial expertise, were also boards that successfully restarted schools. Those same boards were also either largely white, or racially diverse, including white members. In a city where political power has been accessible to and held by black leaders for decades, access to wealth and cross-sector social capital is still not equitable. Especially for schools serving low-income

communities and students of color, the inequity in social capital between charter school boards is concerning. As Orr might (1999) frame it, the boards and leaders of schools which closed appeared to lack intergroup social capital, that is, connections between the communities of color they served and white or inter-racial groups which might have used their own social capital to champion a restart.

Contributions to the Literature

The purpose of this study was to investigate the emergent phenomenon of charter school restarts. I conducted a qualitative case study of eight charter school closures and restarts in Washington, DC to try to answer three research questions: Why do some charter schools restart while others close? Who decides whether to restart a closing school? How do they make that decision? My findings offered insights on all three questions and generated additional questions for future research.

My study provides a few important contributions to the research literature on charter school closures and restarts. First, my study helps shed light on the increasing complexity of actors and behaviors involved in the public-private partnership of charter schools. When Hess (2001) and Henig and colleagues (2003) wrote about tensions in this policy realm, the charter school movement was young, merely nascent in many places. At that time in Washington, DC, charter schools seeking influence in the political arena found themselves lobbying Congress directly, perhaps with assistance from one of two local advocacy coalitions. More than a decade later, DC is no longer under the management of the federal control board; the Mayor is in control of all public education appointments in the city, including the voting board members of PCSB; and a cottage industry of additional advocates, consultants, and local funders has grown specifically to

serve the charter school marketplace. These changes to both the market and political venues has led to changes in the venue-spanning behavior described by Henig et al. (2003). Both charter schools and the authorizer seek to leverage both market factors and political conditions in assessing how to frame their behavior, and private entities continue to enter the marketplace to capitalize on this venue-spanning behavior by schools and government actors. As market enablers (Manno & Finn, 2015) continue to help charter marketplaces mature, research will need to attend to the increased complexity of varied market actors and the permeability of boundaries between public and private venues.

My second contribution builds on the first, as I highlighted the role that social capital seems to play in the ability of closing schools to access restart as an option. While Hess (2001) and Henig and colleagues (2003) referenced the political positioning charter schools and their stakeholders might seek, neither mentioned the role social capital might play in their access or influence. Additionally, neither author attended to the role of race in accessing power and position. The incorporation of Orr's construct of inter-group social capital (1999) helps more fully explain the differences in ways schools seek advantage (or fail to acquire advantage), even when closing.

Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

As with any study, mine has limitations. One limitation of this study is the ability to generalize beyond a small subset of charter school markets. Given the role of market enablers (Manno & Finn, 2015) in influencing the occurrence of charter school restarts and their impact on stakeholders, my study findings may be limited to places like DC, New Orleans, and other jurisdictions where the charter market is more fully developed. Another limitation was access to data. I had less access to data from schools which closed

and did not restart. Perhaps understandably, representatives of closed schools were largely unavailable or unwilling to be interviewed for this research. This limited their voice in the data, and required that I rely on documents, transcripts or videos of first-hand accounts from other individuals. Other third-party accounts helped shed light on the closure transactions but were filtered through the lens of those individual's experience. It was also not possible to get access to student level data from the state to compare enrollment composition of the closed school and the restarted school, so student reenrollment was all self-reported by school operators, often from memory rather than from concrete reference data. A final important limitation of the study is that it examines neither outcomes of restarts nor the experience of parents and students as stakeholders in the restart process, both topics which deserve attention in future research on charter restarts. While various informants offered their insights about the relative success of individual restart transactions, more objective data is needed to properly assess the efficacy of restarts than was available at the time of my study. Similarly, while numerous informants offered insights into the role and experience of parents in restart transactions, I was unable to interview parents to get first-hand consumer data on their experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

Just as gaps in the extant literature led me to my research questions, my research has generated new gaps and opportunities for future research on charter school closures and restarts. Given the continued growth in charter schools, closures are likely to continue to increase. If markets seek to reduce increased disruption from increased closures, restarts may also become more prevalent. The field needs additional research on

both charter school closures and restarts, and qualitative studies stand to play an important role in the body of literature to come.

One essential question warranting investigation is the question, do restarts “work?” By this, I mean is there evidence to suggest that allowing the continued use of restarts after closures will result in positive outcomes for students? At the time of this research, none of the DC restarts had been operating for long enough to have reached the 5-year charter review by the PCSB, so an examination of the academic outcomes was not possible. Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) cautioned that “Policymakers seem to have embraced charters for their theoretical potential – an attractive and compelling idea... Yet actual evidence of charter schools’ effectiveness was and is lagging” (p. 217). While the current quantitative literature suggests that charter school closures may be “working,” to improve outcomes so long as students subsequently enroll in “better” schools, there is not yet an evidentiary base with which to examine restart outcomes. Bross, Harris and Liu (2016) offer promising findings from New Orleans, but as the results are presented in the aggregate with outright closures and charter restarts of traditional schools, it is not possible to delineate the effects of charter-to-charter restarts.

While my study did not examine the success of restarts as “turnaround” efforts or the effects of restarts on students, my findings offer insights into how one might interrogate those questions in DC or another jurisdiction. First, the question of success would need to be rooted in the metrics used to determine success. Is the goal of restarts to offer better educational options for students (CREDO, 2017), greater stability for students and families affected by school closures, or to provide a replacement school with a similar mission within the marketplace? Informants in DC indicated an interest in all of

these goals, though not necessarily all in the same transactions. Second, is success to be measured at the student or organizational level? Schools may operate effectively as organizations and provide average academic opportunities for students, but will they be judged successful if not every student excels at high levels? Finally, will success be predicated on the number of students who continued from the closed school to the restart? This may matter if the goal is to reduce disruption for students, but it may not matter if the goal is simply to replace a poorly performing school in the marketplace with a higher performing alternative. Delineating the multiple goals of restarts is essential to understanding whether such transactions can be judged to be successful.

Authorizers and school governing boards are both neglected in the current, largely quantitative research on closures. Questions abound about the way in which authorizers manage closure and restart. Which closure and restart policies do authorizers choose to, or fail to, enact? Do authorizers seek to generate and provide guidance on best practices related to closure and restart to their schools, or do they leave that to third-party entities in the marketplace? How are charter school boards constructed? Are school leaders provided with guidance on the kinds of people who might benefit the school as board members?

The role of race and social capital also deserves more thorough treatment than I have provided above. My findings identify race and social capital as contributing factors in why some charter schools restart while others close, but I do not provide a fine-grained examination of the topic. I hope that others will do so, perhaps employing a different perspective, such as critical race theory, to further explore the role of race and social capital in charter school closures and restarts.

It is worth noting that all of these questions require qualitative methods of investigation. The dearth of qualitative research on charter school closures and restarts leaves large gaps in the literature and limits our understanding to what has happened, without access to insights as to why or how certain outcomes occurred. Investigation of research questions, such as those suggested above, would extend the literature to more deeply examine effects of closures and restarts on students, systems, and the charter school movement as a whole. Specifically, there is a need in the literature for additional qualitative case studies of the processes involved in charter school closures and restarts. My study contributes to this gap in the literature, but also opens new avenues for case studies to dig deeper into the context of school restarts. How did operators approach the instructional and operational work of restarting different schools? What strategies did closing schools use for parent involvement? What policies or practices might authorizers take to facilitate restarts? Answering these and similar research questions would enrich the knowledge base for scholars, practitioners, and policy makers alike.

Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Charter School Board Members

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research. The goal of this research is to learn more about charter school closures and restarts in Washington, DC and how closures and restarts affect various stakeholders. Your responses will help me build my understanding. I will make every effort to protect your confidentiality as part of this research. While the name of the school will be included in the research, individuals will not be identified by name. Please read this Consent Form for more information about this research. If you are willing to participate in this research, please sign and date the form where requested.

I would like to record this interview so that I do not miss anything that you have to say. Would that be okay?

--

Informant CODE:

What is your professional role?

Tell me a bit about your experience with charter school restarts in Washington, DC.

Possible Prompts:

- Which school(s)?
- In what capacity? (board chair, board member, school leader, other)

What were the reasons for your school's closure?

Possible Prompts:

- What reasons were given by PCSB?
- Any other reasons?

What was your reaction to the announcement of the impending closure?

Possible Prompts:

- Did you agree with the decision?
- Did you try to prevent the closure? How?

For schools that were restarted:

If your school was restarted, how did that happen?

Possible Prompts:

- Who suggested the restart – PCSB? The school's board? Someone else?
- When was restart suggested – before the closure vote? After?
- Who participated in the decision to pursue a restart?
- Why was the decision made to restart instead of close?
- Did anyone oppose the restart? Who? Why?
- How was the restart operator selected?

Tell me a bit about the experience of the restart.

Possible Prompts:

- What went well?
- What was difficult?
- Did anything unexpected happen?

How did the restart affect the board of trustees?

Possible Prompts:

- How were board members involved in the process – full board? Ad hoc committee? Executive Committee? Some other subset of members?
- Did any board members join the new operator board?
- Did any board members join other charter school boards after the closure?
- Are board members satisfied with the restart outcomes to date?

Additional questions, if time permits:

How did the restart affect your students and their families?

Possible Prompts:

- How were families involved in the process – decision-makers? Consulted parties? Recipients of final decision only?
- How did families react to the new operator?
- What changed for students and families under the new operator?
- What percentage of families re-enrolled?
- What reasons did families give who chose not to re-enroll?

How did the restart affect your teachers?

Possible Prompts:

- How were teachers involved in the process – decision-makers? Consulted parties? Recipients of final decision only?
- How did teachers react to the new operator?
- Were teachers offered the opportunity to interview with the new operator?
- If no, why not?
- If yes, what percentage of teachers interviewed?
- What percentage/number of teachers were hired by the new operator?
- What happened to other teachers?

How did the restart affect your school leader and other administrators?

Possible Prompts:

- How were administrators involved in the process – decision-makers? Consulted parties? Recipients of final decision only?
- How did administrators react to the new operator?
- Were administrators offered the opportunity to interview with the new operator?
- If no, why not?
- If yes, what percentage of administrators interviewed?
- Were any administrators hired by the new operator?
- What happened to your other administrators?

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: School Personnel

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research. The goal of this research is to learn more about charter school closures and restarts in Washington, DC and how closures and restarts affect various stakeholders. Your responses will help me build my understanding. I will make every effort to protect your confidentiality as part of this research. While the name of the school will be included in the research, individuals will not be identified by name. Please read this Consent Form for more information about this research. If you are willing to participate in this research, please sign and date the form where requested.

I would like to record this interview so that I do not miss anything that you have to say. Would that be okay?

Informant CODE:

What is your professional role?

Tell me a bit about your experience with charter school restarts in Washington, DC.

Possible Prompts:

- Which school(s)? In what years?
- In what capacity? (teacher, school leader, other)

What were the reasons for your school's closure?

Possible Prompts:

- What reasons were given by PCSB?
- Any other reasons?

For closed schools:

Tell me a bit about the experience of the closure.

Possible Prompts:

- Was the process smooth or difficult?

For restarted schools:

Your school was restarted, rather than closed outright. How did that happen?

Possible Prompts:

- Who suggested the restart – PCSB? The school's board? Someone else?
- When was restart suggested – before the closure vote? After?
- Who participated in the decision to pursue a restart?
- Did anyone oppose the restart? Who? Why?
- How was the restart operator selected?

Tell me a bit about the experience of the restart.

Possible Prompts:

- Was the process smooth or difficult?
- How did it affect your perception of the closure?

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Government Officials and Other System Stakeholders

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research. The goal of this research is to learn more about charter school closures and restarts in Washington, DC and how closures and restarts affect various stakeholders. Your responses will help me build my understanding. I will make every effort to protect your confidentiality as part of this research. While the name of the school will be included in the research, individuals will not be identified by name. Please read this Consent Form for more information about this research. If you are willing to participate in this research, please sign and date the form where requested.

I would like to record this interview so that I do not miss anything that you have to say. Would that be okay?

--

Informant CODE:

What is your professional role?

Tell me a bit about your experience with charter school restarts in Washington, DC.

Possible Prompts:

- Which school(s)?
- In what capacity? (board chair, board member, school leader, other)

Some charter schools that have been closed are offered the chance to seek a restart partner, while others have not. Why is that?

Possible Prompts:

- What makes a school a good candidate for a restart?
- What factors disqualify a school from being considered for restart?
- Have there been any exceptions to these general rules when deciding if a school is a good restart candidate?

Why are charter school restarts being promoted in Washington, DC?

Possible Prompts:

- What are some benefits of restarts compared to closures?
- Who benefits from restarts?
- Are there any drawbacks to restarts as compared to closures?

For schools that were restarted, how did that happen?

Possible Prompts:

- Who suggested the restart – PCSB? The school's board? Someone else?
- When was restart suggested – before the closure vote? After?
- Who participated in the decision to pursue a restart?
- Why was the decision made to restart instead of close?
- Did anyone oppose the restart? Who? Why?
- How was the restart operator selected?

Tell me a bit about the experience of the restart.

Possible Prompts:

- What went well? What was difficult?
- Did anything unexpected happen?

References

- Arts and Technology PCS (2013, November). *Arts and Technology Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- Arts and Technology PCS (2014, January). *Arts and Technology Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- Ascher, C., Echazarreta, J., Jacobowitz, R., McBride, Y., Troy, T., Wamba, N. (2003). Charter school accountability in New York: Findings from a three-year study of charter school authorizers. Retrieved from New York University, Institute for Education and Social Policy website:
[http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/ggg5/Charter_School_Accountability_in_New_York -
Ascher Echazarreta Jacobowitz McBride Troy Wamba Mar 2003.pdf](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/ggg5/Charter_School_Accountability_in_New_York_-_Ascher_Echazarreta_Jacobowitz_McBride_Troy_Wamba_Mar_2003.pdf)
- Bhat, S. (2015). *Investing in our kids: District of Columbia school finance primer*. Washington, DC: DC Fiscal Policy Institute.
- Bross, W; Harris, D. N., Liu, L. (2016). *The Effects of Performance-Based School Closure and Charter Takeover on Student Performance*. New Orleans: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.
- Budde, R. (1988). *Education by charter: Restructuring school districts*. Andover: The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands.
- Campbell, C., Heyward, G, & Gross, B. (2017). *Stepping up: How are American cities delivering on the promise of public school choice?* Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education.

- Carlson, D. & Lavertu, S. (2016). Charter school closure and student achievement: Evidence from Ohio. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 95, 31-48.
- Carter, C. (2007). Ten Years of Exploration and Discovery: A Brief History of the D.C. Public Charter School Board. Washington, DC: DC Public Charter School Board.
- Center for Education Reform. (2006). *Charter schools today: Changing the face of American education. Part 3: Charter school closures: The opportunity for accountability*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). (2013). *National charter school study 2013*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). (2015). *Urban charter school study report on 41 regions*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). (2017). *Lights off: Practice and impact of closing low-performing schools*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Charter Board Partners (2014). Septima Clark Public Charter School and Charter Board Partners. Unpublished manuscript.
- Chingos, M., & West, M. (2015). *The uneven performance of Arizona's charter schools*. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 37(1S), 120S-134S.
- Chubb, J. E., & Moe, T. M. (1990). *Politics, markets & America's schools*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Consoletti, A. (2011). *The state of charter schools: what we know—and what we do not— about performance and accountability*. Washington: Center for Education Reform.

- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (Second Edition ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- David, R., Hesla, K., & Pendergrass, S.A. (2017). *A Growing Movement: America's Largest Public Charter School Communities*, Twelfth Edition. Washington, DC: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/publications/growing-movement-americas-largest-public-charter-school-communities-twelfth>
- DC PCSB. (2013, February 25). *Charter amendment request - Acquisition of Septima Clark PCS by Achievement Prep Public Charter School*. Retrieved December 23, 2014, from 2013 - February 25 - PCSB Board Meeting: <http://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=774521&backurl=/shelf/my>
- DC Public Charter School Board. (2013, December 13). *Arts and Technology Public Charter School Public Hearing*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- DC Public Charter School Board (2013a, January). *DC Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- DC Public Charter School Board (2013b, February 25). *DC Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- DC Public Charter School Board (2013c, November). *DC Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- DC Public Charter School Board (2013d, December). *DC Public Charter School Board Staff Memo: Options PCS Revocation*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.

DC Public Charter School Board. (2014, January 14). *Booker T. Washington Public Charter School Public Hearing*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.

DC Public Charter School Board (2014a, April 23). *DC Public Charter School Board Staff Memo: Options PCS Revocation*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.

DC Public Charter School Board (2014b, April 29). *DC Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board,

DC Public Charter School Board. (2014c, December 10). *Potomac Prep Public Charter School Public Hearing*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.

DC Public Charter School Board. (2014d, December 14). *DC Public Charter School Board Staff Memo: Community Academy Public Charter School Proposal to Commence Revocation*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.

DC Public Charter School Board. (2015). *Closed Charter Schools*. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from DC Public Charter School Board:

<http://www.dcpsb.org/data/files/charterschoolclosure20112013.pdf>

DC Public Charter School Board. (2015, February 11). *Tree of Life Public Charter School Public Hearing*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.

DC Public Charter School Board. (2016). *The performance management framework overview*. Retrieved October 31, 2016, from DC Public Charter School Board:

<http://www.dcpsb.org/sites/default/files/ThePerformanceManagementFrameworkOverviewforweb2.12.16.pdf>

- DC Public Charter School Board. (2016). *2016-17 performance management framework policy & technical guide*. Retrieved November 1, 2016, from DC Public Charter School Board: [http://www.dcpsb.org/sites/default/files/2016-17-182016-17PMFPolicy TechnicalGuideFinal.pdf](http://www.dcpsb.org/sites/default/files/2016-17-182016-17PMFPolicy%20TechnicalGuideFinal.pdf)
- Doyle, D., & Field, T. (2013). *The role of charter restarts in school reform: Honoring our commitments to students and public accountability*. Chapel Hill and Washington, DC: Public Impact and New Schools Venture Fund.
- EdBuild. (2016). *Power in numbers: Arbitrary funding*. Retrieved November 6, 2016, from EdBuild: <http://viz.edbuild.org/maps/2016/cola/arbitrary/>
- Emerson, A. (2013, 09 12). *Charter school restarts: Let's give them a try* [web log]. Retrieved 09 26, 2015, from Choice Words: <http://edexcellence.net/charter-school-restarts-lets-give-them-a-try>
- Finn, Jr. , C. E. & Manno, B. V. (2015) *Charter schools: Taking stock*. [web log]. Retrieved 10 15, 2015, from EducationNext: <http://educationnext.org/charter-schools-taking-stock/>
- Firestone, W.A. (1993). Alternative arguments for generalizing from data as applied to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 22(4), 16-23
- Friedman, M. (1962). *Capitalism and freedom* (40th Anniversary Edition ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Garn, G. (2001). *Moving from bureaucratic to market accountability: The problem of imperfect information* [Article]. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 37, 571.

- Gest, Ted. (2014, June 2). District Sues Management Company and Owner to Protect Public Charter School Funds. Office of the Attorney General, Washington, DC. <https://oag.dc.gov/release/district-sues-management-company-and-owner-protect-public-charter-school-funds>
- Glazerman, S.; Dotter, D. (2017). Market signals: Evidence on the determinants and consequences of school choice from a citywide lottery. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(4), 593-619.
- Hassel, B. (2013, 08 27). Charter “restarts” offer alternative to closing failing schools [web log]. Retrieved 09 26, 2015, from EducationNext: <http://educationnext.org/charter-restarts-offer-alternative-to-closing-failing-schools/>
- Henig, J.R., Holyoke, T.T., Lacireno-Paquet, N., and Moser, M. (2003). Privatizations, politics, and urban services: The political advocacy behavior of charter schools. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 25, 37 – 54.
- Henig, J., Hula, R., Orr, M., & Pedescleaux, D. (1999). *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t8s2>
- Hess, F. M. (2001). *Whaddya mean you want to close my school?* *Education & Urban Society*, 33(2), 141-156.
- Hirschman, A.O. (1970). *Exit, voice and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Hoxby, C. (2009). "A Serious Statistical Mistake in the CREDO Study of Charter Schools." NBER working paper. Available at:
http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/memo_on_the_credo_study.pdf
- Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF). (2012). *Quality schools: Every child, every school, every neighborhood*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Karaxha, Z. (2013). *When the "dream" turns into a nightmare: Life and death of Voyager Charter School*. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(4), 576-609.
- KIPP DC. (2017). Annual Report. Washington, DC: KIPP DC. Retrieved from
<http://www.dcpsb.org/sites/default/files/report/2016-2017%20Annual%20Report%28TLO%29%28KIPPDC%28LEA%29%29.pdf>
- Kolderie, T. (1990). *Beyond choice to new public schools: Withdrawing the exclusive franchise in public education*. (Policy Report No. 8). Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute.
- Manno, B. V., Finn, Jr., C. E., & Vanourek, G. (2001). *Charter schools in action: Renewing public education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mead, S., Mitchel, A. L., & Rotherham, A. J. (2015). *The state of the charter school movement*. Retrieved from [http://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Charter %20Research%200908%20FINAL.pdf](http://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Charter%20Research%200908%20FINAL.pdf)
- Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- MySchoolDC. (2016). FAQ. Retrieved November 4, 2016 from
<http://www.myschooldc.org/faq/faqs>

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2015). *Get the facts: FAQs*. Retrieved September 14, 2015, from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools:

<http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/public-charter-schools/faqs/>

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2015a). *The Public Charter Schools Dashboard*. Retrieved October 31, 2015, from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools:

<http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2014>

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2015b). *Model law and state rankings*.

Retrieved November 7, 2016, from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools:

<http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/>

National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2013). *The state of charter school authorizing*. Chicago: NACSA. Retrieved June 10, 2016 from

http://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/NACSA_2013-SOCA.pdf

National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2014). *Accountability in action: A comprehensive guide to charter school closure*. Chicago: Author.

National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2014a). *The state of charter school authorizing 2013*. Chicago: NACSA.

Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE). (2016). *2016 DC PARCC results*. Retrieved September 28, 2016 from OSSE:

<http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2016OSSEPARCCPresentation.pdf>

- Options PCS (2013, December). *Receiver Memo*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- Osborne, D. (2012). *Improving charter school accountability: The challenge of closing failing schools*. Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute. Retrieved from [http://progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/06.2012-
Osborne_Improving-Charter-School-Accountability_The-Challenge-of-Closing-Failing-Schools.pdf](http://progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/06.2012-
Osborne_Improving-Charter-School-Accountability_The-Challenge-of-Closing-Failing-Schools.pdf)
- Orr, M. (1999). *Black social capital: The politics of school reform in Baltimore, 1986-1998*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Paino, M., Boylan, R.L., Renzulli, L.A. (2017). The closing door: The effect of race on charter school closures. *Sociological Perspectives*, 60(4), 747-767.
- Paino, M., Renzulli, L.A., Boylan, R.L., Bradley, C.L. (2014). *For grades or money? Charter school failure in North Carolina*. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(3), 500-536.
- Patel, S. (2013, 08 28). *Charter restarts: Enforcing charter school accountability* [web log]. Retrieved 9 26, 2015, from *Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Education*: <http://www.newschools.org/blog/charter-restarts-enforcing-charter-schoolaccountability>
- Public Impact & EdPlex. (2016). *School restart authorization process guide*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, and Denver, CO: EdPlex. Retrieved from www.schoolrestarts.org

- Rotherham, A. (2005). The pros & cons of charter school closures. In R. Lake, & B. Gross, *Hopes, fears & reality: A balanced look at American charter schools*. Seattle: Center for Reinventing Public Education.
- Rybka, J. (2015, 08 25). *The promise of restarting schools* [web log]. Retrieved 11 1, 2015, from Michael and Susan Dell Foundation:
<http://www.msdf.org/blog/2015/08/the-promise-restarting-schools/>
- Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: a realist's view of democracy in America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Schulman, L.S. (1997) Disciplines of inquiry in education: An overview. In R.M. Jaeger (Ed.), *Complementary methods for research in education* (pp. 3-9). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Septima Clark PCS (2012, February). *Septima Clark Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- Septima Clark PCS (2012b, March). *Septima Clark Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- Septima Clark PCS (2012c, May). *Septima Clark Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- Septima Clark PCS (2012d, June). *Septima Clark Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes*. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.
- Septima Clark PCS (2012e, September). Septima Clark Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.*
- Septima Clark PCS (2012f, October). Septima Clark Public Charter School Board Meeting Minutes. DC Public Charter School Board, Washington, DC.*

- Steiner, L., & Hassel, B. C. (2008). *Salvaging assets: Considering alternatives to school closure*. University of Washington, Bothell, Center on Reinventing Public Education. Seattle: National Charter School Research Project.
- Stuit, D. (2012). *Turnaround and closure rates in the charter and district sectors*. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 17(1-2), 40-54.
- Teske, P., Schneider, M., & Cassese, E. (2005). Local School Boards as Authorizers of Charter Schools. In Howell W. (Ed.), *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics* (pp. 129-149). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt127xjr.9>
- US Department of Education. (2015, June 12). Application for New Awards; Charter Schools Program (CSP); Grants for Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools. *Federal Register*. Washington, DC, USA.
- Weitzel, P, Lubienski, C (2010a) Assessing the Charter School Experiment. In Lubienski, C., Weitzel, P. (Eds.), *The Charter School Experiment: Expectations, Evidence, and Implications*. (pp. 219–230). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Wexler, N. (2013, 05 31). *Can "restart" turn around low-performing charter schools?* [web log]. Retrieved September 26, 2015, from Greater Greater Education : <http://greatergreatereducation.org/post/19020/can-restart-turn-around-low-performing-charter-schools/>
- Wilkins, C. (2013). *How to lose your charter*. *Journal of School Choice*, 7(2), 225-239.
- Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research design and methods* (Fourth Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.