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An Investigation To Explore Optimal Contextual Conditions And Models Of Charter School Authorizer Accountability In School Improvement Efforts

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AN INVESTIGATION TO EXPLORE OPTIMAL CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS AND MODELS OF CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZER ACCOUNTABILITY IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study sought to learn why authorizers offer current under-performing charter schools the option of turnaround, as well as how, and what models of accountability authorizers use to balance autonomy and accountability to improve low-performing charters. Conducting interviews with nine individuals and document reviews from five authorizers from across the nation, this study explores ways in which authorizer accountability models influence comprehensive and significant improvement processes in five states with charter schools authorized by independent charter boards, institutes of higher education, and a governmental agency. This research provides new empirical evidence of how the varying community actors directly and indirectly view turnaround efforts of underperforming charter schools in lieu of school closure and how authorizers hold schools conducting an improvement effort accountable to achieve and sustain improvement over time. The themes of this study included the two pertaining to public's perception of closure and improvement in each of the authorizer's contexts, including how the purpose of school was factored into decisions about allowing a school to improve. How authorizers approached supporting school improvement and formal and informal mechanisms for holding authorizers accountable were also found. Four themes related to the accountability mechanisms authorizers used to hold schools accountable acknowledge schools are held to the same accountability framework focused on outcomes of their educational program, site visits serve to monitor for improvement and identify support needed, contract year terms are used to increase the level and cadence of oversight and school autonomy is reduced

only when schools fail to improve. Implications pertaining to policy, practice, and leadership include integrating improvement best practices in authorizer accountability and capacity, improving authorizer accountability mechanisms and embedding equity in accountability, and determining sector involvement in improvement to address systemic issues.

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CHAPTER 1

STUDY RATIONALE AND FOUNDATION

While still public schools, charter schools operate independently like a private school. In return for more extensive say in their programming than traditional public schools, charter schools agree to stipulations outlined in a performance contract, or "charter." Entities, called authorizers, hold charters to these agreed-upon financial and academic results. Charter schools that meet these goals will be renewed by the authorizer. If charter schools do not meet the authorizers' criteria, authorizers can choose not to renew their charters and may even close the schools. The threat of closing under-performing schools serves as an important and needed lever in improving the overall quality of charter schools. Unfortunately, as found by researchers at the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), the assumption that students will find a better schooling option after their charter school is closed does not always ring true, as the majority of students whose schools have closed do not always find better educational options in their new schools (CREDO, 2017). Additionally, transition research argues that transitioning students to a different school has long term negative impact on students' academic abilities (Hanushek et al., 2004; Schwerdt & West, 2011).

The most common reasons for school closure are poor finances, governance, and academic achievement (David & Hesla, 2018). We know these reasons because authorizers set up transparent structures focused on compliance accountability,

facilitating clear and concise decision-making about the charter renewal process with two outcomes. Authorizers set benchmarks, and schools are charged with meeting specific targets or goals. Schools unable to meet their goals have their charters revoked. Schools that do meet goals have their charters renewed. Offering the option of turnaround in a charter is messy, but some authorizers have done so with success.

This qualitative study sought to learn why authorizers offer current under-performing charter schools the option of turnaround, as well as how, and what models of accountability they use to set up the balance of autonomy and accountability to improve low-performing charters rather than close them. Conducting interviews with nine individuals and document reviews from five authorizers from across the nation, this study explores ways in which authorizer accountability models influence comprehensive and significant improvement processes in five states with charter schools authorized by independent charter boards, institutes of higher education, and a governmental agency across the U.S.

Background and Context of the Problem

Families choose to send their children to publicly funded charter schools at the same rate at which they choose to send their children to private schools. Publicly funded charter schools offer free attendance, but students must participate in high-stakes standardized testing (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010). Charter school enrollment is unlike traditional public schools which are often referred to as neighborhood schools because students automatically attend if they live in the geographic boundary of the school (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010; Zimmer et al., 2008). By comparison, enrollment in charter schools occur when parents choose to enroll their child in a specific school based on other factors than just geographic boundaries. The number of students attending charter

schools has quickly risen in the brief period charters have existed. Enrollment in charters in 2000 was 0.4 million (close to 2% of students) and 3.2 million in 2017; the number of schools rose from 2,000 in 2000 to almost 7,500 schools in 2017 (McFarland et al., 2017; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.-b). Both the number of charters opening and the enrollment size at charters has grown (McFarland et al., 2017).

The rapid increase in the charter sector is due to a growth in the choice market as well as previous federal legislation, which allowed a narrow set of prescriptive options for low-performing traditional public schools (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2002). One of four turnaround options allowed for consistently low performing traditional public schools consisted of reconstituting the school as a charter school. The rationale for reconstitution came from research on turnaround efforts in traditional public schools which found schools conducting improvement efforts were more successful when they were not only held accountable by an outside entity but that they also had the autonomy and flexibility to make the changes needed based on the needs of the school (Dragoset et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Charter schools by design offered such "autonomy and flexibility for accountability."

Options for Low-Performing Schools

At the same time of rapid growth in charter schools, research on charter outcomes has found that while many high-performing charter schools exist, the sector is still plagued by many poor performers (Finn et al., 2016). Specific policy options for addressing under-performing charters differ depending on authorizer policy and state law. In practice, approaches to addressing low or under-performance of charter schools vary from strict enforcement of accountability where low performing schools are closed, to inaction (Chait et al., 2019). State legislation that dictates charters must be automatically

closed for low performance or provides a performance threshold below which charters must be closed, offers few options to authorizers for improvement. The purpose of closing schools was to provide students a better option elsewhere (Chait et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, the underlying assumption when closing schools that students will find a better schooling option when their school is closed does not always ring true, as the majority of students whose schools have closed do not find better educational options in their new schools (CREDO, 2017). Additionally, transition research argues that transitioning students to a different school has long-term negative impact on students' academic abilities (Hanushek et al., 2004; Schwerdt & West, 2011). In addition, as CREDO (2017) recently found, the burdens associated with school transfers disproportionately affect minority students. For instance, schools serving higher percentages of students in poverty or minority-majority populations were closed more often (CREDO, 2017).

While school closure rates disproportionately affect historically underserved populations, closures only capture a small fraction of the low-performing charters and traditional public schools. Less than 10 percent (5.5%) of the low performing charters identified in CREDO (2017) were closed, indicating students continued attending schools with the lowest reading and math scores in their state (CREDO, 2017). Researchers identified 1,522 low-performing schools meeting such criteria for their study, across 26 states. If such low-performing schools are not going to be closed, substantial turnaround efforts are warranted.

Authorizers hold charter schools accountable to engender good will and confidence in the sector. If schools are closed, it signals to the public that authorizers are doing their due diligence. However, there may be political downsides to closure as well.

Political theory called the Overton Window specifically describes a range of policies on any given topic. The Overton Window identifies within that range of policies the "window" the public would find acceptable (Mackinac Center, n.d.). To move the window of publicly accepted policy, the Overton Window advises employing a policy far from acceptable. With closure as the currently accepted policy for under-performing schools, the Overton Window helps explain how the public may come to consider turnaround of an under-performing charter as acceptable and another way for authorizers to conduct their responsibilities appropriately.

Over the last thirty years, researchers have increasingly examined the elements of a successful school turnaround, including charter school turnaround (Doyle & Field, 2013; Evan, 2019; Evan & Canavero, 2020; National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2015; Therriault, 2016). The literature base on turnaround offers few success stories, and most turnaround attempts that have been studied have failed. However, the conditions found in successful turnarounds are inherent in the makeup of charters, potentially making charters good candidates for turnaround. The following factors have been correlated with successful and sustainable school turnaround: 1) School autonomy, such as the ability to hire highly qualified staff, fire staff deemed unqualified or incompetent; 2) Creation of new school culture; 3) Transformation of academic programming (curriculum, assessment support, and instructional support); and 4) Operational flexibility, including the ability to shift budget priorities to invest in improvements focused on academic achievement (Corbett, 2015). An additional factor found relevant to successful turnaround was when schools were held accountable by external entities such as an authorizer (Hitt et al., 2018; Kowal et al., 2009). Unlike traditional public schools, charters are obligated to meet conditions of their performance

contract within a certain time period, most often five years. "External accountability from the authorizer exerts pressure on the school board and school leadership to dedicate the necessary time and resources to the turnaround effort" (Chait et al., 2019, p. 5).

Statement of the Problem

The recent reauthorization (December 2015) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) increased the options for states to support districts in improving low-performing schools. A national review of school improvement strategies proposed in states' consolidated ESSA state plans does not veer too far from the narrow and prescriptive options under previous ESEA (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). However recent emerging research provides a framework for rapid and sustainable turnaround that many states are adopting or adapting (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Evan & Canavero, 2020).

It is difficult to determine whether turnaround efforts will be worth the number of resources, including time, energy, and willpower to provide a viable option for students to get an excellent education. In a charter context, turnaround efforts may not align with the philosophy of the authorizer, as it may see the only option for a low-performing school is closure. However, the detrimental effects of closure on students, particularly disproportionately minority and low income students, help make a stronger case for turnaround. If so, research has identified the areas of focus for turnaround efforts to examine and improve, including leadership, talent, instruction, culture, and operations.

Areas of Focus of Turnaround for Accountability

From their comprehensive literature review, Leithwood et al. (2004) found that the quality of leadership at the school, while not as impactful as what teachers do, is still quite effective in producing gains in student growth and achievement. In addition, school

leadership is necessary to guide turnaround (Thompson et al., 2016). Leaders are responsible for a wide variety of improvement actions with the most important being improving instruction and making positive changes in school climate.

Effective school leaders recruit and retain a high-quality staff, foster positive school culture, establish high expectations, and reach out to the community (Almanzan, 2005; Clifford et al., 2012). School leadership is not limited to a single person. Teachers and other school staff all play critical roles in effectively leading the school (Herman et al., 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Distributed leadership (collaboration between administrators and leadership teams) can have a positive impact on school quality (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Spillane et al., 2001).

In addition to finding adequate and prepared leaders, schools deemed in need of improvement often have a more difficult time recruiting effective teachers (Brackett et al., 2007). Talent management also includes supporting the teachers already on staff. In addition to recruiting effective staff, schools need to develop the teaching staff they have through effective professional learning and retain staff who will contribute to the school's growth in performance.

Typically, school staff are charged with turning around the instructional practice and culture within a school. This instructional transformation should be data driven, rigorous, and supported system-wide (Anderson et al., 2010; Hamilton et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2008; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Moore & Emig, 2014). To do so, teachers need to be able to identify students' needs and base their instruction around them, build effective scaffolding into their instruction to support students based on their needs, and have the support and infrastructure available to apply

assessment results to instructional plans (Hamilton et al., 2009; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Love et al., 2008).

Quality teaching requires that teachers have clear notions of how learning develops (i.e., learning progressions) and how to guide learners forward. Assessing students' progress toward mastery of standards, skills and/or competencies also known as formative assessment, plays a key role in this process (Hamilton et al., 2009). Through monitoring student knowledge and understanding during instruction, formative assessment yields data that allow teachers to make real-time adjustments to their instruction and helps learners to reflect on their learning (Love et al., 2008). A landmark meta-analysis from Black and William (1998) found that formative assessment positively impacts students' achievement when teachers use the results to change lessons based on students' needs.

A strong school culture creates positive interactions both within the school building and with the larger community. High-performing schools partner with families that support students in determining and achieving their life goals (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Weiss et al., 2010). This is accomplished by working through any language or other cultural barriers to establish trust, increasing the types and impact of interactions with families, and providing families with approaches to use in supporting students at home (Paredes, 2011). Students attending schools using impactful family engagement strategies increased the likelihood by four-fold that the school's reading and math performance would improve (Bryk et al., 2010).

What sets apart successful school improvement efforts from less successful efforts are the decisions made pertaining to staffing, programs, budget, schedule, and data decisions. In successful improvement efforts, these functions serve to support

improvement efforts (Ouchi, 2009; Zavadsky, 2016). School leaders need to know how to align these systems to support school improvement efforts effectively.

State legislation that dictates charters must be automatically closed for low performance (15 states) or provides a threshold by which charters must be closed should performance go below it (19 states) provides few options to authorizers for improvement. The purpose of closing schools was to offer students a better option elsewhere. Laws calling for automatic closure make it difficult for authorizers to move beyond a binary decision tree pertaining to how to support low-performing schools. Improving the charter sector has thus far included starting high-quality schools and closing low-quality schools (LiBetti et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the fields of accountability and education policy by investigating models of authorizer accountability for charter turnaround efforts and determining optimal contextual conditions to facilitate a turnaround option.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following two research questions were investigated:

(1) What contextual (e.g. theoretical, conceptual, or research-based) conditions were in place for the authorizer to facilitate school turnaround?

   a. Does school improvement in charter schools fit into the Overton Window and what factors influenced the political will to allow the option of turnaround?

b. What policies (state and local) were in place to allow a low-performing charter school to engage in turnaround?

c. Was the authorizer held accountable for improving charter schools?

(2) What models of accountability were used for schools conducting turnaround?

a. What autonomies were provided to the school?

b. When and how was the turnaround process monitored for progress?

c. What components of the school were monitored for progress (i.e., leadership, talent, instruction, culture)?

Significance of the Study

The field has a dearth of information on school improvement in charter schools. Because of the independent nature of charters, there is no designated entity in the charter ecosystem to support a charter's turnaround, although turnaround could be a beneficial option for some schools and students. To start, if a charter has been deemed capable of conducting its own turnaround, policymakers at the state level could apply the policies, opportunities, and funding available to support traditional public school turnaround (Evan and Canavero, 2020). Local philanthropy could provide resources to support organizations to conduct or support charter school turnaround. National philanthropy organizations could strategically invest in incubating effective practices for charter turnaround (Chait et al., 2019). This study suggests one additional aspect of charter turnaround: how authorizer accountability can be set up to support or impede the process of improvement in schools.

Charters answer to, report to, and are compliant with an authorizer throughout the application, monitoring, and renewal or closure process. This study sought to determine the type of accountability authorizers are using to hold schools accountable through a

turnaround process. A primary argument for improving the sector lies within the role of the authorizer to open new successful schools and close low-performing schools (LiBetti et al., 2019). Several authorizers are looking to improve their current schools in lieu of closing the school or letting it languish. Instead authorizers are choosing to provide underperforming schools the option of a comprehensive turnaround. As Finn et al. (2016) pointed out, "authorizer failure, combined with policy failure to create a properly accountable authorizing structure, is the biggest reason in most places for weak charter performance" (p. 88). It is therefore important to assess how well authorizers fulfill their role as overseers of the turnaround process, both in how they hold low-performing schools accountable and how they are being held accountable themselves.

Methodological Brief

This multi-case study contributes to charter research by analyzing how the charter movement has evolved over time in terms of the ways in which authorizers are attempting to improve the sector through charter authorizer accountability frameworks. This study had two major areas of interest and contributions: (1) to document the contextual conditions in how authorizers came to offer the option of turnaround, including how authorizers are held accountable for offering turnaround as an option; and (2) to provide an analysis of the accountability models authorizers use when offering turnaround through the content analysis of renewal and improvement documents and interviews with authorizer representatives, including exploring what criteria authorizers use to hold charters accountable when offering turnaround to a particular low-performing charter school. The study contributes to modern education research by creating a typology describing and differentiating authorizer accountability models and illustrating any authorizer variation in accountability approach.

The primary research tool for this study consisted of a document review of charter authorizer documents and semi-structured interviews of charter authorizer staff. Authorizer's policies and rules were analyzed to determine the emphasis on improvement accountability strategies among statewide authorizers in the United States. Research for this study was operationalized based on the analysis of the policies used for reviewing charters and monitoring schools in turnaround status. This study connects authorizer closure and improvement data to accountability strategies. Additionally, supplementary interviews with authorizers were conducted to provide insights and historical, administrative, and organizational context to the data being collected.

Limitations

The way data were collected is a limitation to this study. For this study, authorizers reported their perceptions and thoughts about their own experiences holding charter schools accountable during turnaround. These data were self-reported and thus may not be wholly representative of authorizers' experiences across the country. To minimize the impact of self-reported data, document analysis was performed as a means of triangulating findings. When possible, multiple employees were interviewed at each authorizer to obtain multiple viewpoints and knowledge of authorizer systems and practice.

Another limitation is the role of researcher. I am currently a Senior Research Associate with a national research and technical assistance organization. I have been working in education for 20 years and have been a part of a charter school turnaround team. I have also studied turnaround in both traditional and charter schools, and written toolkits, research studies, and policy briefs on the topic of turnaround and charter school turnaround. Researcher bias is often raised as a concern in qualitative research pertaining

to trustworthiness. The researcher is central to the research process as both the data collector and interpreter in a qualitative study (Patton, 2015). I have reflected on both my own background and experience as well as how these experiences might subjectively impact the collection and interpretation of the data. Given that I have been trained to ensure that my prior experience does not bias my research, I believe I have kept an open mind and conducted this study with impartiality and neutrality, as suggested by Moustakas (1994).

Delimitations

Delimitations in this study include a purposeful sample, which may limit generalizability. States which mandate that authorizers close low or under-performing charter schools were excluded from the study because authorizers in these states are not allowed by law to offer any other option but closure of under-performing schools. In addition, states with mandatory turnaround options were also excluded. By limiting the sample, this research was able to capture states and authorizers that were allowed, but not mandated, to offer turnaround in order to offer the best opportunity to generalize to other contexts without these mandates. Because turnaround in the charter sector is rare, the authorizers selected were not selected randomly but purposefully based on whether they offered the option of turnaround.

One area of focus found needed for successful turnaround is autonomy, specifically, the autonomy to make decisions pertaining to staffing, use of time, programming, financial and facilities to address school needs. While this autonomy is typically already a part of the charter contract, the level of autonomy and what charters have autonomy to do varies from state to state. Given the few charter turnarounds, a delimitation placed on this study is around parsing out or inquiring about the specific

levels and types of autonomy upheld during turnaround, which would in itself provide a major contribution to the literature base.

Definition of Terms

*Accountability***.** Accountability has a wide range of connotations which make it impossible to meet the needs in every context, but at the heart of accountability is "being called to account for one's actions" and holding consequences (Mulgan, 2000, p. 555).

*Authorizer***.** Authorizers are also referred to as sponsors in some states. Authorizers are a "state-sanctioned entity [that] licenses a school to operate in the first place and is then responsible for monitoring its performance and renewing its charter if that performance is satisfactory" (Finn et al., 2016, p. 87).

*Autonomy for accountability tradeoff***.** As indicated in the definition of charter, charters are exempt "from certain state or local rules and regulations. In return for flexibility and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards outlined in its charter" (U.S. Department of Education, 2019a, para. 1).

*Charter***.** The charter itself is a legally enforceable contract between the authorizer and the governing body. The charter describes the laws and rules the school will follow, timeframe of the contract, the school's program, expected results and the metrics used to evaluate the school (Finn et al., 2016).

*Charter School***.** A charter school (charter) is a

> publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract—a charter—with the state, district, or other entity. The charter exempts the school from certain state or local rules and regulations. In return for flexibility and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards outlined in its charter. A school's charter is reviewed

> periodically by the entity that granted it and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or if the accountability standards are not met. (U.S. Department of Education, 2019a, para. 1)

Governing board. The governing board is the school's governing entity and typically approved by an Internal Revenue Service as a nonprofit. The governing board consists of between five and 10 individuals and is responsible for adopting the budget. It also has a fiduciary duty for all funds, and it is legally responsible if anything goes wrong including being accountable for the academic results of the school. (Finn et al., 2016).

Operator. If a school is part of a group of schools such as a network, the school will have an operator. Operators tend to be responsible for employing the staff, determining which curricula the school will use, distributing the budget and conducting operations responsibilities such as heating, cooling, cleaning, repairing facilities. In many ways the operator manages the school (Finn et al, 2016).

*Turnaround***.** For purposes of this study the first part of the definition comes from the federally-funded Practice Guide from the What Works Clearinghouse. The practice guide distinguishes between *school improvement,* as more incremental and slower in nature from *turnaround,* which is rapid even though school improvement and turnaround "may have common approaches, but they differ in implementation" (Herman et al., 2008, p. 4). This definition of rapid efforts of turnaround was further explained in WestEd's Center on School Turnaround, a federally funded comprehensive center: "Turnaround is more than an initial jolt of bold changes in structure, authority, and personnel . . . it's an upward trajectory with rapid, significant, and sustainable improvement in the lowest-performing schools" (Center on School Turnaround, 2017, p. 2).

Theoretical Framework

Political theorist John Overton developed Overton's theory, entitled the Overton Window that describes an array of policies per topic that are currently publicly acceptable (Mackinac Center, n.d.). “Just outside of the window lie 'acceptable' policies, and beyond those the 'radical' and 'unthinkable'" (Marsh, 2016, p. 1). This window of political possibilities is fluid, with political will ever changing (Mackinac Center, n.d.). To bring unpopular ideas into the mainstream, Overton proposed,

> not to advocate for minor, incremental changes to an already accepted idea, but to make the case for a currently “unthinkable” idea, stating it cogently and provoking an informed discussion. These efforts would make radical ideas look more normal, nudging them into the “acceptable” category, and eventually making them politically viable. (Marsh, 2016, p. 2)

Authorizers hold charter schools accountable to engender good will and confidence in the sector. If schools are closed, it signals to the public that authorizers are doing their due diligence. Political theory and the Overton Window, specifically, describe a range of policies on any given topic "that are, at that moment, popular enough for a politician to campaign on successfully" (Mackinac Center, n.d., para 1). Just outside of the window lie 'acceptable' policies, and beyond those the 'radical' and 'unthinkable'" (Marsh, 2016, p. 1). If turnaround is considered radical compared to closure, the Overton Window helps explain how the public may come to consider turnaround of an under-performing charter as acceptable.

Charter authorizers play an instrumental role in addressing charter under-performance. How authorizers address struggling charters has been found to make a significant difference in whether they continue to struggle or improve (CREDO, 2017).

Several guides for authorizers, such as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers' (NACSA) Principles & Standards for Charter School Authorizing, summarize experiences of high-performing authorizers and recommend several authorizing practices authorizers indicated were associated with improving charter quality. One notable practice recommends that authorizers conduct accountability activities such as rigorous and transparent guidelines for charters around applying to open new schools, renewing charters and decisions pertaining to revocation (NACSA, 2018b).

Given the autonomy for accountability tradeoff, charter school authorizers seemingly only have two options for schools not meeting performance expectations: closing the school or ignoring it so they do not have to close it, allowing it to languish indefinitely. However, some charter authorizers are experimenting with a third option that consists of comprehensive improvement for the purpose of turning around a school. If this option becomes politically acceptable, perhaps it would become a more mainstream option across authorizers. Therefore, the problem addressed in this dissertation project was to investigate models of accountability for charter schools and the contextual events that took place to allow for and hold the authorizer to be accountable for offering the option of turnaround.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter one provides a short summary of the background literature in order to introduce the problem, context, and significance of the study. Chapter one contains the research questions grounding this study and the theoretical framework by which the research questions were examined. Chapter two reviews the full literature on the history and purpose of charters, whom they serve, their outcomes, challenges and opportunities as well as the improvement literature and how it relates to charters to lay the foundation

for establishing a conceptual framework to guide the data collection and analysis. Chapter three provides the research methodology, including a methodological basis for a case study approach as well as the cases to be examined, limitations, and delimitations to the approach in addressing the research questions.

The next chapter provides an overview of the history of the charter school movement, previous charter school research, and the literature on turnaround and accountability. By providing an overview of preceding research, this study's uniqueness and contributions to the field can be highlighted to show how it adds to the literature of education policy, including school improvement and accountability of authorizers and by authorizers to improve the charter sector for all students.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review identifies, analyzes, and synthesizes relevant studies related to the purpose of the study and its research questions, as viewed through the theoretical framework. The purpose of this multi-case study was to understand the experiences of authorizers who have offered low-performing schools a turnaround option by investigating both the optimal contextual conditions in which turnaround was offered and the models of accountability for charter turnaround efforts. The following two research questions guided this investigation:

(1) What contextual conditions were in place for the authorizer to facilitate school turnaround?

   a. Does school improvement in charter schools fit into the Overton Window and what factors influenced the political will to allow the option of turnaround?
   b. What policies (state and local) were in place to allow a low-performing charter school to engage in turnaround?
   c. Was the authorizer held accountable to improving charter schools?

(2) What models of accountability were used for schools conducting turnaround?

   a. What autonomies were provided to the school?
   b. When and how was the turnaround process monitored for progress?

c. What components of the school were monitored for progress (i.e., leadership, talent, instruction, culture)?

This chapter first describes the methods used to review the literature. The chapter also provides background and definitions from the charter and turnaround literature, reviewing the history of charters and authorizers, as well as challenges and opportunities currently taking shape within the charter sector, including a concern over the equity of access to high quality options for students. The literature review concludes by detailing the impact of closing low-performing schools on students, examining the literature of turnaround, and identifying the need for policy options for authorizers to improve low-performing charter schools beyond the two options currently available: closing the school or letting the school languish. Throughout the literature review, connections are made to political theory and more specifically, Joseph Overton's Overton Window. The literature presented and reviewed in this chapter illustrates not only the need for improving the charter sector for the 3.2 million students currently enrolled, but also the 8.5 million students whose parents would send them to a charter school should one exist in their locale (Rees & Edelin, 2019).

Literature Review Methods

Studies relevant to the topic of interest for this literature review were included by searching multiple academic databases, including Education Source, EBSCOhost/ERIC, Dissertation Abstracts International, and JSTOR. In addition, professional charter, charter authorization and turnaround content centers, and association websites and charter school organization websites were also reviewed for further context. Although turnaround in charter schools is a budding concept, and most relevant articles were published within the past 10 years, no time restrictions were used in the search to ensure that any earlier

studies were included. Additionally, only sources written in English were reviewed. Various search terms were used to identify relevant literature, using the following primary terms and their variations and combinations: principal, leadership, school, charter, turnaround, improvement, authorizer, authorizer accountability, and political theory. Review of the abstracts determined whether the article fit the topics of interest and need.

Charter Schools

One of the most prolific reform efforts in recent educational history (Finn et al., 2016), chartering, allows the creation of schools of choice, run primarily independently from the district. While still public schools, charter schools have autonomy to establish their own budgets and determine school and class size, length of school day and year, curricula, and educational program offerings. In return for more extensive say in their programming than traditional public schools, charter schools agree to stipulations outlined in a performance contract, or "charter," with an authorizer and are held accountable to the agreed-upon financial and academic results. Charters are reviewed according to the metrics and timeline indicated in their charter, and the charter is re-issued or revoked by their authorizing agency depending on performance (Zimmer et al., 2008). Charters that do not meet their renewal criteria are most often closed.

Charter schools are publicly funded and therefore free to attend. Students who attend charter schools enroll in them by choosing the specific school, similar to how families enroll their students in private schools (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010). In most states the staff employed by charters choose to work there instead of being placed by the district or mandated by a union contract (Finn et al., 2016).

Charter schools enjoy the freedom of private schools, while being free to all students (Finn et al., 2016; O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010; Zimmer et al., 2008). For instance, charters have a governing structure like private schools, where an independent board of directors oversees the school. Charter schools are also oftentimes freed from state mandates and local regulation and are afforded more autonomy in several key decisions, such as staffing and freedom from bargaining agreements, curriculum, and schedule.

Charters come in many different shapes, forms, and grade configurations, and charters can be started by a wide variety of petitioners. Schools can be single, independent schools or part of a group of schools managed by networks such as non-profit charter management organizations (CMOs) or for-profit education management organizations (EMOs) (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2009). Charters can be started by a wide variety of stakeholders, including teachers, leaders, parents, nonprofit organizations and private firms, or converted if enough teachers and/or parents petition or if in effort to turn around a low-performing traditional school (Finn et al., 2016). While most charters are started as new schools in recent years, traditional public schools have also been converted to charter status.

For charters to be offered to students, states must pass legislation that allows for the option of charters. The state dictates which entities can authorize charters, and the roles of authorizers in holding charters accountable for effectiveness. States also determine whether any limitations on charters exist, how charters are funded, and, often, the types of facilities or facilities' funding to which charters will have access (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.).

All charters operate under a contract with a charter school authorizer that holds the school accountable to the standards and performance metrics outlined in their charter (National Alliance for Public Charters Schools, n.d.-a). For charters to exist, authorizers must approve their application. Authorizers also set the expectations in the performance contract and are responsible for overseeing that school performance meets these set expectations. Depending on a school's performance, authorizers decide which schools will be renewed to continue to serve students. State law determines which entities may be authorizers. For example, the most common authorizers are school districts; however, state education agencies, independent chartering boards, institutions of higher education, government offices, and not-for-profits also serve as chartering entities in states (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2009; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.-b; O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010; Zimmer et al., 2008).

Charters Debut

Several individuals are credited with the start of charters. However, as Finn et al. (2016) pointed out, "the debut of chartering was no lightning bolt," and the idea of charters was not just one single vision or theory of doctrine. Rather, many ideas for charters came from academics and economists, teachers' unions, think tanks, and legislators (p. 7).

Ideas of school choice began to surface in the 1960s from conservative and liberal philosophers, although the arguments were for different reasons. Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, who published *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1962, proposed providing needy families vouchers they could use to attend private school. The vouchers would cause failing schools to close by allowing market forces instead of the government to shape public education. However, regardless of the rationale for school choice, the

push toward school choice has always been, and continues to be, that "way too few kids in America have been able to pick their schools, and way too many have been stuck in bad schools that they have no alternative to" (Finn et al., 2016, p. 17).

Some of the ideas for school choice began to expand in the 1970s when Ray Budde, an education professor, proposed that local school boards grant teachers charters to create laboratories of innovative educational pedagogy within public schools. However, it was not until a series of reports on the poor performance of public education that Budde's idea gained real political and societal momentum.

In the Spring of 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.* Written in plain language for public consumption, the report "sounded alarm bells about the state of K–12 education in the United States" (Patterson, 2018, para 1). *A Nation at Risk* drew the public's attention to what it deemed as a failing of public education in sufficiently preparing the next generation of citizens for the future (*A Nation at Risk).* After the Russians beat the U.S. to the moon with Sputnik, A Nation at Risk only stoked the Cold War terror by connecting America's national security and sliding economy to the mediocre performance results of schools (Cohen, 2017).

> At the time, education was pretty much the domain of the experts, the people who were in the K–12 field. Superintendents. District leaders. State leaders and colleges of education. They were in charge – and [the feeling was] everyone else should mind their own business. *A Nation at Risk* basically disrupted that closed system by saying other people needed to be involved in the conversation about education, that the American people had a real stake in this topic. (Patterson, 2018, para. 4)

A Nation at Risk emphasized the need to focus on outcomes, and more specifically confronted the issue that "kids were not learning enough to participate fully in the kind of society and the kind of world that was emerging" (Patterson, 2018, para. 5). It spoke of the importance of setting rigorous expectations for all students. While charters and school choice did not appear in *A Nation at Risk*, reactions to the review interpreted the need to dissolve what was deemed as a monopoly school districts had on our educational system and agitate for the need for school choice. The report incited a wave of panic in political leaders across the country, whose efforts to reform public schooling became even more urgent (Cohen, 2017). The National Governors Association (NGA), led by Tennessee's Republican governor Lamar Alexander, who would later become Tennessee's senator, Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee chairperson, and one of the major authors of the reauthorization of ESEA's Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Alexander, n.d.; Cohen, 2017), backed school choice in a series of *Time for Results* reports in 1986. *The Time for Results* reports led to an all-governors meeting held in 1989, in which the purpose was to "swap red tape for results," which became part of not only the push for charter schools, but also for other reforms we see today (Finn et al., 2016, p. 16).

In response to calls for reforming public education, Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers Union, expanded the idea of charters to include an entire school rather than limiting the concept to select teachers.

> Though teachers' unions almost unilaterally oppose charters today, Shanker became the charter movement's first major booster. Writing to a wider audience in *The New York Times*, he extended Budde's argument, and proposed the establishment of publicly funded, independently managed schools that could

> experiment with ways to educate the some 80% of students that he estimated traditional schools weren't serving well. (Jason, 2017, p. 26)

By empowering teachers to experiment with their craft, charters could serve as innovative laboratories where practices incubated in charters could be taught to teachers in traditional public schools. A group of educators and policymakers in Minnesota were soon curious about the idea, including Ted Kolderie and Joe Nathan. While teachers' unions had previously feared a lack of accountability associated with the charter movement, they also feared charters would initiate more support for school choice options such as vouchers for private schools (Jason, 2017). In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass a law allowing for charters based on the premise that "a charter is an agreement between a school and a [school district]" (Miron & Nelson, 2002, p. 3).

California soon followed in 1992, and an additional six states in 1993 wrote legislation approving charters in the school context. Early charter advocates "envisioned small-scale, autonomous schools run by independent mom-and-pop operators who would be best positioned to respond to local community needs" (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010, p. 5). This vision appealed to a national audience, across party lines. "Everyone from the NAACP to the Walton Family Foundation to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported charter schools. Bill Clinton signed a federal support program for charters in 1994, and every president since has advocated for school choice" (Jason, 2017, p. 26).

Charters Today

The number of students attending charter schools has been on the rise since their inception. Between 2004 and 2017 the number of students enrolled in charters grew from just under 1 million to 3.2 million in 44 states and territories (McFarland et al., 2017; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.-b). Charters are not currently located

in Vermont, and a cluster of states: Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska, as well as Kentucky. Kentucky's neighbor, West Virginia, is the newest state to pass legislation allowing for charters, although none have been opened yet. Washington State recently overturned their charter school legislation, so while they previously offered charters, they no longer do. However, while charters are serving increasingly large numbers of students through expanding current schools, the number of new charter schools being opened has begun to decline as of 2014.

Political Support and Opposition to Charters

Charters have experienced bi-partisan support at the federal level, including from the Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump presidential administrations as well as at state and local levels (Zimmer et al., 2019). "In every state with a charter law, governors and legislators on both sides of the aisle have favored this innovation, and most such statutes (and later revisions of them) happened through bipartisan effort" (Finn et al., 2016, p. 19). While charter support tends to fall politically across the spectrum, charter proponents tend to fall into one or more of three camps: anti-bureaucracy, market-driven educational options, and raising teachers' level of status as a profession (Garn, 1999). Whereas advocates from the anti-bureaucracy side hold that by "legislating an ever-growing number of best practice methods and penalizing deviation, various government agencies have created a top-down educational system that chokes out innovations" (Brouillette, 2002, p. 6). Those who apply to start charters from an anti-bureaucracy viewpoint argue that if they can determine what would work best for students instead of following the mandated offerings, they would be more effective at serving the underlying needs of their students.

Charter opponents suggest that while charters allow parents and families choice of options, regardless of zip code and neighborhood, family choice does not extend beyond the selection of the school (Sondel, 2015). Equal access may as well not be equal for all students. Opponents suggest charter schools recruit top performing students in an area, while discouraging and excluding low-performing students, or students with special educational or English Language learner needs (Ravitch, 2010).

In terms of autonomy, the amount of freedom charters are granted from local and state regulations varies across the states. Charter proponents, who come to support charters because of a market-driven view, believe district schools have a monopoly on public school students and therefore continue to conduct business as usual into perpetuity, regardless of educational outcomes. Charters, on the other hand, have to compete for their students and families. Charter supporters believe that if district schools must compete with charters, they are forced to adapt, to innovate, to attract and retain their students. This competition drives the improvement of the quality of public education (Brouillette, 2002). However, opponents argue that while charter schools offer families choice, these choices are often not better for students than traditional public schools, which is explored in the section below. In fact, opponents argue that charter schools not only are a less effective option for students, but also diminish the effectiveness of all schools in the area by siphoning off resources (Wells et al., 1999).

Finally, another group of charter school supporters believe charters are an opportunity for teachers to use their professionalism to serve students well. Charters offer an opportunity to respect the expertise of teachers and give them autonomy to make decisions that drive what and how students learn in class. Charter supporters in this camp see charters as "collaborative enterprises, where teachers and parents work together for

the good of the child" (Brouillette, 2002, p. 6). However, since most charters are exempt from teacher collective-bargaining agreements, and teachers teaching in charters are not required to meet the same certification requirements as traditional public schools, unions are often opposed to charters and suggest charters hinder teacher professionalism (National Education Association, 2017).

Although until very recently charters have flourished in part due to bipartisan support, this support from both sides of the aisle often masks the variety of reasons for initiating charters (Brouillette, 2002). The land of "a thousand flowers" would better describe the charter sector than "one best system" (Finn et al., 2016). For instance, an analysis conducted in 2005 on the 41 states at that time with charter school legislation attempted to summarize the legislators' purpose for charters. Close to 20 different reasons were found. The most common reason (found in more than half of states' laws) was that charters improve the achievement of all students and provide more options for all families. But a variety of other goals were found as well, matching the reasons for supporting or opposing charters (Smarick, 2005). Wells et al. (1999) posited that state charter laws show a clear indication of the negotiating and policy development possible between politicians from across the aisle who come to the discussion seeking different ends.

As one of the four accepted models under the previous reauthorization of the ESEA entitled No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to improve chronically low-performing traditional public schools, charters became the response to the low performance of minority-majority schools in economically desolate areas. For example, conversion to charter schools comprised over 1,300 schools in 2012–13. A conversion occurs when a traditional public school is given permission to become a charter in an effort to improve

academic outcomes and other school quality shortcomings (National Charter School Resource Center, 2014). Schools were often just converted without any additional systemic improvement to support the conversion (National Charter School Resource Center, 2014). The Race to the Top federal policy also encouraged charter expansion by tying competitive funding to including additional space for charters, resulting in $4.35 billion in funding allocated to expanding charters (Mora & Christianakis, 2013).

While funding is a very tangible input, several opponents to charters saw the issue as being focused on a different goal than funding (Hursh, 2007; Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Ravitch, 2010). Opponents argued against the move to privatize the public education system. While the purpose of NCLB was to identify and support subgroups of students with the greatest need, opponents argued that the traditional public school system, and the needy students it served, were the casualty of a faulty policy (Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Ravitch, 2010). Under NCLB, schools were labeled as failing, and these schools closed. If failing public schools were not closed immediately, they were converted to privately run charter schools. Many of these charter schools were also eventually closed because the systemic reasons for their initial failure were not addressed (Mora & Christianakis, 2013).

This differing set of motives, interpretations, as well as compromises to offer charters have caused charter programs across the 44 states to produce a mixed makeup of types, demographic student bodies, and a wide variety of outcomes (Betts & Tang, 2018). This variance provides both charter supporters and charter opponents ammunition about the legitimacy and benefit of the schools themselves.

Charter Types

The charter sector started with individual, independent schools, and today 60% of charter schools remain as individual, independent schools. However, some leaders realized the monumental task for small, isolated schools and began creating clusters of schools called networks. Networks allow for the pooling of resources including the centralization of tasks, such as curriculum planning, finances, special education, and back-office services such as bookkeeping. A network also allows for a rather efficient way to replicate practices and models of schools found to be successful. Of the schools in the charter sector today, 40% are part of larger networks (Finn et al., 2016).

Charter Demographics

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD), charters across the 44 states enroll a higher percentage of minority students and economically disadvantaged students compared to their district counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2019b). There are also higher percentages of charters that enroll majority-minority student bodies, with 23% of charters enrolling more than 50% of African American students versus just 9% of traditional public schools. There is a similar trend with a majority Hispanic student body: 26% of charters have student bodies consisting of over 50%, versus 16% traditional public schools in 2016–17. This is partly due to where charters are located as most charters are in urban areas, as well as the states in which charters are located. While charters exist across 44 states, the vast majority of schools and students enrolled in charters are located in the most populous states including California and Texas, and almost half of all students enrolled in charters are located in five of the 44 states: California, Texas, Florida, Arizona, and Michigan. This is also partly due to the reason charters were started or offered in a state, since charter

enrollment has increased most in districts with a history of low academic outcomes and funding disparities (Rees & Edelin, 2019). For example, "in New Orleans, Detroit and Washington, D.C., the share of students enrolled in public charter schools is 92%, 53%, and 47%, respectively" (Rees & Edelin, 2019, para.2). Although flourishing in districts with high populations of struggling students, charters tend to serve a smaller percentage of students qualifying and receiving special education services than their surrounding district (Morando-Rhim & Kothari, 2018).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Student Population in Charters versus Traditional Public Schools

Demographic	Charters	Traditional Public Schools
White	33.1%	49.9%
African-American	26.8%	14.7%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.3%	5.4%
Hispanic/Latino	31.7%	25.6%
American Indian	0.7%	1.0%
Two or more races	3.4%	3.4%
Eligible for free/reduced-priced lunch	54.7%	51.9%
Eligible for special education services	10.6%	12.5%

Note. McFarland et al., 2017; Morando-Rhim & Kothari, 2018.

Charter Outcomes

As charters have spread across the United States, there has been an equally steep increase in federally legislated accountability based on standardized test scores starting with the reauthorization of ESEA entitled NCLB, and now under the current reauthorization of ESEA, Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA). As such, student achievement is a mandated goal of the charter ecosystem—by the schools themselves and the entities authorizing them—and the sole basis for their existence is to meet

performance metrics and be held accountable to them. As noted earlier, charters were introduced in many states to boost student achievement; charter authorizers often base renewal or revocation decisions on test scores (Wohlstetter et al., 2013).

The question of whether students attending charters increased student achievement over the past three decades is a central one to the sector. Unfortunately, the answer to the question on effects of charters depends on the location, data, methods, and interpretation. To prioritize studies from the literature determining charter school effectiveness, the Review of Individual Studies Protocol (RISP) version 3.1 from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) was used to determine studies included in this summary. The RISP addresses the data and methodological concerns of conducting and reviewing studies and provides a standardized set of criteria by which to review more complex causal methodologies, such as randomized control trials, quasi-experimental designs, regression discontinuity designs, and considerations for reviewing single case study designs (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Studies on charters cannot utilize a traditional randomized control trial of assigning some students to a charter school and others not, as assigning goes against the main purpose of charters by taking away the fundamental choice parents make (Betts & Tang, 2018; Zimmer et al., 2019). Instead, researchers have used one of two methods for randomization. For charters with more student applicants than seats, students are chosen for enrollment via lottery. These studies have compared students who were successful in a charter lottery versus those that were unsuccessful.

Studies using a lottery for randomized control designs demonstrate higher academic achievement growth for charter students than students attending traditional public schools (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2009, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2007, 2009).

Students in grades 3-8 admitted via lottery in New York City compared to non-admitted students experienced small positive effects (Hoxby & Murarka, 2007, 2009). Over time, these same students, those attending charters in poverty-ridden Harlem and in the wealthy suburbs of Scarsdale, closed the achievement gap by 86% in mathematics and 66% in reading (Hoxby et al., 2009). Researchers conducting evaluations comparing charter lottery winners to students not picked in Boston found that the reading achievement gap among black and white middle school students was greatly reduced and the math achievement gap was eliminated (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2009). The longer the students attended charter schools, the more impact they experienced; when students remained enrolled in charters through graduation, the achievement gap was eliminated in both reading and math (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2011).

Caution is given to lottery studies for several reasons. The first is that the findings cannot be generalized to the larger charter sector since not all charters receive more student applications than they have room to serve (Zimmer & Engberg, 2016). Given that the large cities in which most lottery studies have been conducted have district-wide low achievement, a more subdued effect was seen in lottery studies not conducted in solely large cities with histories of low achievement (Zimmer et al., 2019). For example, one lottery study conducted with a national sample of middle charter schools found no effects on educational achievement overall. However, disaggregated results pointed to positive effects on educational achievement for low-income, low-performing students, but for students that were economically advantaged the effects were negative (Gleason et al., 2010). Another study conducted across 13 states found similar results: overall, no significant effects but closer examination of disaggregated results showed positive effects

for schools with high percentages of free/reduced priced lunch recipients versus a negative effect for advantaged schools (Clark et al., 2015).

For charters without large waitlists, researchers have used two other methods to determine charter effectiveness. These studies are quasi-experimental. The first, from CREDO at Stanford University uses a matched-comparison, where each charter student is "matched" with a traditional public school student based on the student's demographic characteristics such as race and ethnicity, whether the student qualifies for the federal meal program, whether the student requires special education or English Language Learner services, and the student's previous achievement (CREDO, 2009, 2013, 2015). By matching students based on these characteristics, "we have designed the analysis so that differences in the academic growth between the two groups are a function of which schools they attended" (CREDO, 2013, p. 10). Studies using propensity score matching methodology also match students in a similar way (Furgeson et al., 2012). While these matching methodologies can include a wider set of charters, this research suffers from selection bias or other inherent differences in students not accounted for in the characteristics being used to match, such as parental involvement.

CREDO's first matched comparison study of 16 states found that less than 20% of charters outperformed traditional public schools, while 31% of charter students performed worse. The remaining performed statistically indistinguishably from their traditional public counterparts (CREDO, 2009). CREDO's second matched comparison study of 27 states, including the same 16 from 2009, encompassed more than 95% of charter students across the U.S. This was the first time that charters across the U.S. had been studied. Overall, there were no significant differences in math growth between traditional public and charter schools, and a small positive effect of charters on reading

growth. A slightly higher percentage of charters performed above, and a slightly lower percentage performed worse than their traditional counterparts than in 2009 at 29% and 19% respectively. In addition, students in poverty and minority students in poverty saw more positive gains in reading and math attending charters, whereas affluent students attending charters saw similar or negative impacts compared to their traditional public counterparts (CREDO, 2013).

Finally, CREDO's (2015) study used a similar methodology to analyze impacts of online charter schools, which showed that students attending online charters had very weak academic growth compared to similar students attending a traditional public school. To help operationalize the results, CREDO translated the findings to days of instruction. The online charters results "equate to a student losing 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days of learning in math, based on a 180-day school year" (CREDO, 2015, p. 3).

A propensity score matching study comparing students enrolled with particular Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) compared to traditional public school students found positive, but not significant, differences in reading and math achievement scores. However, disaggregating by CMO found large variations in results. For example, students in 10 CMOs had significant positive impacts on four academic subjects (reading, math, science and social studies), while students attending four CMOs had significantly negative impacts on these four subjects compared to students attending traditional public schools (Furgeson et al., 2012).

Other quasi experimental studies show mixed results on student achievement when comparing performance of the same student when they were enrolled in traditional public schools versus when enrolled in charters (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker et al., 2008; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Hanushek et al., 2007; Sass, 2006; Zimmer & Buddin,

2006; Zimmer et al., 2012). Studies in Florida, North Carolina and Texas showed negative effects in reading and math for charter students in grades 4 through 8 (Booker et al., 2008; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Hanushek et al., 2007; Sass, 2006). In Utah, small negative effects were found for charter students in grades 1 through 6 in math and language arts and no effects for the same subjects for students in grades 7 through 11 (Ni & Rorrer, 2012). A study examining student achievement in 14 states found only 19% of charter schools had higher achievement than their local traditional public school (Davis & Raymond, 2012), whereas a different study found no significant differences in scores in math in Chicago, Philadelphia and San Diego, positive impacts on math scores in Denver and Milwaukee, and negative impacts on math scores in Ohio and Texas (Zimmer et al., 2012). In reading, no significant difference was found except in Chicago, Ohio, and Texas where a negative effect was reported (Zimmer et al., 2012). A study looking at California charters found no significant differences in reading achievement of elementary students, but a small positive effect for secondary students. For math, elementary charter students exhibited small negative effects, but no difference was found at the secondary level (Zimmer et al., 2003).

Most recently, researchers have used a value-added approach to determine charters' effectiveness (Baude et al., 2019; Chingos & West, 2015; Ladd et al., 2017; Spees & Lauren, 2019). This approach also creates a "matched student comparison" in a traditional public school based on prior achievement and student demographics. Using a regression analysis, a value add determines whether a current charter student's test score is higher than that of a comparable TPS student and follows students over time instead of just one year's worth of comparison data (Zimmer et al., 2019). Studies conducted in Arizona (Chingos & West, 2015) and North Carolina (Ladd et al., 2017; Spees & Lauren,

2019) found charters are less effective than traditional public schools but are increasing in effectiveness over time. In Texas, charter schools have increased in effectiveness so much over time that researchers found large positive effects in reading and moderate effect sizes in math (Baude et al., 2019). In the case of charters, focusing on the average scores, instead of the large standard deviations found in these studies, hides much of the success and detriment across minority, geographic, state, district, and time period of the charter movement.

Charter Authorizers

Given the mixed outcomes of charters, a significant question in the charter movement is: Are schools being held accountable? As such, a national study on charter school student outcomes found the role of the authorizer, sometimes referred to as a sponsor, to be pivotal to the success of the charter school movement (Palmer & Gau, 2003; Vergari, 2001).

Behind every charter school is an authorizer. Any entity allowed to be an authorizer by the state's charter law is responsible for deciding "who can start a new charter school, set academic and operational expectations, and oversee school performance. They also decide whether a charter should remain open or closed at the end of its contract" (NACSA, 2015, para. 1).

According to the National Alliance for Public Charter School's Charter School Data Digest, of the 963 active authorizers, nearly 90% (863 authorizers) were Local Education Agencies (LEAs), 4.6% (44 authorizers) were higher education institutions (HEIs), slightly more than 2% were state education agencies (SEAs) (21 authorizers) and less than 2% were 'other' authorizing entities, such as independent chartering board (ICBs) (18 authorizers), non-educational government entity (NEGs) (2 authorizers), and

non-for-profit organizations (NFPs) (15 authorizers) (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). These different entities offer varying capacities and limitations to monitoring and supporting charter schools. The number of schools authorized varies often by type of authorizer. For example, while LEAs make up most authorizers, they only authorize slightly more than half of all charters. Whereas SEAs and ICBs constitute a smaller number of authorizers, they authorize slightly more, and slightly less than 20% of all charters, respectively (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). As of 2020, 14 states only offered one option of authorizing entity. The rest of the states were somewhere in the middle of a few too many authorizer options. According to NACSA, "best practice is to have more than one type of authorizer (local school districts plus an alternative); however, in six states, school districts are the only bodies that can approve and oversee charters" (NACSA, 2015, para. 3). NACSA also recommends at least one full time equivalent staff member for every three charter schools (NACSA, 2013) For some authorizer types, such as district authorizers with small numbers of charter schools, or ICBs with very large portfolios, this ratio can be difficult to achieve.

Research findings disagree over which entity might be best set up to provide quality authorizing. The wide range in charter quality is a direct effect of the type and quality of authorizers. (CREDO, 2015). Charter school authorizers offer varying degrees of resources, including staff expertise, experience, and authorizing capacities. Universities, state education agencies, and school districts may be more likely to have relevant expertise, which is why they may be the most common authorizers (Palmer & Gau, 2003; Zimmer et al., 2014). Recent analysis of school authorizer practices and philosophy may help explain not only the variance of quality, but the impact of authorizer practices on the charter sector as well (Chen, 2016).

The differences in authorizing practices and authorizing capacity are important, but so are the authorizer's priorities and ability to hold their schools accountable for the flexibility and freedom charters are given over traditional public schools (Chen, 2016). There is some guidance on how authorizers can provide quality authorizing and several definitions of what constitutes quality authorizing (Lake & Hill, 2006; NACSA, 2015; Palmer & Gau, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) suggests quality charter school authorizing includes: (a) investing resources to develop relationships with schools; (b) setting high standards to determine applicant decisions for new schools; (c) working with schools, but not becoming obliged to them; (d) taking into account the performance at the system and school when making revocation decisions; and (e) actively working to recruit a diverse provider portfolio (Lake & Hill, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education also established practices for quality authorizing: (a) work to build strong organizations; (b) develop a robust talent pool; (c) select schools that show promise of quality; (d) support your new operators; (e) provide oversight that is both transparent and meaningful; and (f) uphold accountability to performance goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). This third set of criteria, outlined by NACSA, is the most commonly cited set of authorizer quality criteria. NACSA outlined quality authorizing: (a) maintains rigorous standards, (b) upholds autonomy, and (c) protects public and student interests (NACSA, 2018b).

In 2015, NACSA launched a national research and technical assistance organization, Public Impact--the Quality Practice Project, intent on uncovering what qualities were exhibited in authorizers with high-performing versus average performance charters, as measured by student performance and other practices. Findings from the project showed three differences across the authorizers. In charter sectors that were

flourishing, authorizers had competent leadership, institutional commitment, and strong professional judgment. The report provided examples of authorizer practices found in high quality authorizers versus average sector authorizers pertaining to their culture that went beyond merely opening great schools and closing failing schools. For instance, high-quality sector authorizers distinguished their roles as being supportive but not giving schools direction about what they should do to improve. In authorizers' opinions, they recognized the consequences of giving direction not only as both overstepping their role, but also going beyond their expertise. In addition, while authorizers did not provide direction, authorizers with high quality sectors did implement other systems to allow charter schools to flourish, including establishing frequent data collection and monitoring, having the expertise with organizational function and knowledge of the school to be able to differentiate between normal fluctuations of data and data trends that are concerning for the school. NACSA found that, most importantly, successful authorizers were those that developed strong and intentional feedback loops between authorizers and school boards. Authorizers should manage data monitoring, and the communication with boards should help schools know where they stand and help authorizers have difficult conversations about performance with schools (NACSA, 2018a).

Authorizer Accountability

Holding authorizers accountable for their role, much like the charter movement itself, has continued to evolve as the outcomes for charters are continually studied. Authorizers are held accountable through internal evaluations of the authorizers themselves and state-specific legislative mandates on roles, responsibilities, and consequences, as well as external evaluations of the authorizer sector itself (Finn et al.,

2016). State policy determines the means by which authorizers are held accountable. National policy takes stock of the changing role of authorizers and for what authorizers should be accountable.

Legislative mandates on authorizer practice dictate how authorizers are held accountable. For example, the Education Commission of the States reviewed the legislation pertaining to charter policy across the 45 states (44 states, plus District of Columbia). Fifteen of the 45 states with charters have legislation that indicates authorizers can be sanctioned for failing to correct a wrongdoing. Most sanctions include removing the charter authorizing authority entirely; other states allow schools to petition for another authorizer should they find theirs unfitting.

Most states (26 of the 45) require the authorizers to provide a summary of the performance of the authorized schools. Other states require the authorizer to submit performance reports, such as annual reports put together by the schools themselves to the state education agency, while others are mandated to conduct annual reviews of charter schools to ensure schools are meeting charter requirements. Some states are required to conduct analyses of school performance compared to traditional public schools, while others are required to report student growth (Education Commission of the States, 2020).

Several states are held accountable for the performance of their charters and are issued consequences for any low-performing charter schools. For example, in Illinois and Hawaii, "persistently unsatisfactory performance of an authorizer's portfolio of public charter schools . . . may trigger a special review by the board" (HI 302D-6 Principles and Standards for Charter Authorizing, 2016). Several states have a process for evaluating the charter authorizers, including Ohio, Missouri, and Minnesota (Education Commission of the States, 2020).

Many state laws also provide conditions and/or procedures for holding schools accountable, including when authorizers can and/or must revoke a school's charter. These conditions including breaches to the charter agreement, local, state and/or federal law, or failure to meet academic achievement or specific charter related targets, such as "to meet or exceed enrollment and retention targets of students with disabilities" (NY 2855–Causes for Revocation or Termination, 2014). State legislation determines how authorizers approach low-performing schools. Currently, all but one state (Maryland) specifies the basis for terminating mid-term or not renewing at the end of a school's charter. Auto-closure laws in 15 states and closure thresholds in 19 states make it difficult for authorizers to move beyond a binary decision tree pertaining to how to support low-performing schools. Several states (Alabama, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and Texas) have an automatic closure law, wherein authorizers are required to close schools not meeting one or more charter criteria. Delaware can deny a renewal based only on certain criteria. Authorizers in Oklahoma are required to provide justification before the state board of education should it not close a school in the bottom 5% of performance across the state. Nineteen states have a threshold beneath which a charter school must automatically be closed. Fifteen of the 19 states indicate schools must be closed based on certain academic thresholds, such as being identified as the federal designations of being in the bottom 5% of performance across the state (Education Commission of the States, 2020).

Authorizers as Linchpins to Improving Charter Sector

When applying to open a school, charter authorizers usually require the applicant to specify goals for student outcomes as well as how the school plans to reach these goals. For instance, charter applications include a request for a mission statement, goals for student achievement, information about how the school will measure students' performance, as well as the foreseen discipline policies (Finn et al., 2016). Charters are often required to meet the goals in their contracts within the period of time specified in order to remain open. Usually this time period is five years.

Some states require that charters report to the authorizer and/or public every year on how the school and students performed on the goals established in the performance contract (Education Commission of the States, 2020). Annual reports help authorizers determine whether progress is being made toward renewal outcomes and help the school gauge whether they are on track to be renewed (Consoletti, 2011). The secret to quality authorizing is not in requiring data submission, but in the authorizers' ability to provide monitoring and oversight, as the difference in what an authorizer does with this information is found as the primary source of charter school failure or success (CREDO, 2015).

Improving the charter sector has thus far included starting high quality schools and closing low quality schools. However, as one authorizer from the University of Missouri-Columbia Charter Schools Office opined, "We can't close our way to improvement" (Dr. Kettenbach, personal communication, October 2019).

Changing Charter Landscape: Ensuring Equitable Access

Across the 44 states, education leaders are troubled by the persistent geographic segregation and achievement gap between students of different racial, ethnic, and income

groups (Finn et al., 2016). Charters were founded for multiple purposes. In some places, they were founded to disrupt the enrollment patterns based on where families live and provide underserved students with high-quality options; in other places, they were founded to provide a wider variety of educational and programmatic offerings. However, students do not have equal access to this choice, nor equal access to high quality choices (Campbell et al., 2017).

School Closure

When charters do not meet the authorizer's criteria, authorizers can choose not to renew their charter and close the school. The option of closure is seen as an important lever in improving the quality of charters. In 2012, NACSA challenged authorizers to close failing schools and open highly effective ones (Forbriger, 2019). Then Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, declared, "In some cases [closing a low-performing school is] the only responsible thing to do. It instantly improves the learning conditions for those kids" (Duncan, 2009).

However, state and district specific studies on the impact of charter school closure on students has yielded conflicting findings. Students are not guaranteed a better school after the closure of their underperforming school (Barnum, 2018; Carlson & Lavertu, 2015; de la Torre et al., 2015; Steiner, 2009). Studying impacts of closure across 26 schools, CREDO found 48% of students were relocated to a school that was higher performing than the charter one that closed (2017). This means a student relocated from a closed school has only a one out of two chance of ending up in a higher performing school.

In addition, transition research argues that transitioning students to a different school has long term negative impacts to students' academic abilities (Hanushek et al.,

2004; Schwerdt & West, 2011) higher suspension (Engec, 2006) and dropout rates (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). More so, this burden of transferring because of school closure unequally affects minority students and students living in poverty (CREDO, 2017).

The annual number of charter school openings has historically exceeded the number of charter school closings. However, charter school openings have been slowing slightly since 2014, while closures have seen an increase. This trend signals a change in the charter sector. Whereas between 2005 to 2014 there was an insurgence and rapid growth of the numbers of charters, since 2014 may have seen a drop-off because many authorizers now employ robust performance frameworks that allow them to monitor school performance. These more rigorous monitoring practices can signal whether schools meet state required closure criteria. This drop may also be due to the number of charter schools reaching any district or state imposed caps (Finn et al., 2016)

State Policy Changes to Address Underperforming Charters

Given the slower growth of charter schools and the varying impacts on students' educational outcomes, some states have passed legislation to acknowledge the flexibility for accountability tradeoff may not be enough to create high quality educational options for all children. For instance, North Carolina

> may not close a charter school solely for being low-performing if the school has met growth in each of the 3 immediately preceding school years or if the school has implemented a strategic improvement plan approved by the state board and is making measurable progress (Education Commission of the States, 2020, para.2 North Carolina).

States that can put schools on probation include California, Indiana, Missouri, New Jersey, and Ohio, and states that must intervene if schools are struggling are California and Missouri. Finally, Florida authorizers are mandated to make "academic achievement for all students the most important factor when determining whether to renew or terminate the charter" (Fla. Stat. Ann. § 1002.33), and they are required to terminate the contract of charters earning two consecutive grades of "F".

As the charters have continued to proliferate, the focus has moved not necessarily to quantity of choice, but quality of choice, with some emerging research ascertaining how well authorizers fulfill their role as overseers of choice (Chen, 2016). How *quality* is defined is up to the authorizer. However, this definition can have effects on the charter movement itself.

National Policy Changes to Address Underperforming Charters

Changes to the national policy context have also pushed for options beyond school closure to address underperforming charters. In 1994, Congress enacted the Charter Schools Program (CSP). With support in Congress from both Democrats and Republicans, the CSP program has increased in budget from $4.5 million in 1994 to $440 million in 2019 (Campbell, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The purpose of the grant was to fund the opening of new charters and evaluate how innovative they were able to be. Not everyone gets charter school funding. States must apply to receive the federal dollars, and then operators must apply to receive the funding from the state. In terms of the overall federal education budget, the CSP program is "just 1 percent of overall spending on K–12, and charters, like traditional district schools, also get additional federal, state, and local funds" (Phenicie, 2019, para. 9).

Recently, the Center for American Progress suggested a pivoting of purpose for the CSP. Approximately $377 million (85% of the grant dollars) of the CPS funds is being used to open new charter schools (U.S. House of Representatives, 2018). However, as the Center for American Progress indicated, “If we think that charter schools are worth investing in, then it would be good policy to invest in helping the 7,000 or so that are out there” (Phenicie, 2019, para. 3). Campbell (2019) argued that the charter sector has changed much since the enactment of the CSP in 1994. To improve the sector,

> in addition to grants to open new schools and facilities financing assistance, the CSP should reflect a balanced approach to charter school policy focused on encouraging the smart growth of excellent schools, improving the quality of existing charter schools, and confronting challenges in the charter sector. Using this approach, federal policymakers can support states and local communities in reaching the goal of public schools having a good seat for every child. (Campbell, 2019, p. 1)

Campbell argued this is especially true given the nature of support surrounding most charters.

The results of attending charters have certainly been mixed, and results from the different types of charters have been even more so. For instance, most charters (65%) serving most students enrolled in charters (57%) are independently managed charters (National Association for Public Charter Schools, n.d.-a). Independently managed charters have experienced the least amount of impact on student achievement and unfortunately continue to be the most likely type of management to be favored. Since independent charters do not have a Charter Management Organization or Education Management Organization to provide support, in the form of leadership training, staff

recruitment and hiring, and instructional and cultural support, independently managed schools are on their own to either provide the services themselves or seek out organizations or vendors to provide the services for them. This is costly and, further, the level of quality of services is not guaranteed.

Authorizers' Changing Role

While work has been done to clarify the role and responsibility of charter school authorizers to establish new schools and monitor existing schools, there has been an evolution of thought around authorizers' responsibility for directly supporting the improvement of a charter. For example, state and local education associations have evolved to be less of a monitor and more of a support entity. However, these entities typically only provide support to traditional public schools and sometimes charters deemed lowest performing. However, unless a charter school meets that designation, no such entity is currently designated to support struggling charter schools (Chait et al., 2019; Evan & Canavero, 2020).

Some states, such as Florida and North Carolina, are beginning to mandate that authorizers are legally required to support schools in need of turnaround.

> Other authorizers may want to [support schools] but lack the resources to help. SEAs and LEAs that serve as authorizers may want to help any failing charter school they have approved, but their required focus on the lowest-performing schools (e.g., Comprehensive School Improvement or Targeted School Improvement schools under the ESSA) may well consume the agencies' limited improvement resources (Chait et al., 2019, p. 9).

In addition, authorizers may lack the capacity to help improve a school regardless of where they stand philosophically about their role as an authorizer (Mead, 2012). Beyond

the ability, either in resources or skill, some authorizers are reticent to get directly involved because "doing so creates an awkward tension because, in the end, if the turnaround fails, the authorizer is the one who pulls the plug" (Chait et al., 2019, p. 9). This scenario may create legal difficulties with the revocation proceedings, requiring the authorizer to justify the closure if the authorizer failed to provide adequate support (Chait et al., 2019).

My study sought to determine why some authorizers are moving beyond the dichotomous option awarded to charters (a school succeeds, it stays open; or it fails and is closed) to offer the option of turnaround to existing charter schools in the hopes of improving them. This study looked to understand the political context of how the opportunity of turnaround became an option beyond closure for low-performing charter schools. As importantly, this study provides an understanding of how the authorizer held the school conducting improvement efforts accountable, as well as how they were held accountable for improvement.

Charter Schools and Turnaround

The turnaround literature is based most often on research conducted in traditional public schools, where most often turnaround fails to improve the school (Baroody, 2011; Bonilla & Dee, 2020; Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Dee & Dizon-Ross, 2019; Dougherty & Weiner, 2019). Contrasting unsuccessful and the limited successful attempts of turnaround revealed what conditions schools need in order for turnaround to be successful. A national study of federal School Improvement Grantees found school leaders need a greater level of autonomy to confront the needs specific to their school (Dragoset et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Schools which were afforded autonomy to make decisions pertaining to staffing budgets and how time is

allocated and used, as well as those which were held accountable to improvement goals by an external entity, were able to lead successful turnaround efforts (Lutterloh et al., 2016). Charters already exist with these autonomies through the autonomy for accountability tradeoff (Corbett, 2015; Evan & Canavero, 2020).

Corbett (2015) described the autonomy for accountability tradeoff. The first type of autonomy concerns staff autonomy. Autonomy of staffing entails having the decision-making ability to hire, fire, and offering incentives. Autonomy in staffing found to be most useful also included how and where to assign staff, as well as how to develop the staff professionally. A second type of autonomy is that charters also have the freedom to determine how to use time, both in how long school lasts for the year and day and what students and staff are doing during that time. A third type is to give charters the decision-making authority regarding programming, such as the ability to choose how the school will teach state standards and how these decisions will be financed. Depending on state law and local autonomy, charters can determine what their priorities are as a school and allocate funding accordingly. Finally, charters have the ability to pick or renovate their facilities at their will (Corbett, 2015).

Under the NCLB, the lowest-performing public schools were required to follow one of four pathways toward improvement. One of those pathways was converting the public school to a charter school. ESSA opened the options for states to support local education agencies (districts, and in the case of charter schools that are determined to be a local education agency, the school itself) in improving low-performing schools. While a national review of school improvement strategies proposed in states' consolidated ESSA state plan does not veer too far from the narrow and prescriptive options under the previous ESEA, recent emerging research provides a framework for rapid and sustainable

turnaround that many states are adopting or adapting (Center on School Turnaround, 2017).

Framework for Turnaround

The federally funded *Center on School Turnaround* is part of the Comprehensive Center Network, which is a network of content and regional supports to states and districts. Center on School Turnaround researchers summarized the methods from research and practice found to be effective in turning around schools. The *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement* (Center on School Turnaround, 2017) framework organizes the issues state, district, and school leaders should consider when planning for a successful and sustainable turnaround: (1) turnaround leadership, (2) talent management, (3) instructional transformation, and (4) culture shift.

Turnaround Leadership

ESSA recognized that school improvement and turnaround require highly effective school leaders (ESSA, 2015). The research on school turnaround supports this emphasis, as quality leadership is often central to school turnaround and rapid improvement (Herman et al., 2017; Klute et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2016). From their comprehensive literature review, Leithwood et al. (2004) found that the quality of school leadership is second only to that of teachers in producing gains in student achievement. In addition, school leadership is necessary to guide turnaround, such as improving instruction and making positive changes in school climate (Thompson et al., 2016).

The competency of leadership to lead the charge for turnaround effectively is also of great importance and interest (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). The competencies required for turnaround go above and beyond what is deemed effective in less demanding

circumstances (Steiner, 2009; Steiner & Hassel, 2011). "Successful school turnarounds–characterized by quick, strategic changes in school culture and systems that result in dramatic improvement in student achievement in persistently low-performing schools–are hard work and difficult to achieve and sustain" (Lutterloh et al., 2016, p. 1). Organizations can use competencies for many purposes such as hiring effective turnaround leaders, evaluating leadership performance, and providing professional development for school turnaround leaders that are based on needs (Steiner & Hassel, 2011).

School leaders have many critical responsibilities. In their Balanced Leadership Framework, Waters and Cameron (2007) identified 21 responsibilities and 66 practices for which principals are responsible. These myriad areas of work can be distilled to two core functions: providing direction and exerting influence (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). This illustrates the breadth of responsibilities that school leaders hold, as well as the complexity of managing the roles in a way that attends to the most urgent and important needs of their schools.

Effective school leaders recruit and retain a high-quality staff, foster positive school culture, establish high expectations, and reach out to the community (Almanzan, 2005; Clifford et al., 2012). Yet, school leadership is not limited to a single person. Teachers and other school staff all play critical roles in effectively leading the school (Herman et al., 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Distributed leadership (collaboration between administrators and leadership teams) can have a positive impact on school quality (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Spillane et al., 2001).

Talent Development

In addition to finding adequate and prepared leaders, schools in improvement have a more difficult time recruiting effective teachers (Brackett et al., 2007). Given this reality, in addition to recruiting effective staff, schools need to develop the teaching staff that they have through effective professional learning and retain staff who contribute to the school's growth in performance. "An effective talent system will identify teachers who are excelling, plateauing, and struggling" (Minnici et al., 2016, p. 2).

Teachers most beneficial in a turnaround context have developed the content and pedagogical competencies needed to drive improvement in student outcomes (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Evan & Canavero, 2020). However, talent management is also successful in a turnaround context if schools attract and recruit teachers who do not yet demonstrate being exceptional teachers but have the desire and willingness to grow into being great teachers (Evan, 2019). Schools undergoing turnaround should provide ongoing training to ensure staff are ready to address the demands of the work required and students reap the benefits immediately (Brackett et al., 2007).

The turnaround context benefits most when teachers understand their own professional learning needs, leadership understands these needs and provides ongoing and embedded opportunities to reflect on and progress in their practice (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Evan & Canavero, 2020). "To do this successfully, talent management systems must include assessment of teaching practice, feedback to individuals, and professional learning geared to both better [*sic*] use strengths and support continuous improvement" (Minnici, 2016, p. 6). Talent management is effective for turnaround contexts when the school works regularly to understand and address teachers' needs in meeting students' needs. Smatterings of unrelated topics for professional development

have been found to have little to no effect in developing teachers. Students make significant academic gains when taught by teachers engaged in growth opportunities that are part of the school culture and cadence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). One common strategy to provide ongoing, embedded support for teachers is through instructional coaching (Odden et al., 2002).

Finally, schools with effective talent management in the turnaround context retain their best performing staff and determine how to utilize their knowledge to drive improvement at the school and help them continue to grow (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Evan & Canavero, 2020). This may include creating "opportunities for the strongest teachers to influence their peers and reach more students... and gives teachers the ability to form career aspirations while remaining in the classroom" (Minnici et al., 2016, p. 8). Teaching in a turnaround context is difficult. Teacher turnover can have detrimental effects on the improvement efforts at a school. A recent study found that entire staffs turned over every 3–4 years, making deep seated, sustainable reform difficult to implement (Holme et al., 2017).

Instructional Transformation

Typically, school staff are charged with turning around the instructional practice and culture within a school. This transformation should be instructional transformation and should be data-driven, rigorous, and supported system-wide (Anderson et al., 2010; Hamilton et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2008; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Moore & Emig, 2014). To do so, teachers need to be able to identify students' needs and base their instruction around them, build effective scaffolding into their instruction to support students based on their needs and have the support and

infrastructure available to apply assessment results to instructional plans (Hamilton et al., 2009; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Love et al., 2008).

Improvement in student learning outcomes depends on system-wide support for change in the classroom instruction (Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Evan & Canavero, 2020; Herman et al., 2008; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Effective instructional practice must include strong standards-based instruction, data-based planning, differentiated learning and individualization. As authors James Stigler and James Hiebert noted in their book, *The Teaching Gap* (2009), "Teaching…is the passageway through which all other educational reforms must travel if they are to make it through the classroom door and, ultimately, improve students' learning" (p. xi). Differences in teaching and teacher quality can have significant implications for student learning. For example, differences in learning gains between a top quartile and bottom quartile teacher can be as much as two-thirds of a school year (Measures of Effective Teaching Project, 2010).

Quality teaching requires that teachers have clear notions of how learning develops (i.e., learning progressions) and can guide learners forward. Formative assessment plays a key role in this process. Through monitoring student knowledge and understanding during instruction, formative assessment yields data that allow teachers to make real-time adjustments to their instruction and helps learners to reflect on their learning. A landmark meta-analysis from Black and William (1998) found that formative assessment positively impacts students' achievement when teachers use the results to change lessons based on students' needs.

While students learn from teachers, teachers can also learn and improve their instructional strategies through effective professional learning systems. Professional

learning involves external training, sometimes called professional development, and job-embedded activities that drive changes in teacher craft (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009). For a professional learning system to be effective, it must be reflective and incorporate strong communication, collaboration, and leadership (Bryk et al., 2010; Vescio et al., 2008). Staff professional development should also be well connected to the school's priorities and goals; teachers should be able to link professional learning activities easily to local requirements as the teachers drive toward a shared goal (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Fullan et al., 2004).

Also key to quality teaching and learning is alignment of the level of rigor in the curriculum and instruction as well as assessments to what is expected in the grade level standards. While students' foundational skills may need improvement, students benefit when they build these foundational skills within the content and expectations of grade-level curriculum. Teachers who utilize student assessment information that is collected regularly and adjust their instruction maximize the impact of instruction (Cohen, 1987; English & Steffy, 2001). Educators and schools that effectively use data are working to ensure all students are growing and progressing, as well as determining professional learning opportunities for teachers (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

Culture Shift

Culture can uphold or unravel the important work of turnaround. A strong school community builds the culture within and among members of the community, including families. Schools with a strong culture partner with families that support students in determining and achieving their life goals (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Weiss et al., 2010). This is accomplished by working through any language or other cultural barriers to establish trust, increasing the types and impact of interactions with families, and

providing families with approaches to use in supporting students at home (Paredes, 2011). Schools that used impactful family engagement strategies saw a four-fold increase in that school's reading and math performance (Bryk et al., 2010).

The success of turnaround can be affected by many factors. In traditional public schools, "two major factors affect turnaround success: the characteristics and actions of the turnaround leader, and the support for dramatic change that the leader and staff receive from the district, state, and/or other governing authority" (Steiner & Hassel, 2011, p. 1). In the case of charter schools, authorizers hold schools accountable but often do not provide support. Support to charters can also be provided by partners or outside consultants (Evan & Canavero, 2020).

Based on the literature regarding turnaround in a charter context, it is difficult to determine whether offering and conducting turnaround will be worth the vast amount of resources, including time, energy, and willpower to provide a viable option for students to get an excellent education. In a charter context, turnaround efforts may not align with the philosophy or capacity of the authorizer, as the authorizer may see the only option for a low-performing school is closure. Turnaround efforts may also not align with the "window of opportunity" by which charter authorizers are held responsible. However, the detrimental effects of closure on students, especially minority and low-income students, help make a stronger case for turnaround. This study identifies the optimal conditions of how some authorizers have offered the option of turnaround, as well as how authorizers are held accountable for the outcomes of their sector and how authorizers hold schools in turnaround accountable. Understanding the option of turnaround from these two pressures (pressure on the authorizer and pressure on the schools) is imperative if the option is to become more widely accepted and conducted.

The next chapter details the research methodology and how it will be used, including a rationale and description of the case study method, sampling plan for the cases, and the data collection methods to address the research questions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology used for this study and the specific choices made and rationale in designing the study. This study intended to understand the experiences of authorizers who offered low-performing schools a turnaround option by investigating both the optional conditions in which turnaround was offered, and their models of accountability for charter turnaround efforts. To do so, the following two research questions were investigated:

1. What contextual conditions were in place for the authorizer to facilitate school turnaround?
    a. Does school improvement in charter schools fit into the Overton Window and what factors influenced the political will to allow the option of turnaround?
    b. What policies (state and local) were in place to allow a low-performing charter school to engage in turnaround?
    c. Was the authorizer held accountable to improving charter schools?
2. What models of accountability were used for schools conducting turnaround?
    d. What autonomies were provided to the school?
    e. When and how was the turnaround process monitored for progress?

f. What components of the school were monitored for progress (i.e., leadership, talent, instruction, culture)?

In this chapter, there will be an in-depth explanation of the research design of the multi-case approach, using content analysis, along with a description of the context of the study, the methods that were used to select the sample, collect, and analyze the data.

Research Design

This study used a multi-case approach to a case study as the methodology. A case study is a research design that provides a rich, in-depth, and focused portrayal from which to understand a phenomenon within a single or multiple settings (Eisenhardt, 1989; MacDonald & Walker, 1975). In this study, each authorizer represented a single "case" and setting. Given the dearth in the literature base about authorizer practices to hold schools employing turnaround accountable, the goal of the design was to describe and document authorizer practice in relation to schools in turnaround in order to understand better the phenomenon, as well as for others to learn more about how and why particular tactics were used so they can ultimately apply the lessons learned to their own context.

By examining authorizer practice across multiple authorizers, this study provides further understanding of authorizer practice from a wider variety of authorizers, therefore contributing a richer portrayal to the field of accountability and education policy. The wide variety of authorizer philosophies (Chen, 2016) and types (NACSA, 2015) provides a unique opportunity for research. The examination of the experiences that individual charter school authorizers have with charter schools in turnaround may provide a deeper understanding of beneficial authorization practices as well as the authorization experience within differing political contexts.

Population and Sample

A database of schools closed between 2015 and 2019, organized by state, authorizer, and year closed was obtained from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. From there, state laws related to low or underperforming charter school policy were reviewed. A pool of potential participants for were selected for recruitment by meeting the following criteria:

1. State in which authorizer is located does not have an automatic closure law (as obtained from policy scan of auto-closure laws from Education Commission of the States, 2020)
2. State policy did not indicate a type of probation, improvement plan, or other opportunity to improve was mandatory prior to charter renewal decisions (as obtained from policy scan of charter laws from Education Commission of the States, 2020)
3. A central repository of states and/or authorizers offering the option of turnaround does not currently exist. Therefore, confirmation of a turnaround or significant improvement effort had been or is being conducted in a charter school, conducted through a search of news articles and authorizer websites.

From this pool, a purposeful sample was chosen to represent a variety of geographic, authorizer type, authorizer capacity, and size of authorizer portfolio. Purposeful sampling is used when trying to gain as much insight and understanding about the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). As demonstrated in the review of literature in chapter two, charters are employed for a multitude of purposes, with a wide range of philosophies and types of authorizers. The size of the sample was determined from research recommendations when using multiple case study approaches. Suggested sample size is

at least two, but for more complex phenomenon, five to six cases are recommended to illustrate similarities and differences across cases (Yin, 2009). Turnaround is quite a complex phenomenon; therefore, seven authorizers were recruited to participate in the study, with the hopes that consent agreements would be secured by at least five of the authorizers. Of those recruited, five authorizing agencies agreed to participate. Of the two authorizers who were invited but did not participate, one did not respond even after several attempts to contact them, and one indicated they were only a two-person office and did not have the capacity to participate. This latter authorizer is a district office, which accounts for the majority of authorizers across the U.S. (NACSA, 2020). Although district offices tend to each authorize only a small number of charter schools, not having a district office included in this study limits their perspective in this study.

Qualitative studies typically employ two levels of sampling. Sampling includes first the case, and then the people, activities, or documents within the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, nine individuals were chosen based on their role within the authorizers' functions. The size of authorizer teams varied greatly, so roles and job functions were used to identify participants. Specifically, this study interviewed the individuals involved in making decisions pertaining to charter renewals and closures, but also in performance reviews and support.

Recruiting Procedures

Interview participants were recruited by obtaining their email addresses from authorizer websites and contacting them via email to confirm their responsibilities and ask their permission to set up a time for an interview. Potential participants, such as Executive Directors from charter authorizing agencies were emailed via their authorizing agency email listed on the authorizing agency website. Potential participants were

recruited using the draft email in Appendix A to explain the purpose of the study, explain the risks and benefits of participation in the study, request their voluntary participation in the study and request their resume and suggestions from whom else in their office would provide beneficial information from their authorizing agency.

As indicated in the draft recruitment letter, potential participants were informed the interview would take approximately one hour and should they be willing, they were asked to respond to a scheduling poll indicating available dates and times within a two week window to be interviewed. Participants were informed of the data privacy and confidentiality procedures I intended to follow, which included not naming individuals or authorizing agencies specifically, or attributing any quotes to individuals. Potential risks and benefits to participation included a national exposure to the research findings. Because I am currently a researcher for the National Charter School Resource Center these findings will potentially be shared through this national vehicle. This is both a benefit and a risk to authorizers. To ensure their comfort and lessening of risk, I created pseudonyms for each authorizing entity instead of naming them specifically. All information from the interviews was kept on a file system that was accessible only through a password and was only accessible to the researcher. My professional email address and cell phone number was provided should any potential participant have any questions or concerns prior, during, or after their participation in the study.

Data Collection Methods

This study relied on two methods of data collection: documents and interviews, allowing for a variety of perspectives on how and why turnaround was offered to low-performing schools. The use of multiple data sources is a method used in qualitative research to increase credibility as well, by being able to triangulate and verify findings

across sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Below is a discussion of each data collection method in detail. Please see Table two for data collection methods by research question.

Table 2

Research Question and Data Sources

Research Question	Data Source	
	Documents	Interviews
(1) What contextual factors were in place for the authorizer to facilitate school turnaround?	X	X
a. Does school improvement in charter schools fit into the Overton Window; what factors influenced the political will to allow the option of turnaround?		X
b. What policies (state-local) were in place to allow a low-performing charter school to engage in turnaround?	X	X
c. How was the authorizer held accountable to improving charter schools?	X	X
	X	X
(2) What models of accountability were used for schools conducting turnaround?		
a. What autonomies were provided to the school?	X	X
b. When and how was the turnaround process monitored for progress?	X	X
c. What components of the school were monitored for progress (i.e. leadership, talent, instruction, culture)?	X	X

Document Review

Documents in this study were collected, including policies, procedures for the authorizers and schools when the option of turnaround is offered to a low-performing charter school. Documents gathered or requested included the following:

- Rationale for why improvement should be considered or is being offered as an option
- Policy and practice documents, such as
    - Performance frameworks;
    - Site visit protocols, descriptions, rubrics, reports;
    - Guidance to board members and improvement plan templates and how plan will be evaluated;
    - Timeframe(s) allowed for improvement and any guidance on determination of timeframe;
    - Process for determining improvement-related conditions and/or performance benchmarks and how the charter will be renewed and/or amended;
    - Process and schedules for monitoring the progress of any school in improvement.
- Evaluations of the authorizer

Interview Protocol

For each authorizer in the study, I downloaded and reviewed as many of the documents in the list above from what was publicly available on the authorizer's website. After reviewing documents, and making note of additional documents needed, a one-

hour, semi-structured interview was conducted. These interviews were conducted virtually using an interview protocol.

The interview protocol developed for this study (located in Appendix B) included both structured and unstructured interview questions to allow the interview to flow more like a conversation, as questions were asked out of order and worded to connect with interviewers' previous answers as well as tailored to reference specific documents or information that was uncovered during the document review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While there was specific information gathered from all participants, there were also less scripted probing questions asked depending on interviewees' answers to allow for exploration and a multifaceted understanding of authorizers' perspectives.

The interview protocol was developed to ensure the research questions were adequately addressed and the interview would take place within a 45- to 60-minute timeframe. Political theory also informed the interview question development. The interview protocol was field tested to ensure the questions are clear, concise, and provided the type of information the questions are meant to uncover. The protocol explored the topic areas of research for this study including the contextual factors allowing an authorizer to offer and facilitate school turnaround and the models of accountability used in monitoring schools conducting turnaround.

As indicated in the Appendix, and with approval through the Indiana State University IRB, each interview began by describing the purpose of the study, reminding participants that they may choose not to participate or conclude the interview at any time, and ask if they have any questions before we started. As permitted by the interviewees, each interview was recorded so the recordings could be transcribed for analysis. All recordings were destroyed after transcription. To ensure confidentiality, authorizers were

not identified on transcripts, or in the findings in chapter four, and only the researcher conducting this study was able to access the recordings or transcriptions of interviews.

Data Analysis

Rather than being coded all at once, data were coded within each case as they were collected in an ongoing manner with coding and collection happening simultaneously (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were secondarily coded cross-case and analyzed cross-case after all data were collected (Stake, 1995). While ongoing coding allows for an iterative process, with constant comparison, analyzing the data in its totality allowed for the magnitude of themes and patterns to emerge from the full dataset and be grouped within themes (Yin, 2009). To do so, initial reflections were noted after each interview was conducted. Interviews were transcribed and read.

Developing Codes

As interview transcripts and documents were reviewed, codes and categories were identified from the data themselves instead of prior to analysis, as described as tabula rasa (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This allowed the researcher to put aside any prejudices or presuppositions and previous knowledge of the subject area.

After codes were determined, they were organized into broader categories with common characteristics (Saldaña, 2013). This type of coding allowed for broader and interconnected themes both within and among cases to emerge within the data (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Creswell (2013) recommended the final step as making meaning by interpreting the data. These interpretations compared findings from interviews and document review to the literature base to raise additional and new questions and suggest implications and recommendations for moving forward.

Reliability and Validity

As mentioned previously, the use of multiple data sources, in this case, multiple interviews and documents, increases validity of the findings since findings can emerge from multiple sources through the process of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, reliability was ensured by keeping an audit trail, which is a log of how the researcher collected data, analyzed data, and arrived at findings presented in chapter four.

Summary

This case study identifies the optimal contexts and accountability frameworks being used by authorizers from varying capacities, sizes of sector and geographic locations. Chapter four presents further description of these characteristics of participants and the analyzed results of the interviews and document analysis to the research questions anchoring this study. Chapter five provides conclusions and implications, as well as suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

There were two questions that guided this research study. The first was to explore the contextual factors in place for the authorizer to facilitate school turnaround, including (a) public perception of turnaround and whether improvement fit into Overton's Window of "acceptable"; (b) policies and legislation that allowed low performing schools to engage in turnaround instead of being automatically closed; and (c) how the authorizer was held accountable to improving charter schools and whether this accountability offered to authorizers supported them in offering schools the chance to improve.

The second question was designed to document the models of accountability authorizers used for schools conducting turnaround, including (a) what decisions the authorizer allowed the schools to make pertaining to improvement; (b) when and how turnaround progress was monitored; and (c) what components the schools were monitored for progress to improve.

Study Sample

Of the five authorizers reviewed in the study, turnaround was most often referred to as a state-determined criterion and not by the authorizer. Therefore, many of the questions asked had to be redefined to pertain to comprehensive school improvement. The descriptions used included efforts "low or underperforming" charters partake "in lieu of closure." The authorizers who agreed to participate in this study were offered

confidentiality. The citations for the primary sources related to the authorizers in the sample have been partially redacted and listed as "Authorizer, 2020" to protect the confidentiality of the authorizer, as this information would reveal the identity of the authorizer.

Characteristics of Participants and Institutions

Profiles of the five authorizing agencies that agreed to be part of this study provide a description of the varying authorizer contexts and capacities. The profiles are based on interview data combined with document review collected from the authorizer or state webinar accessed through its websites. Table 3 provides a synopsis of the contextual conditions, followed by a description summarizing each. To protect the anonymity of participants as promised, limited information for each authorizer is provided.

Table 3

Participants

Authorizer	No. Range of Charter Schools	Total Closures 2015–2019	Geographic Regions	Authorizer Type	Authorizer Capacity*
A	51–75	21	Midwest	IHE	High
B	Above 100	27	South	Independent	Average
C	25–50	9	Midwest	Other	Low
D	51–75	3	West	Independent	Average
E	25–50	6	West	Independent	High

Note. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Charter Closure data 2015 to 2019 by state, authorizer, and year.

*The ranges of authorizer capacity are summarized here as high, average, and low according to the average of one third of a full-time equivalent staff member for each charter school in their portfolio needed (NACSA, 2013). Capacity was calculated by

dividing the number of staff in the authorizing office by the number of schools in their portfolio.

All authorizers included in this study had at least 25 schools in their portfolios. The majority of authorizers (67 percent) typically only authorize 1–2 schools (LiBetti et al., 2019; NACSA, 2015); therefore, the subset of authorizers included in this study represent the minority of authorizers in the U.S. Two authorizers had portfolios between 25 and 50 schools, two authorizers had between 51 and 75 schools and one authorizer had over 100 schools currently authorized.

The authorizers collectively closed 66 charter schools between 2015 and 2019. The number of schools closed per authorizer ranged from three schools to 27 during this time period. The database of closed schools did not provide the underlying reasons for each of the schools being closed; however, overall reasons for school closure included financial hardship and academic underperformance. Authorizers interviewed confirmed these underlying reasons as well.

Authorizers represented three of the four geographic regions, including one authorizer from the South and two authorizers from the West coast (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Two authorizers from the Midwest region were also included in the study. Authorizers from the Northeast region were not represented in this study.

Authorizer types in this study represented all authorizer types, except district authorizers. There was one authorizer included in the study from an Institution of Higher Education, two that were Independent Chartering Boards, one State Education Agency, and one authorizer that was considered "other." For purposes of confidentiality, and because there is a limited number of authorizers that fall into the "other" category, further description is not provided.

Interview participants included executive directors from each of the authorizers as well as an additional staff member that led the accountability and/or support process for schools implementing improvement efforts. The number of staff within authorizers' offices ranged from under 10 staff members to over 40. Two authorizers were considered high capacity, as they had approximately more than one staff member per 3 schools. Two authorizers were considered average, as having one staff member per 3 schools and one authorizer was considered low capacity because their staff was responsible for more than three schools. Three of the five authorizers (two high capacity and one average capacity) had staff that provided direct support to schools, two authorizers (low capacity and average capacity) did not. Authorizer capacity is explored more fully in the findings.

Data Collection

Taking the literature review into account related to authorizing practices and effective accountability for improvement, several ideas became apparent. These ideas evolved into a list of pertinent documents to review as well as interview questions that provided the structure to collect data from authorizers. Prior to each interview, documents from the authorizers' websites were downloaded and reviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the nine participants from the five authorizing agencies. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in real time through AI software called Rev. Upon conclusion of each interview, a summary of each interview, including key takeaways and connections to the authorizers' documents were written. Once the interviews were complete, transcripts were reviewed quickly allowing me to "build a sense of the data as a whole" prior to data being sorted, coded and analyzed, both within each case and across cases, keeping consistent with multi-case study analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188). Interviewer notes were also sorted,

coded, and analyzed. A more in-depth document review was also conducted, where data derived from the documents were coded and analyzed.

Case Study Analysis

When using a multi-case study approach, coding and analysis are done both within each individual case, as well as across cases. In this study each authorizer served as a case. Coding and analyzing data in this fashion allows for themes to emerge within the context of a particular authorizer as well as across contexts. Data were secondarily coded cross-case and analyzed cross-case after all data were collected (Stake, 1995). Given that one of the research questions specifically sought to capture the intersection of context and phenomenon made this methodology suitable and appropriate for the study.

Data from both the documents and interviews were coded with early codes and categories through memos. Memos are "not just descriptive summaries of data but attempts to synthesize them into higher level analytic meanings" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 95). After all data were coded, these codes were reviewed and then categorized into broad themes. These broad themes were then reanalyzed within the data to determine final themes and overarching concepts. Finally, interpretation of the data in the context of the literature as well as within and across authorizer context was also conducted. The results of which are provided below. Other colleagues also reviewed the codes, themes, and evidence supporting the findings to provide additional insight about the key themes and findings.

Multiple strategies were used in this study to check for validity in this work, as suggested by Creswell (2013). The first was triangulation of data. Through interviewing more than one person at each authorizer and collecting and analyzing documentation from the authorizer, I was able to cross reference self-reported information provided in

the interviews. The use of quotes from authorizers related to the various themes helped connect the readers to each context. Finally, peer review occurred, when peers and committee members reviewed and asked questions about the study ensuring researcher bias was limited.

As will be discussed in the following section, authorizer contexts, purposes, and roles vary as widely as the rationales for charter schools themselves. All participants attributed charter schools, and improving existing charter schools, as a means of offering families needed choice. If an abundance of choices was already present, spending the time "pushing a round peg in a square hole" was not deemed worth the effort, time, and resources needed. How significant improvement efforts were offered and the ways in which authorizers held schools accountable to these efforts are explored further below.

Major Themes of the Study

Through semi-structured video-interviews with nine authorizer staff members, I was able to gather insight into the experiences, context, and policy and accountability frameworks for offering and holding charter schools accountable to improvement. The goal of this study was to determine and describe the patterns, common connections, and themes throughout the findings that could impact other authorizers implementing an improvement option and synthesize the relationships among the differing contexts and themes throughout the findings. The following six themes emerged. They are presented, not in order of frequency, but in order of magnitude of theme and subtheme interrelatedness, as related to the literature review. The open and axial codes as well as themes emanating from these codes is included as Appendix for reference.

Themes from Research Question One

The themes of this study are organized by research questions. The first research question explored what contextual factors were in place for the authorizer to facilitate school turnaround, including policies that were in place pertaining to offering improvement, and the factors that influenced the political will to allow the option of turnaround. The political theory, Overton's Window, was used to explore whether improvement was deemed "acceptable." Lastly, formal and informal mechanisms for holding authorizers accountable were also explored. Themes pertaining to this question included:

- Authorizers weigh positive and negative factors regarding students, community, and themselves when making decisions about improvement versus closure
- Supporting school improvement varied greatly among authorizers

Improvement Versus Closure

The first theme from research question one pertained to the decision to offer turnaround. While all authorizers in this study were recruited specifically because they offered an improvement option to schools, authorizers shared their experiences both positive and negative with improvement and closure. Authorizers also shared their experiences of how the decision to offer turnaround or closure impacts students, communities and themselves. Authorizers weighed several of these factors in policy pertaining to underperforming schools. **Improvement**. All authorizers shared that the main reason they offered improvement was motivated by the same reason given for closure: the students. Whether all schools were given the option of improvement, or if authorizers determined which schools to allow to stay open and pursue improvement, the

option that seemed best for the students typically tipped the direction. As one authorizer shared,

> The reason we offer turnaround is the students. If the family is saying they don't have a quality option, we're not going to give up on those kids. If we feel turnaround gives them a better option, then we're going to do the work to get them there.

Authorizers also shared that improvement can be beneficial to communities, ultimately causing less disruption for families and students. Schools that improve "offer a great option for families," when these options fail to exist otherwise. Improving a school can also spark improvement in the community itself, as shared by one authorizer:

> I want to give students an option of high-quality education that they wouldn't have otherwise. And especially in areas that don't have any options, [turnaround] can be the beacon in that area. Once you have one good thing, more good things come from it. And you just need that one thing to start it.

Authorizers shared that the relationships they had with schools, boards, and communities benefited from offering turnaround because authorizers were willing to engage deeply with schools on their outcomes. Communities' trust for authorizers grew and, as a result of these relationships and conversations, communities' knowledge and understanding of key educational outcomes. Authorizers' knowledge and capacity for the difficulty of improving a school also increased.

All authorizers examined students' educational outcomes in one school compared to other educational options offered. Some authorizers compared individual schools to the sector itself. Other authorizers compared schools to geographic constructs consisting of traditional and charter schools, considering the schools students could attend if their

current school closed. How authorizers regarded this information, or the educational experiences, varied. Some authorizers took the availability of better educational options into account when determining how much they would push for improvement. For example,

> We spend time looking at, if the kids were not attending this school where would they be attending? What would that education look like? Because we're dealing with kids' lives. Every year lost is just so hard to regain. We know that.

One authorizer provided workarounds in the form of transportation assistance to families to attend other schools in the sector. This particular authorizer specifically does not take these comparison circumstances into account. This authorizer explained why:

> Just because your high school was slightly outperforming the neighborhood high schools around it . . . That is something we talk about, it's what the schools push the conversation to be about, but it's not a factor in our determination [for improvement]. We had one arts school, the conversation was like, yeah, they have a theater program. That's amazing for those students. And we heard the three or four students who really took off in the arts after they left. But their academic scores were still so low, and their growth was low. We couldn't justify keeping them open for a theater program.

Another authorizer considered the schools' impact well beyond "reading, writing and arithmetic" with a purpose not only about educating students but anchoring communities:

> One way to think about it is these schools are community assets. And that goes beyond academic performance. Yes, the academic performance of schools is the most important thing that we oversee, but you have a school that was the

> elementary school named after the first principal [of name redacted for confidentiality]. Where thousands and thousands of residents went to school there. If we close that school without recognizing the role that it plays in the community as a center, as a touchstone and just abandon it . . . . That I think would be problematic. In a lot of ways we don't measure that necessarily directly through state accountability.

The same authorizer went on to say,

> But the cultural relevance of the school itself, I think, is undervalued sometimes and needs to be part of the conversation, which is why intervening in the way that we do allows us to keep the sort of essence of what the school was for the community. And not abandon that, but also offer better academic options for students.

Authorizers also shared other pressures when looking to improve the schools within their portfolio instead of closing them. For example, one authorizer acknowledged the difficulty and pushback from districts within the state to open new charter schools. Within this context, this particular authorizer prioritized staff time and resources to support current schools than to close and open new ones.

Authorizers acknowledged negative aspects to improvement as well. Authorizers shared past experiences with schools and admitted that not all schools attempting to improve did. Authorizers described improvement as a time and resource intensive endeavor on the part of the school and authorizer, and authorizers described spending quite a bit of time and energy determining if a school is a good candidate for improvement versus closure, as one authorizer explained,

> We spend so much time on those [improvement] decisions. Even when we do come to the closure decisions, we turned over every rock and tried to really think through what makes sense. If we don't try to pursue a turnaround, the biggest reason is that it is a lot of work. And it isn't a high percentage of success. When we do try it, it's because we do think we have an operator for that area. We think we have a board that still has the stamina and the commitment to do it.

Authorizers shared that improvement was not always deemed the best option at every school. Schools that were severely low performing, consecutively low performing, financially insolvent or found to be egregiously non-compliant were often mandated to close. All other schools that had not met renewal criteria were up for discussion of improvement.

Closure. The authorizers included in this study were not fundamentally opposed to shuttering a low performing school; in fact, the authorizers interviewed had closed schools. Authorizers expressed that closing an underperforming school was the "option easier on authorizers" and being more "predisposed to closing a charter school that's low performing then going through a full turnaround process." However, while national policy challenges authorizers to close all low performing schools, other than being easier on authorizers, no authorizers expressed a positive reason for closure (NACSA, 2013). While authorizers discussed positive and negative aspects of improvement, authorizers only discussed negative experiences with closure. Improvement served to avoid the negative consequences of closure on authorizer, community, and students, while potentially being beneficial to students and communities.

> A huge positive [with improvement] is if we cannot disrupt the school community and if turnaround is effective in that their academic outcomes are starting to increase, and the students are getting a stronger education. That's a huge positive.

Closure was viewed by the authorizers as disruptive and having long term negative impacts on students. One authorizer expressed an upcoming study examining the extent to which students from closed schools dropped out and failed to finish high school. Their anecdotal evidence suggested almost half of the student body failed to complete high school when the authorizer closed a secondary school. "The number of dropouts we lose when we close a high school and even in middle school is horrible." This authorizer went on to explain the reality of what happens when schools close in her sector,

> We have also seen that when a school closes, the students in that school tend to enroll in other low performing schools. We've tried to really work our magic and try and get students into higher performing schools. But it's difficult. There are roadblocks for multiple reasons and the low performing schools have seats open, and then we close THAT school. So we had some students who went through two high school closures within three years. I feel like that should never happen--even having one school closed. It is just so disruptive. So I think for us really trying to take a look at the data of what happens with students in the school that closes.

Authorizers shared that closure decisions were the hardest to make and that they spent countless hours and staff professional judgment determining whether to move forward. One authorizer described it as "I can't ever recall a conversation that was not brutal and talking about, are we going to recommend closure? There's always been a hope that there's another way out." Some authorizers have strict policies or "backstops they can

lean on" when faced with what they consider to be a difficult decision regarding whether to close a school.

From the perspective of Overton's Window, authorizers indicated that improvement is more accepted publicly than closure and shared that improvement helped avoid the negative aspects of closure. One authorizer shared that "it's becoming harder and harder [publicly] to close." Another authorizer indicated they had received community backlash for school closings in the past and, so, "ideally we don't want contentious closures if we can avoid it." The community aspect of closure often adds to the consternation felt by many authorizers. One authorizer described the community reaction to closure being

> a heartbreaking experience and in many cases, parents tend to fight it. In many cases, the school kind of leads a campaign to get their families to show up at public hearings to try to show a side from all the data and all these numbers. This is the human side, and these are folks that want their kids in our school. And so it turns from being like very number and data driven conversations to very personal and it can get quite emotional. Which is why I think that when there is an opportunity for turnaround or takeover our board is very open to it.

If the push to keep schools open stems from parents, they may be biased in their conclusions of the quality of education being offered. Authorizers with the strongest community backlash also admitted they needed to do more to build relationships with families and help families better understand the performance frameworks in which they held schools accountable. Authorizers who did not experience such strong parental protests to closure likened this wider degree of acceptance because of the work they did to keep the public connected and informed. This work included having representatives at

the schools purposefully connect with parents about the outcomes of the school. Several authorizers also shared when they need to close a school; they publish a letter "telling their side of the story" both in the newspaper and sent to the school. This helps inform parents, as authorizers have found parents are not always receiving accurate information from the leaders of the school. They explained what happens when a school is being closed,

> We notify the board officially via a letter. The letter is never short. It usually contains our side of the story, so to speak, and it speaks for itself. So, as that letter becomes public or as that story gets out there, parents read the information and say, ‘Oh, I didn't realize all of this.’ And so then that picture starts to get painted. And then the story kind of loses some of its luster.

The first theme under research question one explored the decision to offer turnaround. Authorizers take many factors into account when deciding to offer turnaround or close a school. At the heart of this decision is what is best for students. However, authorizers also weigh positive and negative aspects of turnaround and closure.

Supporting School Improvement

The second theme from the first research question pertained to once an improvement option was offered, what was the authorizers' role beyond accountability. and whether authorizers offered support to schools conducting improvement initiatives. The biggest variation across authorizers was how much or how little authorizers believed they should support schools' improvement processes and in what ways. This was the stickiest and most difficult line for authorizers. Authorizers on one end of the spectrum held the philosophy of providing no support: "We have a fine line between how much we support schools and then upholding that accountability," seeing providing support

services as reducing their ability to hold schools accountable if they failed to improve. Other authorizers had teams of staff that provided direct support in the form of trainings, in-school root cause analysis and needs assessment processes, and capacity building communities of practice.

There were three types of authorizers represented in this study's sample: independent chartering boards, institutes of higher education and other. All three types were represented in either camp of no support or direct support for improving schools, but they did vary by staff size, suggesting that the overall capacity of an authorizer might be more important than the authorizer's type. NACSA found that authorizers average one third of a fulltime equivalent staff member for each charter school in their portfolio (NACSA, 2013). The authorizers that provided no support in our sample fell just at or below that threshold, while those that provided direct support had higher staff to school ratios by which to do so.

Authorizers acknowledged several criteria needed for a successful turnaround. Determining whether other high-quality options were available for students was an initial deciding factor for one authorizer, whereas for the remaining authorizers, offering a school the chance to improve was automatic. Authorizers discussed the need for having the "right" people: leaders, operator, and board members "that have the stamina and commitment to do it. It's a huge commitment. Do you have the right folks either currently in those positions or that are ready to take on those positions to turn around an organization?" Some authorizers with higher levels of capacity were able to train operators and board members, to ensure a smooth transition.

> We do a lot of board training as well. We'll do individualized training throughout the year. We have a series, but for these schools, we do an intensive just for that

> board and work with them throughout the year on specific trainings to get them up to speed and support them.

Several authorizers were quick to explain a particular area of training often needed was ensuring the board understood the data and the outcomes the school was producing. This type of training was determined to be the most important role an authorizer could take in the overall improvement of the sector. From their perspective, authorizers have found that once the performance framework has been communicated effectively, and understood, this served as the motivator for improvement.

> A lot of it is getting the board to understand the data. Because 99 times out of 100 when boards aren't making the decisions needed, it's because they don't truly understand how bad the situation is, for whatever reason.

It was important, when a new charter operator was taking charge of a school in improvement status, for operators to understand the expectations of the authorizer as well.

> The reason that we're in a turnaround is generally because the school has been unable previously to perform, so it is definitely already at a lower level. And so the expectation is not that you have 20 years to start making the growth. So the idea is that the operator that's coming in understands what they're walking into and that the expectation is for them to hit the ground running and demonstrate that they can be effective in this environment is going to be critical.

Along with training, authorizers acknowledged the significance of relationships with school boards and leaders. Authorizers recognized that relationships have to be something created from the beginning, with all schools, "because the backend it's already too late at that point." Authorizers needed the staff capacity to do so but that the time was

well worth the effort; as one authorizer explained, developing the kinds of relationships needed takes time and staff to:

> Really invest in the relationships with the people that are on the other side of these difficult circumstances. Those relationships have really gone a long way in helping to make it so that when we have these difficult conversations, like the words, the words land in a way that they may actually have some real impact.

Lastly, there was no formal accountability mechanism included in the legislation or in practice, for any of the authorizers included in this study. While all the states represented had laws in place to sanction authorizers for performance, there were limited mechanisms that collected information to do so. All authorizers interviewed named informal and indirect accountability metrics in the form of annual funding from legislation, political backing, or market/community support. However, there lacked external accountability for authorizers and a determination of whether authorizers' decisions to direct their resources of time and talent, funding, and focus paved the way for improvement or created barriers to improvement. Further, a lack of accountability further stunted an authorizer’s ability to determine what is working and not in their sector and to pivot to more effective practices.

The second theme from research question one concerned the role, beyond accountability, that authorizers play for schools in improvement status. Some of the ways in which authorizers supported schools was to provide direct support, such as training boards, leaders, and operators. Other authorizers, however, took an opposite approach and did not provide direct support but rather, due to capacity or philosophy, chose to serve a connecting role by connecting schools with trainings or vendors. Finally,

authorizers in this study did not participate in any type of formal evaluation to determine whether their version of support was working or not for their sector.

Themes from Research Question Two

The second research question explored policy, practice, and accountability levers authorizers employ to hold schools accountable. Several authorizers described the fear of whether they have "closed a school too soon or left a school open for too long." Striking the right balance of accountability and attempting to hold schools accountable to do the work needed to improve were difficulties all authorizers acknowledged. The mechanisms authorizers used to hold schools accountable and what schools were held accountable for was reviewed based on the *four domains* improvement framework in the literature that identified four domains needed to ensure sustainable charter school turnaround, which include: leadership and governance, talent management, instruction and culture as well as financial and operational soundness (Evan & Canavero, 2020). Several themes (4) related to accountability, school autonomy, and the mechanisms used to hold schools accountable arose in the data and included:

- All schools are held to the same accountability or renewal framework focused on outcomes of their educational program
- Site visits serve to monitor for improvement and identify support needed
- Contract year terms varied depending on performance
- School autonomy is reduced when schools fail to improve

Authorizers have multiple accountability mechanisms to improve the charter sector: (1) the performance framework, (2) site visits, (3) charter time terms, and (4) levels of autonomy. While all schools are held accountable to the same performance framework, regardless of improvement status, site visits are utilized most to monitor

progress of improvement efforts and measure impact of improvement. Varying charter time terms were utilized to offer authorizers a mechanism to be able to "pull the plug when needed." Autonomy was upheld until improvement failed to occur.

Accountability Frameworks

The first theme from research question two pertained to authorizers' accountability framework. Often referred to as performance frameworks or renewal frameworks, authorizers held all schools, regardless of improvement status, accountable for outcomes of their education program. These outcomes included metrics for academic and financial performance, and sometimes operational as well. These data help authorizers determine the extent to which schools are or are not meeting performance criteria as outlined in schools' charter. As charter schools can offer a myriad of programmatic and curricular offerings, having a universal set of indicators across a portfolio also provides a way to compare schools. For schools in improvement status, performance frameworks provide a less-subjective measure for stakeholders, such as parents, board members, and leaders to understand.

Academic Outcomes. The various academic outcomes authorizers used to measure schools' academic performance are included in Table 4. Academic outcomes were collected from students enrolled in grades K-12. The most common measures collected included standardized test data for students in grades 3–8 and one grade level in high school. Measures of student achievement included the percentage of students meeting the criteria of proficiency of college and career ready standards (as based on the states' high stakes assessment used to measure college and career ready standards), as well as measuring the extent to which students showed progress (or growth) in their academic ability over time. Also often collected was student growth on literacy and

mathematics compared to geographic locations, home school, or national or state averages. Measures of student subgroup performance, such as subgroup growth for students in grades 3-8, was less often collected. Indicators that authorizers referred to as "mission-specific" were included by one authorizer if the school sought to serve specific student demographics or curricular offerings.

High schools were often measured by the statewide assessment of students' levels of post-secondary readiness (often in grade 10) and graduation rates. Additional high school performance measures included, but less often common were opportunity and performance on Advanced Placement exams, and career specific measures, such as earning career and technical certifications. Like elementary and middle school, subgroup post-secondary readiness was less often included in authorizers' performance frameworks.

Academic performance frameworks are typically how authorizers determine whether schools are improving if they were struggling with meeting academic performance. Some authorizers recognize how difficult it may be to improve particular indicators, such as proficiency rates. One authorizer pays a bit more attention to growth than proficiency:

> We dig deep into a lot of our indicators. We have [state's] ratings. Growth is a big part of that. There are multiple different growth measures and proficiency. We'll go deep onto some of those measures, too. To say, well, proficient, it looks like their rating didn't move that much, but actually we're seeing a lot of progress on the growth side. Also digging deep on the data on the back end to understand what that looks like and what that means.

Table 4

Number of Authorizers' Performance Frameworks with Specific Academic Performance Outcomes

Academic Outcomes	No. of Authorizers
State and Federal Accountability	
State Grading/Rating System	4
State Designations	3
Student Growth	
Nationally Normed Tests	2
Growth Measure using State-level Assessment Data	5
Subgroup Growth	3
Student Proficiency	
Proficiency on State Exams	5
Subgroup Proficiency	2
Schools Serving Similar Populations	3
Comparison of Student Options	4
Post-Secondary Readiness	
ACT/SAT/Post Sec Readiness Indicator	4
Subgroup Post-Secondary Readiness	1
High School Graduation Rates	4
High school Dropout Rate	1
AP/IB/Dual-Credit/Industry Certifications	2
Post-Secondary including Military/Workforce/College	1
On-Track to Graduation Rate (Post-Sec)	3
Remediation Rate	1
Post-Sec Second Year Persistence/Completion Rate	1
Mission-Specific Academic Goals	
Diversity: ELL, Free/Reduced IEP enrollment	1
Mission-Specific Academic Goals	1

Note. Documents collected from interviewed authorizers.

Operations Outcomes. If authorizers had an operational framework, the measures included typically determined whether schools were compliant in following specific terms, as well as local, state, and/or federal rules and legislation. For example, as noted in Table 5, several authorizers measured whether schools were in compliance of federal laws pertaining to students qualifying for special education services or English

Language Services. All authorizers measured whether schools followed financial management rules and procedures and almost all measured schools against management accountability and whether schools were compliant in submitting the myriad of local, state, and federal reports. Depending on the state law, authorizers also measured whether schools were complying with the specific governance requirements, such as board members could not benefit materially or be awarded contracts from the school. Indicators pertaining to staffing compliance, such staff being properly credentialed and performing background checks were also depending on state law. Several authorizers also collected measures on facilities and transportation, health and safety, and whether schools were in compliance with keeping student data secure and confidential.

Some authorizers also collected outcomes as part of their school operations, such as students' average daily attendance and percentage of students who re-enrolled the following year. The former measure served as a proxy for student engagement. This latter measure serves as a proxy for parent satisfaction, with the idea being that if parents are satisfied, they will continue to enroll their child(ren) at the school. Evidence of student support services, such as emotional and instructional support were also collected by one authorizer.

Table 5

Number of Authorizers' Performance Frameworks with Specific Operations Outcomes

Operations Outcomes	No. of Authorizers
Educational Program	
Material Terms of the Charter	2
Education Requirements	1
Students w/Disabilities	3
ELL Students	3
Financial Management & Oversight	
Financial Reporting & Compliance	5
Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP)	5
Governance & Reporting	
Governance Requirements	4
Governance Vacancy duration	1
Governance Attendance	1
Management Accountability	4
Reporting Requirements	4
Students & Employees	
Attendance/Attendance Goals	2
Staff Credentials	2
Employee Rights	1
Student Re enrollment	3
Background Checks	2
School Environment	
Facilities and Transportation	3
Health and Safety	3
Information Management	2

Note. Documents collected from interviewed authorizers.

Financial Outcomes. The financial indicators measured by authorizers on performance frameworks varied across authorizers but tended to fall into two categories, near term and long term, as indicated in Table 6. Near term indicators provided a prediction of whether the school would be able to meet its financial obligations over the next 12 months, with schools meeting the desired standards seen as demonstrating "low risk of financial distress" for the coming year. Schools that fail to meet the standards may

currently be experiencing financial difficulties and/or are at risk for financial hardship in the near term (Authorizer Performance Framework, 2020). Some authorizers also captured sustainability measures that provide a prediction of longer term (usually 3 years) financial viability.

Most authorizers collected near term measures of financial stability including enrollment variances between the number of students predicted to be enrolled compared to the actual number of students enrolled. Keeping track of whether a school hits their enrollment target (since this is what schools use to build their annual budget) helps authorizers home in with the school about how they will either be bringing in the amount necessary or cut necessary expenditures to ensure the school is in a healthy financial position (Authorizer, 2020). Almost all authorizers captured enrollment variance because the funds charters receive per student enrolled is typically the largest revenue source for schools and provides not only a view into the schools' ability to attain enrollment goals, but also how they adjust when those enrollment targets are not met. Additional near term measures include cash on hand (or some timeframe allocation of cash on hand, such as days, months, quarters that a school can pay its expenses without further funds needed), any defaults on debt payments, and ratio of current assets versus current liabilities.

Financial sustainability, or longer-term measures included net income, which is a measure of whether a school is operating at a surplus or deficit. Because schools have different expenses in different years, such as purchasing curriculum or technology or a capital planning project, often times the net income is averaged over a period of time to show financial trends of surplus or deficit. Another longer-term financial indicator is debt to asset ratio (similar to the current ratio observed annually). This indicator measures the total amount owed versus the assets owned and how much the school relies on borrowed

funds for operations. States have varying laws about long term financial viability. For example, one state law prohibits schools from spending more funds than they have (Authorizer, 2020).

Table 6

Number of Authorizers' Performance Frameworks with Specific Financial Outcomes

Financial Outcomes	No. of Authorizers
Near-Term	
Current Ratio	5
Unrestricted Days Cash	4
Cash to Current Liabilities	2
Enrollment Variance	4
Sources of Revenue	1
Debt Default	4
Sustainability	
Total Margin/Aggregated 3-Year Margin	5
Debt to Asset Ratio	4
Cash Flow	3
Debt Service Coverage Ratio	2

Note. Documents collected from interviewed authorizers.

At the time of interview, several authorizers discussed changes currently occurring or in the near future to embed a layer of equity to their performance frameworks. For instance, one authorizer provided a larger weight on their performance framework to schools that enrolled a more diverse or historically underserved population than their neighboring schools. Another authorizer planned to add an examination of outcome data per student subgroup to ensure the school was meeting the needs of all students. Whereas one other authorizer was exploring how they could examine a school's outcomes within the context of the student population in which they were serving, in

order to recognize the differences of what the schools needed in order for high quality options to be equitably accessed across the sector.

Research question two examined the crux of accountability and how authorizers held schools accountable for improvement. The first theme under research question two examined the threshold of existence for particular charter schools, the accountability or renewal framework. All schools are held to the same standards consisting of academic, and oftentimes operational and financial indicators as well. However, these latter indicators are more centered on compliance than quality. While all schools were held to the same standards, authorizers oftentimes weighted academic indicators such as growth more heavily than other indicators such as proficiency when reviewing schools attempting to improve. Few authorizers examined outcomes from an equity lens to determine if schools were producing equitable outcomes per student subgroup.

Site Visits

The second theme from research question two pertained to another of authorizers' monitoring and oversight mechanisms employed: site visits to schools. The authorizers interviewed described visits as often consisting of classroom observations, observations of school processes (i.e., morning routine, lunch time, dismissal), and interviews or focus groups with key stakeholders such as leaders and other staff, including teachers, support staff, and the leadership team including staff leading special education and English language learning services, board members, and families. Data collection and analysis and document reviews are also often conducted during a site visit.

Some authorizers had set schedules for conducting site visits, such as every 3 years or 5 years, or in the first 2 years of a new school launch. These schedules were often modified to visit schools in improvement status whether or not they met these

schedules. While site visit protocols were developed to determine the quality of schools' programming, they also serve as mechanisms for authorizers to review schools in improvement or turnaround status to ascertain how schools were implementing their improvement plan.

The site visit served different purposes for different authorizers. Some authorizers incorporated the site visit findings into the overall evaluation of the school. Other authorizers used them more informally. Site visits were also tailored to a variety of purposes for the visit, such as pre-opening “readiness” check, initial site/facilities evaluation, renewal, or support visits. One authorizer who stated how site visits fit within the authorizer’s mechanisms for accountability described the purpose of the site visit as:

> The purpose of [the site] visits depends on the nature of the visit. In most cases, it is to exercise oversight, gather formal and anecdotal evidence that supports the [authorizer's] monitoring of its schools, and document progress toward goals outlined in schools’ charter to ensure accountability as a state-authorized, public school. Focus is on the academic performance and organizational effectiveness of the school, as well as adherence to the approved charter and charter contract with the [authorizer]. In other visits, it is to support schools under the [authorizer] and help schools reach their goals. We want schools, especially those we authorize, to succeed. Our work, whether through evaluative or support visits, is designed to help schools do their best for students and ensure schools are able to continuously operate at high levels of performance (Authorizer, 2020, p. 9)

Some authorizers incorporated the site visit findings into the overall evaluation of the school. "Evidence gathered during site visits is ultimately used by the staff in its recommendations for renewal." Authorizers using site visits for renewal decisions tended

to rate the schools on the components of data reviewed during the visit through a rubric against which schools were rated. Other authorizers do not use a rubric, but rather personalize the visit to the school in which they are visiting and use professional judgment to determine the efficacy of the program. The focus of the site visit is often academic performance, and the level of fidelity to the school's charter; however, reviewing schools for financial solvency and organizational effectiveness is also included as part of the site visit process.

Site visits also assist authorizers to monitor schools for improvement and identify support needed. For purposes of monitoring schools in improvement status, a site visit has the potential to offer the authorizer and school feedback on improvement efforts to determine progress of improved school quality that authorizers are collecting through their accountability process. The authorizer can use the information gathered to determine strengths and weaknesses for schools and provide support as needed, as described by one authorizer:

> When we do our site evaluations, we bring the context of what's happening in terms of school performance into those conversations. And we use that as a chance to ask questions, to validate, to verify kind of how things are going. And often we learn a lot through the teacher conversations, the parent conversations about, if there is a change going on, how has that change been working?

Authorizers' site visits did not often collect and review schools according to the following core content areas, as identified by a framework for sustainable charter school improvement: leadership, governance, talent, climate, instruction, financial and operational (Evan & Canavero, 2020). Site visits that reviewed leadership (including the leadership team) pertained to the collective understanding and fidelity of the staff to

the school's mission, vision and key design, and the ability of the leadership to identify goals and align programming, such as instruction, professional development of teachers, and budgetary decisions to meet these goals. Other areas of focus for site visit reviewers included the communication style of the leader; the ability of the leaders to develop relationships with staff, parents, and students; and the systems/structures implemented.

The strengths of the governance structure at a school were most often related to the body's ability to develop a strategic vision. Some authorizers looked deeper into the process governing boards used to develop and monitor against the strategic vision. There was no discussion of site visitors reviewing the quality of the strategic vision.

Only one authorizer included organizational factors, such as compliance of reporting or submitting required documentation on time in their site visit protocol. Other authorizers collected or tallied these data in other reports.

Few authorizers collected information pertaining to talent management as part of their site visits. The quality of professional development was one authorizer's area of focus pertaining to talent development, while another authorizer collected data pertaining to the adequacy of the school's human resource system and whether its staff were deployed effectively.

Data pertaining to climate were often pertaining to a safe and orderly environment for students, and a respectful and collegial environment for staff. Two authorizers collected information pertaining to the relationship between the school and families, including the types and effectiveness of communication with families.

By far the most frequent area of focus for site visits entailed that all authorizers collected information pertaining to the instructional focus, quality, and alignment of curriculum and pedagogies used in classrooms to deliver effective instruction. One

authorizer also examined the extent to which the level of quality was evident across the school, instead of classroom by classroom. Another common area of focus was in the use of assessments and the extent to which students received differentiated instruction based on their needs. Only one authorizer collected data pertaining to the school's process and delivery of special education and English language services to students.

Financial data were often not included in site visit data collection. Authorizers often reviewed annual audit reports or conducted separate financial reviews as part of their oversight. Some authorizers reviewed these data prior to a site visit to inquire regarding the follow-up on any issues relating to financial findings during the site visit.

Documents reviewed, either prior to or during a site visit, may include, but are not limited to the following examples: staff directory, including non-instructional staff and any consultants/contracted employees, such as speech pathologist or cafeteria workers; organizational chart; teacher roster, which may or may not include certification information; student and/or teacher schedules; list and calendar of assessments for all diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments administered by each grade level throughout the year; professional development calendars; core curriculum documents and English language curriculum; lesson plans; assessments and analysis of previous assessment information shared with staff (such as item analysis) and staff plans resulting from assessment data; and student writing samples, as well as special education and English language policy and procedure manuals. Talent information included documents such as evaluations of staff (including teachers, administrators, leaders), professional development materials, staff recruitment materials, and plans.

In summary, the second theme from research question two centered around authorizer site visits. Site visits were a valuable opportunity for authorizers to deem how

improvement was being implemented. However, the majority of authorizers did not collect information helpful for turnaround. While all authorizers collected information on instruction, very few collected data on other core components, such as leadership, governance, talent, culture. Those that did were very comprehensive in their examination of these core content areas. Site visits served different purposes for different authorizers. Some authorizers incorporated the site visit findings into the overall evaluation of the school. Other authorizers used them more informally. Site visits were also tailored to a variety of purposes for the visit, such as pre-opening “readiness” check, initial site/facilities evaluation, renewal, or support visits.

Contract Year Terms

The third theme from research question two pertained to authorizers' use of contract year terms. If allowed, authorizers described that they used contract year terms depending on a school’s performance. Schools that are attempting to improve often have shortened contract year terms where schools need to meet performance renewal metrics in a limited time frame. Most authorizers offered schools three years to improve, which is in line with research on time most turnaround takes. We know from past successful efforts that sustainable efforts take at least three years to see improvements in student outcomes (Evan & Canavero, 2020). Unless an authorizer is looking to other leading indicators that show whether a school is showing signs of improvement, such as increases in retention of high qualified staff, student re-enrollment rates, and stability in funding or operations processes, authorizers may not be giving schools enough time to improve or may miss improvement markers. While contract terms can serve as a mechanism for further data collection efforts, shorter contract terms due to having to meet renewal criteria every year were found to be burdensome for schools, as one authorizer learned.

> We used to give schools a lot of two year–three year contracts. And it really was just creating extra work for them. And for us. It takes a chunk of time to turn a school around and see actual change. So we've moved away from shorter terms.

This authorizer went on to explain that longer contract terms allow schools to "keep the work in the classroom."

While the point of some authorizers offering shorter time period contracts meant a school was up for and had to meet renewal more often, other authorizers offered a longer contract term, but added further data collection criteria.

> Our school lead assigned to that school is going to be pretty involved, certainly attending board meetings, doing classroom observations, drop in visits with leadership, whereas maybe they wouldn't attend every one previously, they would here. These serve as temperature checks for how the turnaround is going. We look at standardized test data. But that's a lagging indicator and we don't want to wait until a whole year has gone by. But with turnarounds we pay attention to the growth component.

Another authorizer employed five-year charter terms with annual criteria that allowed schools to ebb and flow in improvement but still meet minimum criteria. This type of "stair step performance" stipulated the school would meet a gradually increasing level of performance that "ideally gets the school to the renewal benchmark by the next review [at the end of the five years]." The school is also not allowed to dip below a particular floor threshold on outcomes during any year of the five years. However, the five-year time frame allows schools to implement and see real progress in student achievement scores, often "the hardest to move the needle." This type of contract term allowed the authorizer to shut down the school if progress went wildly in the wrong

direction but gave the school time to meet renewal criteria and improvement programming.

Some authorizers aligned their contract terms to state law. As stipulated in one state's law, schools were mandated to close after three consecutive years of being at the lowest level of the state's ratings. The authorizer did have discretion to close the school prior to the three years. Another state had a similar "accountability clock" for the two lowest performing categories of schools across the state, including charters. This state's time frame was five years before the state board takes over. The authorizer was clear this policy has not been followed in practice, however, and hoped to avoid a similar scenario of allowing schools to languish in low performance,

> If you're on the clock for more than five years, the state board will intervene in theory. I guess that's the one fear is we don't want to become the same as the state board where they look at a CSI school [a school that qualifies as being in the bottom 25% of school performance] and says, oh, they've been on the clock for eight years and haven't done anything. We want to avoid that at all costs.

This same authorizer went on to explain given the loose policy around school improvement in the state, it was difficult to establish a formal timeframe for schools that carried weight, explaining that they offered underperforming schools two-year contracts to "create a sense of urgency." Even though the contract was only for two years, this authorizer's sense was improvement would take longer and hoped to cap the time frame around four years:

> Maybe it's not formally articulated in policy, but I think the way we envisioned it when we started rolling out the performance contracts was, when you come up for renewal, let's say you got a two plus two [contract time frame of two years to

> meet renewal criteria to get another two year contract]. You miss the plus two. That's kind of close to the end. So it's almost like two missed performance contracts. You know, four-ish years. You've been given sufficient warning, sufficient notice, sufficient opportunity in theory, to have moved the needle. And four years is a really long time, especially for those kids who have been with you all four years and have not seen appreciable improvement. So that's kind of how it is in my head. It's, you know, it's one, maybe two missed performance contracts, before we need to have those really hard conversations around an off ramp or a wind down.

The third theme for research question two about authorizers' accountability levers examined contract time limits. The purpose of contract terms was to have a shorter time period for schools to meet renewal standards and increase frequency of monitoring. Contract time terms were used variably by authorizers either because of past experience with school in improvement or past experience with state law policy. Term limits ranged from two years to five years, with most authorizers offering contract term limits of three years. This is in line with the research on the time it takes to see improvement in outcomes. Some authorizers used contract term limits to ensure schools were monitored more often and would benefit from looking beyond performance framework metrics to gauge improvement progress.

School Autonomy

Finally, the fourth theme from research question two was regarding schools' decision-making or autonomy. The autonomy afforded to charter schools was often spelled out in state legislation. For charters looking to improve, all but one authorizer described autonomy being limited at some point. The authorizers use different milestones

to begin limiting charters' autonomy. Some authorizers limit schools' autonomy immediately upon the school needing improvement, other authorizers wait until improvement has not succeeded before doing so.

State legislation of the authorizers interviewed typically afforded charter schools exemptions from local district policies and regulations. In one state, charter schools have to request waivers for specific autonomies (e.g., curriculum). In another state, the charter law did not dictate whether charter schools had autonomy from policies (district or otherwise). Some states also exempted schools from a limited set of state provisions, or they offered schools the option to apply for a waiver if the charter was not automatically exempted. Charter schools were still required to follow all federal rules, regulations and statutes, and schools' compliance with these laws was often part of the authorizers' performance frameworks.

Authorizers were often clear in how they approached autonomy for schools in improvement status, although autonomy was not approached the same way by all authorizers. For example, some authorizers interpreted their role as telling the school board that the leader needed to be replaced. Other authorizers determined this type of feedback to be overstepping the boundary of autonomy for schools. Most authorizers initially discussed that they were in the strict camp of not telling schools what to do to improve but provided examples that waned from this initial stance. Another authorizer took a different approach. This authorizer provides schools the opportunity to improve, but limits autonomy after that chance has not produced the improvement necessary:

> If we've given you this chance to come up with this plan and we're not seeing adequate progress or worried about your trajectory towards renewal because everything is aimed towards will you, or won't you be renewed, right? The

> evaluation is saying we're not confident that you're on that path. So we heightened the intervention. If we allow you to choose a vendor before we say, okay, you're not choosing, we're going to choose for you. You work with these people. This is a vendor that we know and trust. We know that they will hold your feet to the fire, and you have to comply with that.

Two authorizers who strictly upheld autonomy in terms of not telling schools what they needed to do to improve used conditional renewal mechanisms when improvement was deemed warranted. For example, these authorizers have renewed charters "conditionally" meaning the school's charter would be renewed only if the school board agreed to make particular changes. The school board can decline to make the changes and the school will be closed. The changes authorizers "condition" may be closing underperforming grade levels, such as the middle school, changing operators, or even reconstituting the school board itself. Authorizers typically review these components of a school at inception, or upon expansion of a school during the application phase, so authorizers felt justified in making them conditions to renewal and not considering these conditions to be trampling autonomy.

One authorizer described renewal conditions as a compromise stemming from a lawsuit by a school the authorizer board chose to close.

> We have a school that our board actually voted to close this past Fall. A lawsuit ensued. It was a K-12 school. As a result of the lawsuit, we landed in a place where they kept their high school. So the elementary and middle school is closed. We kept the [grade] 9–12 portion of the school. I will say that we're actually really pleased. They hit the 80% mark on their grad[uation] rate. They've moved

> their grad[uation] rate very quickly. And that was probably one of our most struggling schools.

The school had such a positive experience with this type of condition, the authorizer now considers the condition for other charters looking to improve. This authorizer went on to describe another school where they "pruned the tree" in a similar situation:

> We had another school that struggled. Consistently inconsistent was a term that we had used a lot with that school. They have gotten their most recent ratings to three stars at both the middle and high school. Their graduation rate has been above 80%. They've gotten to a place that I think is pretty stable. This was a school where their elementary school was the weakest part of that program. It was closed, but I think to the benefit potentially of the other two parts of the program, which have been more stable over the last couple years. I think we're optimistic that they've turned that corner and are continuing to head in the right direction.

Another authorizer, however, takes a different approach to autonomy afforded to schools. Instead of waiting to determine whether a school will improve or not and then dialing back autonomy accordingly, this authorizer sets up their accountability check-ins to allow for improvement reflection with the leader and build the leaders' capacities to make midcourse corrections.

> So we're looking for folks to understand that there is a problem, you need a solution. The solution is not to keep doing the same thing. You need a very robust plan. Then we look for when we go to the school mid-year and say, well, how are things going? If they're able to report on some data that tells [*sic*] them some things are going right, they’re able to say, we know it's working or not working because of X, Y and Z. Sometimes the first plan doesn't work. And that's okay.

> But we want them to be able to tell us if they know what's working or not working. And how they're adapting.

Quality authorizing practices outline the need for a delicate balance of autonomy and accountability. The fourth and last theme pertaining to research question two found examples of how this balance changes when authorizers offer low performing charters an opportunity for turnaround and the opportunities and implications for this option in their context. At the end of the day, charters lose all autonomy when they are closed. The role of authorizers in upholding autonomy was interpreted differently by authorizers, and schools were provided varying degrees of autonomy when in improvement status. In all but one case, curricular, budgetary, and staffing decisions seemed to be upheld. However, authorizers limited schools' decision-making ability in other ways, such as the grade levels served, the members on the board, or even the leader or operator itself.

Summary

The themes of this study were organized by research question. The first research question explored the contextual conditions and the public's perception of closure and improvement in each of the authorizer’s contexts, including how the purpose of school was factored into decisions about allowing a school to improve. The political theory, Overton's Window, was used to explore whether improvement was deemed "acceptable". One theme that emanated from the data was the notion that authorizers found improvement to be viewed as a better option for students by both the authorizer and the public. Lastly, formal and informal mechanisms for holding authorizers accountable were also explored as well as how authorizers provided support to schools working to improve.

The second research question explored policy, practice, and accountability levers authorizers employ to hold schools accountable. The mechanisms authorizers used to

hold schools accountable and what they were accountable for was reviewed based on the *four domains* improvement framework in the literature that identifies four domains needed to ensure sustainable charter school turnaround: leadership and governance, talent management, instruction, and culture, as well as financial and operational soundness (Evan & Canavero, 2020). Four themes related to the mechanisms authorizers used to hold schools accountable arose in the data acknowledging that all schools are held to the same accountability framework. This framework focused on outcomes of their educational program, site visits to monitor for improvement and identify support needed, contract year terms used to increase the level and cadence of oversight, and a reduction of school autonomy only when schools fail to improve.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I synthesize and provide evidence as to whether this research study supported each of the research questions. I also provide some reflections on policy implications and recommendations for future research. Last are some concluding remarks on this study's place in the much larger canon of research.

The purpose of this multi-case study was to understand the experiences of authorizers from a variety of contexts who have offered low-performing schools an improvement option by investigating both the contextual conditions in which turnaround was offered and their models of accountability for holding charter schools accountable to these turnaround efforts. Given the slowing growth of charter schools and recent legislation limiting new charter schools in particular contexts, I hoped to gain insights for current authorizers who are looking to implement or improve this option for their own schools, and to provide implications for practice and future research.

Research Questions

There were two questions that guided this research study. The first was to explore the optimal contextual factors in place for the authorizer to facilitate school turnaround, including (a) public perception of turnaround and whether improvement fit into Overton's Window of "acceptable"; (b) policies and legislation that allowed low performing schools to engage in turnaround instead of being automatically closed; and (c) how the authorizer

was held accountable to improving charter schools and whether this authorizer accountability supported authorizers in offering schools the chance to improve. The second question was designed to document the models of accountability authorizers used for schools conducting turnaround, including (a) what decisions the authorizer allowed the schools to make pertaining to improvement; (b) when and how turnaround progress was monitored; and (c) what components the schools were monitored for progress to improve.

The authorizers chosen for this study all offered the option of turnaround, or as quickly discovered via the interviews, was referred to as significant improvement. Authorizers all had portfolios of at least 25 schools, and at most over 100. Authorizer types included independent chartering boards, institutions of higher education, and other. Although a district authorizer was recruited, they declined participation due to limited capacity.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Based on the results of this research study, I discuss whether the findings supported each of the research questions. Summaries of findings are organized by topic of the question, with research question one pertaining to the contextual factors of improvement and research question two the accountability mechanisms of improvement.

Contextual Factors of Improvement

The first research question determined the contextual conditions in which they offered schools a turnaround option. All authorizers described positive repercussions to offering turnaround that they indicated outweighed some of the negative implications. The most often stated outcomes were the success stories in their midst. All authorizers recalled schools that really struggled to educate their students effectively and were able to

turn themselves around and sustain improvement. Authorizers looked to these success stories oftentimes as positive proof that, with the right supports, schools could be the beacon of change in an area.

Other successes included more positive and stronger relationships with the schools, boards, and families, and a more universal understanding and appreciation by stakeholders about the outcomes authorizers were expecting and holding them accountable. Authorizers found that providing the option for a significant improvement effort helped them create positive relationships with the community and with parents. Communities portrayed authorizers as working with them to ensure a high-quality education for their children. At the same time, stories of attempted but unsuccessful turnaround were neither downplayed nor forgotten. In fact, authorizers more often had stories of unsuccessful turnarounds than those that did work. What was different about these two situations was the place of blame. Schools, and often school leaders, were blamed for unsuccessful turnaround efforts; authorizers were blamed for automatic closure.

In these contexts, and in answer to the research question about public perception of turnaround and whether improvement fit into Overton's Window of "acceptable", it was. Closure, on the other hand, was often seen as disruptive by communities, demeaning to families, and disheartening to the long-term impacts on students. To make closure more palatable and understood by the community, authorizers employed several tactics of what Overton's Window would argue were inclined to make closure more acceptable by the community.

The first tactic was to offer the schools a chance at turnaround. If schools attempted improvement and were unsuccessful or were too low or seen as too far gone to

be improved, authorizers described in detailed rationale their justification for closure. This particular tactic sometimes worked to share with the public why the school was being closed, especially if the school was not sharing these outcomes with families. Another authorizer added language to a school's charter when offered the opportunity of improvement. If a school agreed to the new charter, the conditions stated if the school was unable to improve for whatever reason, the school would relinquish their charter voluntarily. Therefore, closure was not "on the hands" of the authorizer.

Exploring the legislation allowing authorizers to provide an improvement option that I found lacked written policies and legislation. Instead current legislation and policy of the authorizers interviewed detailed when a school had to close, but not specifics pertaining to improvement. This lack of information may be due to the authorizers purposefully sampled, in that their states did not specify automatic closure stipulations.

The last sub-question under research question one pertained to how the authorizer was held accountable to improving charter schools and whether this authorizer accountability supported authorizers in offering schools the chance to improve. Within the political context where closure was often "unacceptable," the informal accountability mechanisms of elected boards of trustees, legislatures that provided funding, or officials that held authorizers accountable were also more inclined to accept turnaround as a workaround to a contentious closure. Lacking in this setup of holding authorizers accountable was a mechanism to determine whether the authorizer's particular recipe for accountability and support made a positive impact to the charter sector. Once the authorizer offered a low performing school the opportunity for turnaround, the public perception of responsibility for conducting a successful effort typically shifted to the school and away from the authorizer.

To summarize, the contextual conditions examined under research question one that authorizers found optimal for offering turnaround were when authorizers had the capacity and expertise to understand what was needed for improvement, and what was to be expected during turnaround. Also, when authorizers had legislative "stop gaps" to close a school when needed was also found to be optimal. When authorizers were intentional about keeping parents and the public informed of the decisions being made about schools and why, they were less likely to fight and protest closures. In addition, when an authorizer offered turnaround (even for a shortened period of time) and was not successful, the blame was no longer on the authorizer for closing a beloved school.

Accountability Mechanisms for Improvement

The second research question was designed to document the models of accountability authorizers used for schools conducting turnaround, including (a) what autonomy the authorizer allowed the schools when in improvement; (b) when and how turnaround progress was monitored; and (c) what components the schools were monitored for progress to improve.

In reference to the autonomy provided to schools in improvement status, this study found some states' legislation articulated the regulations from which charters are exempt and therefore authorizers cannot impede. In these states, authorizers were very careful to uphold autonomy. How "upholding" autonomy was interpreted varied. Given their portfolio consisted mostly of independent charter schools, one authorizer sought out to address any and all barriers (transportation, substitute teachers, schedule) to schools participating in direct (but still voluntary) support. At the other end of the spectrum, authorizers with strict autonomy laws seemed to "hide" behind autonomy and not provide any support to schools undergoing improvement for fear of being seen as trampling

autonomy. Other states' legislations do not specifically identify or exempt charters from specific regulations and therefore can and often do take a more hands-on approach to charter improvement.

Like an assessment system for students, authorizers employ multiple accountability mechanisms for different purposes in regard to when and how turnaround progress is monitored. The performance framework is equivalent to a summative assessment and measures how well a school is advancing or retreating toward renewal criteria. Like formative assessment results, site visits served to measure the progress schools are making toward these renewal criteria. In this way, site visits can potentially be an immensely helpful tool to schools leading an improvement initiative for a few reasons. While authorizers

> collect a lot of information regarding performance and compliance through electronic and paper submissions, relying solely on written documentation would not provide them with a comprehensive view of their schools. The majority of these offices also use focused site visits to gather information that is only apparent on-site at the school. The offices differed in the number and timing of visits, but most agreed that the visits were an effective monitoring tool. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b, p. 35)

Site visits, when done well, can be informative to improvement. In terms of which components the schools were monitored for progress to improve, for example, school site visits go deep into the core components of a school’s functions of leadership, governance, talent, instruction, and culture, and can identify whether schools are on the path to success or need improvement. Oftentimes, the site visit team will write a comprehensive report that identifies the factors that most significantly support effective learning and

those factors that limit effective learning. Recommendations will be made for how to improve the quality of support provided. One authorizer stated:

> The site visit report will identify examples of the school demonstrating/not demonstrating the criteria and which justifies the ratings. For criteria in need of improvement, the [authorizer] will offer solutions grounded in best practice and/or aligned with the school's mission, vision, and academic program as outlined in its charter. (Authorizer, 2020, p. 10)

Equally important, site visits for the purpose of support, such as a "new school support visit" were often employed for turnaround schools and described as able to "get school year started on the right foot and help them make sure they have everything in place," can help schools troubleshoot and not get stuck.

> But in the [name of elementary school], I think it was pretty consistently two stars and has been on our radar as a concern I would say for a year and a half now. We did an extra site evaluation on them because we wanted to make sure that we did some follow-up. We were really intentional about thinking about some of the academic pieces. And one of the things we found on our site evaluation was some real potential misalignment between content that was being taught and what the standards are. There was a lot of thought that went into that site evaluation around what are we looking for that helped us to uncover some of that. Our team met probably monthly with them to talk about progress in response to our site evaluation. And I think for the first time we are seeing a shift and we know that there's a shift because we went out and did another site evaluation and we heard teachers and kids talking about a change. So I think that that's a piece of it, too. Connecting the dots there.

In sum, the accountability context that was optimal occurred when authorizers held schools to the same high standards as other schools but recognized the sometimes herculean effort needed to meet those criteria. When authorizers were versed enough to understand leading indicators of school quality through site visits prior to seeing impacts due to lagging student outcomes, authorizers could intervene and help schools adjust as needed. When a school had the time and autonomy to make decisions based on the needs of their school is when turnaround options seemed to flourish. Offering schools a significant improvement option provided authorizers with a more in-depth examination at what it took to turn around a school, including the comprehensiveness of improvement needed, the overlap of core school functions with the time necessary for schools to put the systems, functions, and staff in place to see real impacts.

Conclusions

While the role of authorizers has continually evolved as the charter sector has matured, authorizers are finding themselves caught in the middle of policy recommendations to close low performing schools and the public outcry around schools they deemed to be of lower quality than their alternatives being closed. This middle ground creates an auspicious opportunity to attempt turnaround with those charter schools that have thus far failed to meet their potential.

We know from research that significant improvement efforts at any school are time consuming, expensive, and require a systemic approach from the entire ecosystem to ensure sustainable success. Once seen as a potential inspiration of reform, charter schools have shown us their potential and their limitations. Some of the best–and worst–schools in the U.S. are charter schools. Some charters need help if they are going to thrive in

providing our students with a high-quality education. Improvement efforts are not new, and we need to apply the lessons learned thus far to these efforts.

The public attitude and growing willingness of authorizers, legislators, and policy makers to dial back the rhetoric of a dichotomous-only path forward to improving public education consisting of starting new schools and closing underperforming schools allows for further innovation of this research base. The findings of this study tell us that part of what the sector is doing is working: having an external entity hold schools accountable is working; examining improvement progress from a comprehensive lens focused on the core functions of school (i.e., leadership, governance, talent, culture, instruction) is working; and recognizing that improvement takes time is working. However, not all authorizers have amassed the professional judgment, either in staff or experience, to be able to support schools in improvement. I next discuss what this means for the field as we move forward.

Implications for Policy, Practice and Leadership

While the charter movement began in 1991, between 2004 and 2017 the number of students enrolled in charters grew from just under 1 million to 3.2 million in 44 states and territories (McFarland et al., 2017; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.-b). Examining charter schools' legacy, researchers recently examined the number of charter school closures between 1999 and 2017. What they found was staggering. Over 867,000 students had to move to another school because their charter school closed. Researchers analyzed groups of schools that opened in the same year and looked at their failure rates at three, five, 10 and 15 years. Close to 1 in 5 charter schools closed by the three-year mark. A large proportion of schools failed by the end of the first year. By the five-year threshold, 1 in 4 schools had closed. By charter schools' 10th year anniversary,

40 percent had closed. Of those schools that made it to their 15-year mark, only one in two of those schools remained. Failure rates by the 15th year mark ranged from 47 to 54 percent (Burris & Pfleger, 2020). These findings signal a deeper issue with the charter sector than previously examined, which is their lack of sustainability.

With the annual growth rate of new charter schools steadily climbing until 2014, authorizers increased their support to new schools. As sector growth has slowed since 2014, and as the field has recognized that even charter schools who have demonstrated success for years can be subject to failure, authorizers are beginning to recognize the need to provide resources and support to more mature schools in sustaining success

. This new era of the charter sector, and what this study has borne out are implications for policy, practice and leadership as indicated in Table 7 and further explored below.

Table 7

Implications for Policy, Practice and Leadership

Implications for Policy Makers	Implications for Practitioners	Implications for Leadership
Holding authorizers accountable for improvement	Updating authorizing principles and standards	Intentional sector involvement in improvement
Introducing legislative guardrails to support improvement options	Improving authorizer accountability mechanisms	Build authorizer capacity regarding improvement
Explicitly examining equity in accountability		

Note. Implications derived from study themes.

Implications for Policy

There are several implications this study raises for policy. The first implication regards accountability of authorizer practice and policies. The second implication for policy requires tightening up legislative supports for authorizers offering turnaround. The third implication is a need to have frank discussions about the reality of addressing the needs of vulnerable and historically underserved populations and push for widespread reckoning of inequitable access and outcomes within our education system, including charters.

Holding Authorizers Accountable for Improvement

The first policy implication pertains to holding authorizers accountable for the quality of their sector. While authorizer accountability has often focused on authorizer type and philosophy, perhaps a deeper dive into authorizer staffing and capacity is warranted (Chen, 2016). The three types of authorizers represented in my sample represented the authorizers with the largest portfolios (and presumably, the largest capacity): independent chartering boards, institutes of higher education and other. All three types provided and did not provide direct supports to schools, suggesting that the overall capacity of an authorizer might be more important than the authorizer's type. NACSA found that authorizers average one-third of a fulltime equivalent staff member for each charter school in their portfolio (NACSA, 2013). Some of the authorizers in this study were at and above that threshold. Authorizers that were at or above that threshold hired and organized their staff to provide direct supports to charter schools. Authorizers that fell below that threshold did not provide direct support. The authorizers with the lowest capacity ratio were much less likely to provide differentiated explicit support to schools than were those with higher ratios. With so many schools per each staff member

at low-capacity authorizers, the data they collected and provided back to schools were also generally related to each school's overall performance, rather than focused on specific findings that a school would find actionable.

None of the authorizers in this study participated in an external evaluation, either formally or informally. Some executive directors, while not having complete authority over granting new schools, did have ultimate decision-making authority over charter renewals, expansions, and replications. Authorizers mentioned being held accountable to the success of the sector indirectly by "many layers": the public, their boards, the legislatures in their state. Determining the needs of individual sectors, and whether or not the authorizer's priorities, resources, and capacity meet those needs is warranted.

One authorizer commented that part of the reason they offer improvement was because opening new charter schools was becoming more politically unacceptable, and therefore improving the current schools was their tactic to keeping the charter sector alive and functioning. As we move to a potentially more hostile environment for charters, without authorizer evaluations the potential for authorizers to sacrifice quality over philosophy becomes potentially more likely.

Introducing Legislative Guardrails to Support Improvement Options

The second policy implication suggests providing legislative guidance authorizers can lean on when offering schools an improvement option. While authorizers who were unable to offer a turnaround option because of legislative prohibitions were not included in this study, authorizers appreciated when they had legislative guardrails to an improvement option. These supports may seem counter-intuitive, such as timeframes for improvement and stop gaps that mandated closure after a certain number of consecutive years at the lowest performing category. However, authorizers explained that flexibility

was a two-edged sword when it comes to accountability. When done well, flexibility gives schools the space and time needed to improve; when done poorly, or without "teeth," flexibility allows schools to avoid making the improvements needed to better serve their students. Some authorizers offered lessons learned on how to structure flexibility well that included clear, rigorous, direct but realistic goals, clear and realistic timelines, clear consequences for not meeting them, and willingness to follow through on the consequences when not met. Authorizers shared lessons learned in using flexibility that merely allowed schools to "kick the can further down the road" and offered no clear milestones, just continuing recommendations that “dance” around the issues and a lack of prioritization of the issues (i.e., laundry list) with no real consequences when milestones are not met or improvement is not occurring.

When authorizers could lean on legislation that mandated regulations, the conversation between authorizer and board and leader shifted to ensuring the schools would meet the requirements rather than a plea for another chance at meeting them. Each context will need to determine, perhaps through evaluation and best practice, what those specific guardrails would entail.

Explicitly Examining Equity in Accountability

Finally, the third policy implication is about more explicitly examining equity within accountability frameworks. Charter schools and closure intersect deeply with racial inequality in schools. While the purpose of charter schools varies greatly across the United States, presidents, state legislators, and local education authorities envisioned charter schools as, in some cases, an alternative to the inadequate education happening within many communities of color. The failure and closure of charter schools, disproportionately in these same communities, has illuminated the need for high

expectations but needs further innovation for obtaining them. Racial balance and equity have recently become a conversation not just in our school system, but in society as a whole. Several authorizers in this study spoke about their recent work in wrestling to ensure accountability frameworks were equitable.

> Part of the reason I'm so bent on equity is we don't have enough of it.
>
> I don't think we ask the right questions to know if a school is a place where families feel safe and loved. That needs to be factored in. And if we're not factoring that in, we're not seeing the whole nature of what the school is. And so I think that's another impetus for this change that we're trying to offer in how we hold schools accountable.

The Overton's Window suggests that if public opinion continues to push a strong desire for racial equity, authorizers may soon have to illustrate the will and commitment to address equity in their sector and put in place the efforts and evidence to address.

With that said, we also cannot assume charters will save education. By doing so, we neglect the real work it takes to meet the needs of our most vulnerable populations (who given the pandemic may be growing). Charter laws were enacted to encourage innovation in education, address the needs of all students—including at risk students, improve student achievement, provide choices in education, encourage parental and community involvement, develop and use site-based budgeting, and hold charter schools accountable for meeting the state standards and fiscal requirements. Although these purposes may at times seem competing, charter schools are to be incubators of innovation designed to provide alternative education opportunities and improve student performance. But they also need help and help before they fail.

Implications for Practice

There were two implications for practice that arose from the findings of this study. The first implication includes updating authorizer principles and standards to include best practices around improvement scenarios. The second implication for practice concerns aligning these new principles and standards to improve authorizer accountability mechanisms to include lessons learned from the research base on improvement.

Updating Authorizing Principles and Standards

The first implication for practice is around updating authorizing principles and standards. Most authorizers look to the National Association for Charter School Authorizers (2018b) to guide their authorizing practices. Statewide authorizing practices are often based on these principles and standards and if authorizers participate in a formal evaluation of their own work, authorizers are evaluated according to their upholding or delineation from them. One area of improvement this study implies is the dire need to update these principles and standards to meet the current reality of authorizing.

While only 20% of charter schools close in the first year, more than 50% do by year 15. The role of an authorizer is evolving. Schools need support in attaining *and sustaining* high quality educational options for students. The literature base for charter school improvement is relatively thin; however, the literature on traditional public school improvement is invariably rich and full of lessons learned that can be applied to charter schools, starting with the *Four Domains for Significant and Sustainable Charter School Improvement* (Evan & Canavero, 2020). Authorizers need to mine the improvement literature and align their practices not with just openings and closings, but with all the

steps and life cycle of charters in between. Weaving these lessons into the practice of authorizers will ensure our turnaround track record also improves.

Improving Authorizer Accountability Mechanisms

The second implication for practice includes improving authorizer accountability mechanisms. The authorizers in this study all collected similar information and held schools accountable to similar indicators on their performance or renewal frameworks. Site visits, however, varied considerably. Site visits have the potential to be either incredibly useful for improvement purposes or a missed opportunity for a school to be reflective. If the visit protocol is either not aligned to renewal criteria, does not take into account a comprehensive examination of the school, or is carried out by individuals without the expertise needed to examine, interpret, and describe the data in actionable ways for leadership and boards, it may be a missed opportunity. Creating model documents, much like the performance standards, would benefit authorizers greatly. Model documents such as site visit criteria, document review instructions, protocols, rubrics (if desired), and practices would help ensure the valuable opportunity of being onsite would ensure an external review of progress is not squandered.

In addition, given the drastic fall-off of charter schools after the 15-year threshold, long range planning and reflection are warranted as we look to develop more intentional and compassionate accountability. This practice will entice school leaders, authorizers, and state education agencies to engage in the exercise of seeing past just the year in front of them to lay out and reflect on what it will take to achieve and sustain success for all students through:

- Overview of future goals/plans/strategies for achievement
- Review of academics and updated academic benchmarks

- Review of organizational changes
- Review of projected financial security
- Review of operational management
- Review of enrollment projections

Implications for Leadership

Finally, there were two implications for leadership that arose from the findings of this study. The first is an acknowledgement that school improvement is not just a school issue, but rather there is a need for stakeholders across the sector to be involved to build capacity at the schools. Secondly, there is a growing need for authorizers to bring improvement expertise to their role, as an increase of schools are participating in these efforts. Without this expertise, authorizers may repeat similar mistakes found in the literature that districts make around school autonomy and inadvertently impede improvement progress.

Intentional Sector Involvement in Improvement

The first leadership implication is ensuring sector involvement in improvement initiatives. We know from the literature that school turnaround is not just a school's issue alone, and successful improvement efforts require alignment and accountability across the ecosystem of stakeholders (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Schools experience failure due to internal and external factors. If authorizers are not involved or are not knowledgeable of improvement to be involved, schools are less likely to be able to sustain a successful turnaround, as external factors may not be addressed. In addition, some authorizers have realized that schools do not fail on purpose. School leaders would improve their systems, processes, and functions but may need help to do so. Some

authorizers have also realized that school improvement is a very needs-driven process. Crowd-sourced capacity building opportunities are often not as impactful to schools in improvement status, but rather these schools require individualized support to meet their needs.

One example of how supports have improved the charter sector pertains to finance management and operations functions. Authorizers spoke of schools that closed due to financial reasons. Initially, financial closures were approached as a lost cause:

> Most of the closures were financial. So, it's harder to have a turnaround in that realm because the bottom has already fallen out. It's a dire situation.

Some authorizers hired staff with this specific capacity and expertise to provide guidance and supports for financial reasons, "So we do have similar intervention systems for financial issues as well as operational or organizational issues because the last schools that have closed or been closed by [us] were closed because of financial challenges, not academic challenges." Other authorizers sought out organizations to provide this guidance to schools. Either way, the support helped stave off closures due to schools lacking capacity to manage their finances.

Authorizers approach board and leadership capacity building similarly and from one of two ways: finding the "right" people or training them. Few authorizers provide individualized support to schools and school leaders and their boards to ensure they can drive a long-term improvement effort. Charter schools, unlike traditional public schools that are part of a district or local school system, lack a designated "support" system. Some authorizers served as the connection between support provided by agencies, vendors and/or the state education agency. Several authorizers expressed difficulty with finding operators to take on the task of turnaround and found when board members and

leaders did not have the requisite skills or experience to lead a turnaround, they typically failed to do so successfully. Our leadership training and leadership pipelines must turn out more leaders with the knowledge, training, and experience to lead a school in improvement. Like financial management, leading a school through an improvement effort is a learned skill set, but one that is currently lacking in typical leadership development programs.

Build Authorizer Capacity Regarding Improvement

The second implication for leadership involves building authorizer capacity concerning improvement skills and capacity. Much of the turnaround literature is based on research conducted in traditional public schools, where turnaround often fails to improve the school (Baroody, 2011; Bonilla & Dee, 2020; Center on School Turnaround, 2017; Dee & Dizon-Ross, 2019; Dougherty & Weiner, 2019). The limited successful attempts of turnaround revealed what conditions schools need in order for turnaround to be successful. School leaders need a greater level of autonomy to confront the needs specific to their school (Dragoset et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Schools afforded autonomy to make decisions pertaining to staffing budgets, how time is allocated and used, as well as being held accountable to improvement goals by an external entity, led successful turnaround efforts (Lutterloh et al., 2016). Charters already exist with these autonomies by definition (Corbett, 2015; Evan & Canavero, 2020).

Corbett (2015) described the type of autonomy charters are offered, in lieu of the results of successful turnarounds. The first type of autonomy concerns staff autonomy. Autonomy of staffing entails having the decision-making ability to hire, fire, and whether to offer incentives. Autonomy in staffing found to be most useful also included how and where to assign staff, as well as how to develop the staff professionally. A second type of

autonomy is that charters also have the freedom to determine how to use time, both in how long school lasts for the year and day and what students and staff are doing during that time. A third type is to give charters the decision-making authority regarding programming, such as the ability to choose how the school will teach state standards and how these decisions will be financed. Depending on state law and local autonomy, charters can determine what their priorities are as a school and allocate funding accordingly (Corbett, 2015).

Authorizers that dial back this autonomy when schools fail to improve may be repeating the cardinal sin of districts impeding turnaround efforts. Because a leader has the autonomy does not equate with capacity to use the autonomy. Leaders with capacity need to lead the school or the capacity needs to be built. School improvement is highly contextualized work. Authorizers who build relationships with school boards and leaders, who understand the phases of school decline, who provide or look for extra assistance to schools at risk of or currently failing will help their schools improve the educational options for students. Authorizers need the capacity to understand what is needed in turnaround in order to set up the conditions that allow a school in improvement to flourish. Once the authorizers begin "voluntelling" schools how to improve, our historical trajectory of mostly failed attempts at improvement will continue. Improvement efforts will be short lived, superficial and increase inequities in our system as schools will shy away from serving our most vulnerable populations.

Opportunities for Future Research

Although the themes emanating from the interviews in this study were based on the authorizers' perceptions and judgments, they offered only a snippet in time and were not verified based on evidence of implementation over an extended period of time. While

interview findings were triangulated across multiple staff members within an authorizer's office as well as with authorizer documentation, measures such as additional observations, interviews of constituents in the schools that turned around, or the collection of artifacts to substantiate the consistency or quality of implementation related to what the authorizers shared would be an excellent follow up to the study conducted. Further examination of these themes quantitatively as factors with the ability to predict successful improvement efforts would benefit the sector by verifying these themes and potentially further refining them.

District authorizers did not participate in this current study, although they were recruited. The authorizers participating in this study tended to have a more robust staff who were independently focused on their charter school portfolio. Since district authorizers make up the majority of authorizers, it would be beneficial to explore the research questions from this study and understand the perceptions, supports and challenges of district authorizers in offering schools an improvement option. While research found district authorizers to be more knowledgeable of the content of school improvement, district authorizers tend to have to balance multiple priorities and may not have the capacity to put their expertise to use. However, there may be ways to capture their expertise for other authorizers.

Another area of study that was not explored in this one was to interview and explore these issues with authorizers that did not offer a turnaround option. Working with authorizers who (1) are legislatively prohibited to provide the option of improvement or (2) are able, but choose not to, would provide insight into understanding and providing a more complete view of the contextual conditions pertaining to school improvement.

Exploring accountability perspectives with authorizers who do not offer turnaround would also be warranted.

In particular, a deeper understanding of the specific components of turnaround that supported or impeded successful improvement would be beneficial to the field– which specific autonomies, which specific policies, timeframes, procedures, on the part of the authorizer, board, and school were beneficial or detrimental to improvement efforts. As part of this exploration, understanding how to engage parents in the conversation about school quality and improvement also has the potential to change the conversation about the quality of schooling.

Closing Remarks

Schools have one of the most important jobs imaginable: educating the next generation of citizens. As authorizers, how well they are educating our students is the basis of how they are held accountable. And yet, they are also historical markers; community gathering places; childcare providers; meal providers; wellness providers for eye, hearing, and dental checks; social and emotional supports; and much more. Schools are often places where our most vulnerable students are fed, sheltered, and feel safe. How do we encourage and acknowledge the heavy lift some of our schools are taking on in the name of "educating" students, while at the same time holding them accountable to the same high milestones? How do we take some of the burden off of them so they can focus on education, instead of making sure students are able to be educated?

As the charter sector has expanded and matured, authorizers have almost universally expanded the supports and intensity of documentation, training, and review during the initial stages of starting a charter school, including the phases around designing and planning and preparing to open successfully (NACSA, 2018b). This

expansion of supports reflects the increased interest in ensuring new charter schools have a strong foundation on which to build before student enrollment even begins. With the annual growth rate of new charter schools steadily climbing until 2014, authorizers increased their support to new schools. As sector growth has slowed since 2014, and as the field has recognized that even charter schools who have demonstrated success for years can be subject to failure, authorizers are recognizing the need to provide resources and support to more mature schools in sustaining success.

Unfortunately, the way states' charter laws are structured is to wait until a charter school fails or they have not met the requirements of local and state laws before they even get a second look. Many authorizers consider the performance milestones laid out in the performance framework to be the minimum of what schools should be reaching. In addition, authorizer accountability frameworks measured lagging indicators of distress and success, such as measures of student achievement. If the school is meeting criteria and thresholds laid out in the performance contract—regardless of lift it takes to get there—there is not much an authorizer will do to enact changes. If the school is not meeting performance contract, it is only after a school does not meet the performance contract terms that any kind of change can be required, or any help offered if at all.

This dissertation was written amidst the most unexpected and unprecedented challenges to schools, parents, families, and those who support them our generation has ever seen. While the challenge of delivering educational services was felt by the nation during 2020 and into 2021, determining the fallout and repercussions of this school year's disparate educational services is still yet to come. We need to reevaluate, now, what was working from our “old” way of holding schools accountable and what new and innovative ways need to be introduced. These lessons learned need to be a part of the

knowledge development and dissemination for national and local policy leaders and practitioners at state, district, and higher education entities. Authorizers who are not mired in getting back to "where we used to be," but building back stronger, and more equitably than we used to do, will show us the promising practices of tomorrow. We are in the midst of an historic moment to reinvent schooling so that all children have the educational opportunities to meet the demands of the future.

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APPENDIX A: DRAFT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear X,

I am engaged in research to identify authorizer frameworks for charter schools participating in an improvement/turnaround effort. I would like to interview seasoned charter authorizers, such as yourself, to hear thoughts and reflections on your perspective of allowing under-performing charters to turnaround as well as holding charter schools accountable during an improvement effort.

I would like to request a one-hour virtual interview with each member of your team involved with school closures, school performance reviews and school support. If you would like to participate, please send your resume and complete the doodle poll linked below to schedule a time to talk. The discussion will not take more than 1 hour. Please feel free to forward this invitation to others on your team who are involved in school closures, school performance reviews, and school support; each team member can schedule their own interview time. The goal of these interviews is to answer the following questions:

1. What contextual factors were in place for you (the authorizer) to facilitate school turnaround, such as policies (state-local) allowing for improvement in lieu of closure; and
2. What models of accountability were used for schools conducting turnaround, such as autonomies provided, and how turnaround progress was monitored?

I have reserved time during [two-week window] for interviews but are willing to work around your schedule. Please use the following link to schedule a time: [doodle poll]

If you have any questions about the research you would like to discuss in advance, please let me know! Thank you for your consideration.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Authorizers and Board Members

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.

To ensure the accuracy in our data collection, I would like to audio record this session. I will destroy the audio recording after ensuring my notes have captured the content of this interview. The recording will be transcribed and used for coding purposes, but both the audio and transcript will be destroyed once coded so I may summarize the findings. Do I have your permission to record?

Any interpretation or quotation will be sent for your review to ensure I have interpreted our discussion correctly. In the final write-up, your personal information will not be used to identify individuals, nor authorizing entities. A pseudonym will be used to uphold confidentiality.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Philosophy/Context

1. What role to charter schools serve in your sector?
2. How do parents and other stakeholders view charter school closures in your context?

Renewal Criteria

1. What criteria do schools need to meet to have their charter renewed?
    a. *Probe:* Are there circumstances where expectations vary from school to school, reflecting schools' differing missions and purposes?
    a. *Probe:* Are advantages and disadvantages of a school's student body factored into the school's renewal criteria? How so?

2. What are the options for low-performing charter schools in your sector?
3. As an authorizer, what and how are you held accountable to the quality of the charters you authorize?

Decision making process to offer turnaround

1. How did turnaround become an option for low- or under-performing schools?
2. Why do you offer schools a turnaround option?
3. Are all under/low performing charter schools offered a turnaround option?
    a. *Probe*: When is it appropriate to offer turnaround to a school?

Specific school examples of turnaround

1. Walk me through [name of school offered turnaround]:
2. Are there particular expectations, activities, data collection schedules, etc. for schools conducting turnaround?
    a. *Probe:* How long did the school have to improve?
    b. *Probe:* Who oversees turnaround initiatives?
3. What kinds of information do you gather as part of the turnaround process?
4. Who gathers the information? How is this information gathered? How often? How is it used?
5. What is the responsibility of the authorizer to support low-performing charters? How so?
    a. *Probe:* The State?
    b. *Probe:* Other entities? Whom?

APPENDIX C: OPEN AND AXIAL CODES AND THEMES

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
More in favor of closure for low performing schools for students' sake	Authorizer philosophy	Improvement vs. closure
More in favor of improvement option for students' sake		
Easier on authorizer to revoke a charter than improvement		
Not all schools improve	Negative experience with improvement	
Turnaround is a lot of staff time, resources		
Turnaround is a delay of closure: kicking the can down the road		
Past examples of successful improvement efforts	Positive experience with improvement	
Authorizer accountability rigidity is a negative		
Improvement can be what starts upward trajectory for community		
When a school improves; offers a great opportunity for families		
Improvement is less disruption on community		
Improvement leads to better relationships with community		
High dropout rates from closed schools	Negative experience with closure	
Closure is disruptive to community institutions		
Closure is disruptive to students		
Closure is difficult decision that takes time and analysis		
Parents protest school closures		
Community does not understand why schools are closed		
Schools get community to show up at board meetings to show support		
Closure is very emotional		
Past closure that was difficult on authorizer		
Getting harder to close schools		
Difficult to open schools: districts fight it	Other reasons for improvement option	
Authorizer reluctance to give up charters		
Schools are more than academic institutions		
Schools serve as community hubs		
Education outcomes are most important for authorizers to measure		
School offers students beyond that which is measured		
High-capacity/strong board chair	Needed for turnaround	Supporting School Improvement
High capacity/solid board		
Capacity-building supports to offer		
The right leader with turnaround competencies		
Board members resign	What should schools/boards expect during turnaround	
Drop in student enrollment		
Staff turnover is expected		
Standardized test data; outcome data dip		
Back of the office support/for hire	External supports available	
Charter support organization/membership org		
One stop shop of support: the [name of vendor]		
School improvement funds from State Education Agency		
Not a budget to provide direct support themselves	Lack of support available	
No real statewide charter support org		
Authorizer does not provide support for struggling schools		
Pre-vet and predetermine vendor	Indirect supports from authorizer	
Authorizer can connect to others but does not provide support		
Recruitment of school board members		
Connections to State Education Agency support		
One-to-one board training/coaching	Direct supports from authorizer	
Board training		
Critical friend for Improvement Plans		
Root cause analysis		
Operations training		

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Personalized support to schools		
Board to board meetings discussing data		
Conversations with school leaders		
Cohort training with leaders		
Held accountable by public through public position	Indirect authorizer accountability	
Only one point of accountability		
Board only approves charters		
Renewal is biggest accountability lever	Lessons learned about accountability	Performance Frameworks
Improvement aligned to meeting renewal criteria		
Need clear renewal expectations		
Need clear repercussions to not meeting renewal criteria		
Holding true to standards is difficult		
Renewal is biggest accountability lever		
Accountability framework for schools in turnaround not different than other schools	Performance contract for turnaround	
All schools are held to a bare minimum		
Stair step gradually builds toward renewal criteria		
Academic framework based on state tier system		
Improvement plan criteria determined by state		
Improvement plan: alignment of everyone and everything to improvement		
Legislation about mandatory closure	State-local law	
No legislation about mandatory closure		
No legislation about turnaround option		
Underperforming schools treated as new schools	Determining the amount of oversight	Site visits
Make sure improvement getting started on the right foot		
More/added oversight		
Increased oversight led to better practice		
Sometimes do extra site evaluations		
How to support the school	Purpose of site visit	
Are you on a positive trajectory		
Underperforming schools treated as new schools	Differing data collection for improvement schools	
Midyear teacher retention		
Midyear student withdrawals		
Local benchmark assessments		
Improvement plan progress		
Financial markers		
Most attention paid to academic improvement		
Financial and academic went hand in hand	Lessons learned	
Get board involved in visit		
Depending on improvement offer varying contract lengths	Authorizer levers for contract terms	Contract Year Terms
Have ability to offer variable term limits at renewal		
There is a timeframe for improvement	Authorizer lessons learned regarding time for improvement	
Time it takes to improve is around 3 years		
"Accountability clock" of 5 years	Contract terms in statute	
Mandatory closure after 3 consecutive years of 1 star performance		
Create a sense of urgency on the part of the school	Reason for shorter term contracts	
Renewal is biggest lever for authorizers		
Even with shorter contracts, renewal conditions must be met		
Increased oversight		
School comes before the authorizer board more often		
Authorizer engages earlier		
Shorter contracts were more burdensome on the schools trying to make progress	Reason for longer contract terms	
Allowing schools time for turnaround puts focus back on kids		

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Schools have the time they need to get what they need in place		
We can remove board members/reconstitute the board	Authorizer lever limiting autonomy	Autonomy
Find an operator for the school		
Find a new/different leader		
Prune the tree: close lowest performing grade levels		
Tiers dictate what happens next for accountability	Autonomy based on time or attempts at improvement	
Autonomy reductions as go through Tiers		
(Level 1) School improvement plan		
(Level 2) Heightened intervention = lowered autonomy		
(Level 3) More heightened intervention = vendor must use		
Authorizer chooses vendor for school		
We do not tell a school what to do	Authorizer upheld autonomy	
It's a school's choice who they work with		
Our role is not to prescribe changes		