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dissertation entitled

SCHOOLING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

presented by

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has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Ph.D. degree in Educational Policy

Major Professor's Signature

5 May 2005

Date

SCHOOLING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Policy

2005

ABSTRACT

SCHOOLING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

By

Ann Marie Allen

The purpose of this study is to determine if public charter schools are responsive to a larger community than the parents and students they directly serve, and if so, to describe the nature of that responsiveness. Qualitative, case-study methodology was used to examine the responsiveness of four public charter schools in one urban community. A comparative set of two district schools in the same city was also examined. Respondents in the study included charter and district school administrators, board members, and neighborhood association directors. Data from observations of public board meetings and documents were also analyzed.

Dedicated to Mark, Elizabeth and James Allen for their support and encouragement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. David N. Plank for his unyielding support, guidance and wisdom throughout the doctoral process, as well as Dr. David Arsen, Dr. Stephen Esquith, Dr. Kimberly Maier, and Dr. Gary Sykes for their support, critique, and assistance in the development of the dissertation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

KEY TO SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

School Abbreviations

CA – Conversion Academy

ICA – Inner City Academy

ICE – Inner City Elementary

REA – Reggio Emilia Academy

SCA – Secondary Charter Academy

SEE – South East Elementary

Neighborhood Association Abbreviations

DNA – Downtown Neighborhood Association

SNA – South East Neighborhood Association

SWNA – South West Neighborhood Association

Demographics Abbreviations

AA – African American

AI – American Indian

F&RL – Free and Reduced-Priced Lunch

Symbols for Strength of Representation

+ Very strong representation

√+ Strong representation

√ Fair representation

√- Weak representation

– Evidence contrary to representation

Chapter 1

The Changing Relationship of School to Community

The school-community relationship has taken some dramatic turns over the past 100 years. Often these turns have been driven by changes in school governance policy, reflecting shifts in the way citizens are represented in school decision-making. For example, the consolidation of school committees into district school boards reduced the number of citizen representatives on school governance bodies from as many as 20 per school to as few as seven per district (Tyack, 1974). The creation of special school elections in the 1920s effectively reduced the number of citizens who vote on school issues by more than half and created an election system that was quiet, untimely, and more controllable (Lutz & Iannacone, 1978). Fiscal policies that move school finance from the hands of local taxpayers to state departments of education have decreased the amount of control local citizens have over their local public schools, and policies that allow for increased parental choice in public schooling potentially decrease the public's connection to its schools by creating a more privatized system of schooling.

There are reasonable arguments to be made in favor of all of these changes. The increase in professional decision-making that spurred the consolidation and the minimization of citizen boards and the creation of special school elections was an attempt to improve the quality of schooling by ensuring that educational decisions were made by trained, professional educators. The more recent finance reforms that shift local funding of schools to the state level is a way to address the vast inequities that result from localized funding programs. Choice and charter school policies attempt to increase the power parents have over their own child's education by decreasing the bureaucratic

barriers that have encumbered public school districts, and through a competitive market, increase the pressure on public school districts to improve education for all students.

With every turn, however, there is a road not taken. What is lost, for example, when public schooling is more accountable to a market clientele than the community in which it resides? How does such a shift affect the relationship between the public and the public school? Specifically, how does it affect citizen representation in school decision-making, and what effect might such a change have on students and communities? In this dissertation, I begin to examine this shift in terms of the relationship between the broader public and the public charter school by examining ways citizens are represented in charter school decision-making.

Democratic theorist Robert Dahl (1998) identifies the political institutions necessary for modern representative democracy. These institutions provide a useful analytical framework for considering citizen representation in public school decision-making. He writes that representation that is democratic needs to allow for choice in representation through free, fair and frequent elections of representatives, freedom of expression, access to information, ability to associate with others for more adequate representation, and representation that is inclusive of all citizens. Using Dahl's criteria for democratic representation as an analytical framework, it appears at first glance that the traditional public school district has the structures in place to represent the citizens of the district, whether or not those citizens are parents of students enrolled in the district schools. Charter school policy in Michigan, however, provides more autonomy from community, relieving public charter schools from direct obligations to the electorate. The question I aim to answer is whether the differences in Michigan's public school policies

affect the democratic nature of representation in charter school decision-making to the point of being unresponsive to the larger community. In other words, are charter schools responsive to a larger public than the students and parents they directly serve, and if so, how? Answers to this question only touch the surface of the school-community relationship, but at least they begin to tell the story of how charter school policies may affect the larger infrastructure of schools in community.

Definitions of Community

Before one can discuss changes to the school-community relationship, it is necessary to examine more carefully what is meant by the term "community" (Plank, 1997). Community as related to schools could mean the professional school staff – the teachers, administrators and personnel that make a school run; it could mean the students and parents, or the students, parents and staff; it could mean the neighborhood that surrounds the school, or again a combination of all of the above; it could mean the city in which the school resides, or the state system of education of which it is a part. How policy addresses the concept of "community" is likely to not only affect the nature of the school-community relationship but to define it.

Public school policy in the United States has long defined community as a geographic area surrounding a school. Plank (1997) explains: "Assigning priority to geography, as has been traditional in the US public schools and school districts, fosters pluralism and inclusion at the risk of attenuated social and value coherence" (p. 14). Public school governance also has a tradition of local control, meaning the citizens who reside in a given school district are responsible to elect representatives to school boards, vote on funding, building, and re-organization issues and participate in discussions or

debates that affect the way schooling is delivered in their community. If the electorate is not happy with the way the local school is being governed, it traditionally has had the right to elect new members to the governing board in hopes that changes would be made that better reflect citizens' preferences.

Recent changes to state school policy in Michigan have changed the way the electorate interacts with the school district, and those changes likely are redefining the notion of community in the school-community relationship. These changes in policy are discussed at length in Chapter 4, but suffice it to say here that state policies that shape public school governance have the power of shifting the definition of the school community from one of geographic boundaries that is inclusive of citizens who both have and do not have children in the schools to one that is more focused on students and their parents, and placing more control for education directly in the hands of the parents and students the schools directly serve. Turning over control to a powerful group like parents can be detrimental to the ideal of a common school. As Plank (1997) notes:

> "...despite the intense rhetorical enthusiasm for communities in current policy debates, a variety of recent policy initiatives and structural changes in the public school system have undermined rather than strengthened the role of communities in educational governance. Notable examples include state and national standards, enforced by testing and backed up with the threat of state take-overs; and the move to student-based funding, which greatly strengthens the 'exit' capabilities of parents and correspondingly weakens the claims of community institutions on their putative members" (p. 19).

Scholars like Gutmann, Mintrom , Plank & Boyd, Voke and others suggest that public schools need to be responsive to all citizens in a community – not just those with students in school - in order to preserve the democratic purposes of public schooling. Citizens have a vested interest in public schooling because public schools socialize and educate the next generation of citizens. Gutmann (1987) argues that it is the emerging generations of public school students that will be caring for today's citizens tomorrow. These authors also argue that as members of a self-governing society, citizens have a stake in public school decision-making because public schools are a part of the community infrastructure that affects the lives of local citizens. Therefore, schools have a responsibility to ensure that school decision-making allows for the representation of citizen interests.

Others argue that the inclusive representation of citizens in public school decision-making is important for ensuring necessary community support and investment in successful public schools (Lutz & Merz, 2000; Stone et al, 2001; Bryk, et al, 1998). Stone et al posit that the political barriers that have been created to disconnect citizens from public schools need to be broken down to allow for the mobilization of advocates who can spur equity in public schooling. Likewise, Bryk et al (1998) write that increased participation of citizens in school decision-making increases trust in schools. They write: "If local professionals in urban schools do not reform their relationships with parents and community members to build a stronger foundation of trust, it is hard to envision how these schools can improve fundamentally, or how communities can better support the education of their children," (p.255).

Public schools have long been cornerstoness of community; they are the places that children learn and play but they are also meeting places for senior citizens and community groups; they are buildings and grounds that take up space in neighborhoods, affecting housing markets and often defining the face of neighborhoods. The hope of public schooling is to break down the social barriers that prevent cohesive communities and create opportunities for understanding across social and economic lines.

Levin (2000) and others argue that a system of charter schools would create greater equity gaps because only those students who have the means to choose to attend a charter can attend. Those who do not have the means will end up in schools that have been drained of resources. Levin also argues that a move to privatize public schooling, in an education market, will create less cohesive communities. The "common good" purposes of public schooling could disappear under such a scenario, as could the participative practice of engaging citizens in school decision-making. This could have detrimental effect on the democratic goals of public schooling.

The public common school as a vehicle for a more cohesive society, however, is an ideal that some argue is too complex to ever become a reality. Chubb and Moe (1990), for example, argue that attempting to meet everyone's needs resulted in large bureaucratic schools that can be unresponsive to individual students and parents. These charter school advocates posit that a market system of public schooling would break down the bureaucratic barriers to quality education and give all parents "purchasing power" in deciding the best educational fit for their students. Doing so will lead to a better system of education for everyone because the competition created by the market would force schools to either improve or shut down. Market advocates like Chubb and

Moe place the power of education in the hands of parents. Critics of charter schools argue that the market with parents as its clientele threatens the democratic nature of public schooling because it greatly restricts the ability of citizens to have a say in public schooling.

In contrast, Mintrom (2001) and Smith (2001) argue that charter schools may in fact be a breeding ground for democracy. The small school environments of charter schools, they argue, allow for increased deliberation and participation in school decision-making. Mintrom suggests that the by increasing parental participation in school decisions through the small charter school environment, communities as a whole will enhance their capacities for democratic participation. Mintrom's work, however, does not consider the absence of other stakeholders – namely citizens who do not have children enrolled in the charter schools – in the process of charter school decision-making. Smith's argument is a broader and does make a case for the larger community. She argues that the small charter school can serve as an associational democracy for under-represented communities. Students who have been left behind in the traditional school district may be better served in a charter school that focuses on meeting the interests of the community to which those students belong. In this way, then, charter schools may provide what Dahl calls associational autonomy – or the ability of the under-represented to associate with others for the purpose of more effective representation.

A system of charter schools as associational democracies may lead to what Fuller (2004) describes as an increasing pluralistic, post-modern society. He posits that a system of charter schools made up of small groups of like-minded parents and students represents a shift away from a more modern conception of society, which is concerned

about the democratic ideals of common goods and services. He calls for more research into the tensions between the modern and post-modern approaches to public schooling. Writes Fuller:

> "We should endeavor to understand how policymakers are weighing - even how they grasp – the virtues of this dizzying pastiche of cultural communities against the persisting importance of shared and unifying values. A new generation of research on the tension between the modernists and the pluralists could yield stronger policy tools and clearer knowledge of whether richer communities are indeed being built or sustained, for children, parents, and educators alike. We may find that the advance of cultural pluralism also brings greater inequality and legitimates advantages for dominant classes. But either way, this new line of policy research could enrich the deeply human dynamics of public action and democratic deliberation." (p.23).

Similarly, McCarthy (1997) warns that moving forward with policies that redefine the "basic structure" of education calls for a more concerted effort at understanding what these changes portend. She writes:

> "If the purposes and basic structure of public education in our nation are being redefined, we need to understand all implications of the decisions. We need to consider the values that are guiding educational policy into the next century because m uch more than public schooling is at stake. IF we are not attentive, we may, by default, embrace policies that are inconsistent with democratic principles, when a majority of our citizens still believe strongly in those ideals." (p. 68)

In this dissertation I attempt to answer the calls of Fuller and McCarthy by beginning to examine the tensions between what Fuller calls the modern and post-modern approaches to education, by examining the relationship between the broader public and the public charter school and to begin to identify how these relationships affect the democratic participation of citizens in public school decision-making. Chapter 2 of the dissertation examines the literature that frames the theoretical argument regarding representation in public school decision-making and the effects changes in governance policy may have on such representation. Also presented in Chapter 2 is an examination of Michigan's educational policy landscape and the policy shifts that contribute to the changing school-community relationship. Chapter 3 delineates the methods of the study, which focuses on one city in Michigan in which four differently –governed charter schools operate. The dimensions of representation from Dahl's conceptions of democracy presented in Chapter 2 are used as a framework for analyzing interviews, documents, and observations at public meetings. In chapters 4, 5 and 6, I present findings from the case study of the individual schools as well as findings from the comparison of schools, and findings from community respondents. These findings are examined within and across respondent type (i.e. charter respondents, district respondents, and community respondents). Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation with implications for public school policy and a look at emerging questions for future study.

Chapter 2

The Market and The Common School: A difference in representation

Charter schools emerged in the early 1990s as way to experiment with new and potentially better approaches to public education. Many of the studies evaluating the effects of charter schools have focused on whether charters improve student achievement, provide innovative teaching practices, and organize a more efficient system of teaching and learning. However, charter school reforms also came about as a way to change the governance of public education, in part, to increase the responsiveness of school leaders to students and their parents (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Boyd, 2003). Fuller (2004) suggests that the rise in support for charter schools may be related to a shift in the public's conception of the public sphere. He posits that the modern idea of a system of regulated schooling that aims to develop a common set of skills and values for all students in the state has given way to a desire for more pluralistic schooling. The post-modern pluralism Fuller writes about may not only change traditional definitions of the common good; it is likely to change the relationship between public schools and the communities in which they reside.

Researchers have begun to examine differences in the way charter schools relate to the parents they serve (Mintrom, 2003: Beneviste, Carnoy & Rothstein, 2003), yet little has been done to examine how charter schools respond and are responsible to other members of the local community. Public schools have a long history of working with and in community. One of the purposes of the common school is to provide a common set of values and skills to students to prepare them for life in democratic society, often in their own communities (Labaree, 1997). In light of this goal, public schools have a formal and

informal relationship with community. Formal relationships are evident in the public funding school districts receive directly from tax payers and the influence citizens have on the governance of public schools through their participation in electing school board members. Informal relationships include the involvement of community members on advisory committees, relationships between community organizations and schools to provide students with school-to-work or service-learning opportunities, and partnerships with social service organizations or government agencies to support the social needs of students.

Charter schools, however, are formally independent of community resources. They do not have an elected governing board, and often do not identify with any one school community as public school districts do (Arsen, Plank & Sykes, 1999; Miron & Nelson, 2002). As a result, charter schools may have few reasons to connect to the community beyond the parents and students they directly serve.

Not much is known about the relationship between public charter schools and the communities they serve. As publicly funded institutions, is there a larger community to which charter schools are responsive, and if so, how is the school-community relationship different among charter schools? How does this new conception of community change the way the public and public school interact? These are the questions my dissertation aims to answer.

Boyd (2002) writes that the trial American school governance is facing today is related to both pressure for performance from policymakers and pressure for legitimacy from parents who are not satisfied with the education available from the traditional school district. Therefore, efforts to increase accountability for school performance on

one hand and efforts to increase parental choice on the other have resulted in new school governance models, directly affecting the ways in which community members interact with public schools.

How do these new governance models, specifically charter schools, affect the relationship between the public and their public schools? With little empirical research on school governance (Land, 2002), the answer remains unclear. There is a growing literature, however, that supports the importance of engaging the broader community in public school decision-making, to develop political legitimacy and the trust needed to support student learning (Mintrom, 2001; Gutmann, 1987; Boyd & Plank, 1994; Voke, 1998; Smith, 1998; Brk & Schneider, (2003); Meier, 2003; Hirota & Jacobs, 2003). The literature reviewed here examines the potential impact of charter school policy on the relationship between communities and public schools.

Many scholars of democracy argue that citizen participation and engagement in civic life helps to maintain a balance of power as well as to build the kind of trust among citizens that is necessary to produce a common good (Putnam, 1993; 1994; Dahl, 1998; Richardson, 2002). Applied to the local control of public schooling, community participation in school decision-making is important because it gives citizens the opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect their lives (Gutmann, 1987; Plank & Boyd, 1994). Beneviste, Carnoy & Rothstein (2003) simply state: "Society has an interest in the kind of education that its children receive and this should be an area for debate" (p. 106). As Voke (1998) writes in her argument for greater legitimacy in charter schools, the need for citizen participation goes beyond engaging school parents: "Yet, clearly those in the community outside the charter school have an interest in and will be affected by the

education taking place within a charter school. All citizens have an important and common interest in educating future citizens" (p. 4)

The goals of American education are multiple and often contested (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Labaree, 1997) and public schools serve multiple constituents with varied interests. The complexity of public schooling, therefore, has traditionally called for democratic representation to insure that multiple goals and interests are considered in school decisions, and that community members have an opportunity to examine and challenge the balance of those goals and how their interests will be represented.

Democratic governance of public schools, however, has been criticized for its inability to efficiently respond to the needs of individual parents and students due in part to the multiple interests and constituents of public school bureaucracies (Hess, 1999; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Charter schools were designed to provide parents with a schooling option in which they have greater control over their own child's schooling and greater access to school authority (Mintrom, 2003; Chubb & Moe, 1990).

The difference between the common school and the charter school may be viewed in terms of a dissatisfaction theory of education. Hirschman (1970) outlines exit and voice as the primary vehicles for dealing with discontent in a democratic society. Exit, he writes, is the economic approach, and provides customers with opportunities to leave one school for another when the first school is not meeting the needs or interests of the client. Voice is the political strategy that allows for stakeholders to deliberate issues of interest, in hopes of improving a negative situation. Hirschman notes that while exit is the easier way to deal with discontent, in a democratic system that aims to provide fair and

equitable service to all citizens, voice is necessary to preserve and improve the quality of the system for all stakeholders.

Critics of traditional public school systems argue, however, that large bureaucratic, top-down school districts do not provide for effective voice. The lack of responsiveness that Chubb and Moe (1990) identify is largely a failure of schools to react to the articulation of voice. The lack of power parents have over these systems is what underscores charter advocates' mission. Chubb and Moe argue that part of the reason that large school systems are so unresponsive to parents is that they are obligated to respond to multiple interests and stakeholders. The "loose-coupling" of public school districts, they note, prevents much responsiveness to anybody. Charter school policies attempt to address the responsiveness issue for parents by giving them the option to leave an unsatisfactory school for another. Yet, as Hirschman (1970) notes, the exit strategy does nothing to foster democratic deliberation aimed at improving the system for all stakeholders, including those stakeholders who cannot exit the public good effects of public schools (Labaree, 1997).

Researchers including Mintrom (2001, 2003) and Smith (2001), suggest that the small communities of charter schools may be more conducive to promoting democratic voice among participants than large bureaucratic systems. Furthermore they suggest that the social capital developed through the charter school experience may lead to stronger democratic participation among charter school participants. Mintrom (2001) reasons that democracy is best practiced in small communities, where access to information and authority are easily obtained. Opportunities to participate in decision-making processes are also more accessible in small communities, and the threat of exit, he argues, will

encourage school leaders to make available more opportunities for democratic participation in school decisions.

Smith (2001) makes a similar argument in her book, "The Democratic Potential of Charter Schools." Using the work of political theorist Joshua Cohen, Smith argues that charter schools may serve as "associative democracies," taking on a "regulatory role in cases where the state is limited in its capacity to advance the common good (p. 73). Associative democracies, she writes, are "intended to encourage secondary associations capable of fulfilling the functions of representing previously underrepresented interests and advancing regulatory competence" (p. 75). The large bureaucratic system of schooling that Chubb and Moe identify as the root of inefficiency could be seen as preventing effective representation for under-represented groups. Charter schools, therefore, could become the secondary association that best represents the needs of a particular group.

Smith notes that the formation of charter schools is likely to lead to more homogeneous communities, creating "political solidarity" among charter school participants. She argues, like Mintrom, that such solidarity could lead to more participative communities deliberating on issues of common concern.[1] The remaining question, according to Smith, is whether charter schools can maintain an interest in democratic governance and civic engagement. Writes Smith, "While most charter schools will not be concerned first and foremost with democratic governance nor civic education, public interests in each of these aspects of education require that charters at least meet

[1] These ideas are supported by Costa & Kahn's (2002) research. Costa and Kahn examined 15 studies of social capital and conclude that small, homogeneous communities increase social capital among members, and may lead to more voter participation within that community.

some minimal requirements." She identifies those requirements as: "1) the organization of charter schools under a specific policy balances the plurality of interests in public education; 2) the governance procedures of specific charter schools result in legitimate collective decisions; and 3) the curricular and pedagogical practices within specific charter schools promote 'regulatory competence' in future citizens" (p. 77).

Mintrom (2001) also notes the potential threats to democracy that charter schools pose, but concludes that "these could be mitigated through appropriate policy changes" (p. 628). The management of charter schools by private for-profit management companies presents a danger to democratic practice, he argues, because the structures that the companies may impose on schools limits the autonomy of the school itself. He also notes that school leaders may find ways to "screen" students who attend their schools as a result of the increased autonomy of the public charter school. Thirdly, Mintrom notes that democracy could be curtailed by increased focus on parental decision-making and decreased accountability to the broader public. He writes: "Given the greater influence that parents enjoy over charter schools, it is possible that some schools will become so preoccupied by local interests and the specific concerns of parents that they will neglect to teach essential democratic values and to support the cultivation of a common national culture" (p. 629).

Putnam's (1993) research indicates another potential danger that charter schools pose to democratic practice. While Mintrom posits that the social capital small charter schools build will lead to a more participative society, data from Putnam's (1993) study of regional communities in Italy indicates otherwise. Putnam found hat it was not the small, close-knit communities that were the most participative, but communities that

were modern and diverse. Putnam writes that Benjamin Barber's idea of democracy "captures the character of civic community as it emerges from our Italian explorations. He quotes Barber as saying:

> "Strong democracy rests on the idea of a self-governing community of citizens who are united less by homogeneous interests than by civic education and who are made capable of common purpose and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions rather than their altruism or their good nature. Strong democracy is consonant with – indeed it depends upon – the politics of conflict, the sociology of pluralism, and the separation of private and public realms of action. " (Putnam, 1993, pp 117-188)

Granovetter (1973) made a similar argument when he argued that the strong ties of small, exclusive communities result in a weakened civic community, whereas individuals that have weaker ties to each other will be more willing to interact across different characteristics and values. Plank (1997) makes a similar argument, noting that differences in a community's size often reflect differences in the community's character. He writes:

> "Small voluntary communities (e.g. ethnic neighborhoods, Christian schools) are likely to be closely-knit and rich in 'social capital' but at least potentially subversive of common civic culture. Large statutorily defined communities (e.g. New York's community school district) are likely to reflect the value conflicts and policy dilemmas of the broader society" (p. 15).

Charter schools, therefore, may in effect divide the public sphere into a multitude

of small spheres, potentially reducing the number of constituents and consequently the number of competing interests (Fuller, 2004). This type of division could break down the relationship between the school and the broader community – the community that is not represented by the parents of the students enrolled in school.

Some researchers suggest that public schools that fail to be responsive to the larger community may be detrimental to the development of a cohesive, democratic society (Gutmann, 1987; Levin, 2000; Fiske & Ladd, 2002). These scholars have predicted that choice policies that allow students to separate into like-minded communities will dissolve the social fabric that supports a cohesive, democratic society. Research by Fiske & Ladd (2002) indicates that choice policies that do not consider the needs of citizens beyond the local choice school create a system of segregation that intensifies the benefits of some to the detriments of others. These authors posit that the democratic representation of all public school stakeholders in public school decision-making helps to protect against this potential segregation and ultimately the inequities that such segregation can foster.

Democratic participation and community engagement in public schools

Public schooling began as an institution under local control (Tyack, 1974). Mintrom (2001) notes that it is at the local level where the potential for democratic deliberation is at its greatest. Dahl (1998) makes a similar observation: "The more citizens a democratic unit contains, the less the citizens can participate directly in government decisions and the more that they must delegate authority to others" (p.109). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest, as Mintrom (2001) has, that charter schools may present an opportunity for increased parental engagement in school decision-making, and

an increase in democratic deliberation among parents served by the charter schools. This type of participatory democracy is effective, notes Dahl, when all citizens affected by the organization have an opportunity to participate in decisions. In cases where participatory democracy falls short, representative democracy insures the interests of all citizens are considered in democratic decision-making.

Dahl's criteria for democratic representation seems an appropriate frame for examining how citizen representation does or does not exist in public charter school decision-making. Dahl identified six political institutions necessary for democratic representation. These institutions are: 1. Elected officials; 2. Free, fair, and frequent elections; 3. Freedom of expression; 4. Alternative sources of information; 5. Associational autonomy; 6. Inclusive citizenship. It is not unreasonable to consider these structures when thinking about the representation of public interest in school decision-making. In fact a Ford Foundation report (Hirota & Jacobs, 2003) on community engagement in public schools identified structures similar to Dahl's political institutions as important to community representation in school decision-making. These basic structures of representation have traditionally been present in public school district governance (Tyack, 1973), but as educational policies aimed at creating more autonomy for public charter schools are implemented, these traditional institutions of representation are changing, possibly changing the relationship between public schools and the communities in which they are located.

Consider how differences in choice of representatives, access to information, freedom of expression, and inclusive participation may affect the school-community relationship in public schools:

Choice of Representatives: By electing officials, citizens delegate the authority for decision making to a few representatives who act on behalf of the citizens they serve. However, charter school policy releases public charter school boards from direct citizen control through the appointment, not election, of school board members. Whether citizens have a say in who represents public interests in public charter schools is an open question. One way to look at representation as applied to schools is to consider that as the size of the school community gets smaller, the need for representation does likewise because, theoretically, more people have the ability to participate without elected representatives. Creating smaller organizations with closer ties to the people they serve was one of the motivations behind the charter school reforms (Chubb & Moe, 1990). While charter boards may serve a smaller population potentially increasing the level of citizen voice, the fact that voters do not directly elect charter representatives may lessen the amount of community representation. Charter school boards are officially appointed by the charter's authorizing agency, which in theory creates a link between the voter and the charter school, but Miron and Nelson (2002) note that in practice board members are chosen by the charter school founders and existing board members. The self-perpetuation of board members, then, may serve to limit representation to the narrow viewpoints of the founders and the sitting boards. Write Miron & Nelson (2002):"The selection of board members by authorizers and founders, along with the selection of replacements by existing board members, serve to narrow the range of interests represented by charter school boards," (p.33). While it is the role of elected school board members to represent community interests in school outcomes in traditionally-governed public schools, less is known about how community members are represented in charter schools.

Access to information: Dahl argues that effective participation is dependent on citizens' ability to access alternative and independent sources of information. Public schools in Michigan are subject to freedom of information laws that make nearly all information of public concern available to citizens on request. Miron and Nelson (2002) in their evaluation of Michigan's charter schools, however, present some evidence that charter schools in Michigan due to their contracts with private management companies have not been as public with information as traditional school districts. Being under the management of private companies allows the charter schools and their management companies to conceal information as property of the private organization and not as public information for citizen review, potentially limiting the public's access to information about public charter schools.

Freedom of Expression: Whose voice is heard is an important consideration in all methods of representation. Dahl (1998) argues that freedom of expression by all citizens is necessary for effective participation. Gutmann (1987) argues for community democratic deliberation in public schools as a way to represent the interests of multiple stakeholders in public school outcomes. Critics of deliberation argue that far too often deliberation only serves the voices of those who are already empowered (Williams, 1998) and strict deliberative democracy is ineffective in reaching decisions because of the difficulty in reaching consensus (Posner, 2003). However, even these critics concede there is a role in representative democracy for expression of citizens' ideas, and deliberation in moderation can serve to enrich, not derail, decisions on policy outcomes. Therefore, citizens' ability to express their concerns or interests to public school authorities is an important aspect of democratic representation in public school decision-

making. The open meetings laws for public schools apply to public charter schools, but without a clear tie to the electorate, it is not clear how public charter schools are responsible for creating citizen access for expression or how responsive charter school authorities are to citizen concerns.

Associational Autonomy: Dahl's framework provides for the right of citizens to form associations that represent their interests, such as political parties or special interest groups. Examples of the types of associations that have been represented in school decision-making include teachers unions, special needs students, ethnic communities such as American Indians, minority groups, low-income families and residents, and local senior citizen organizations. The charter school decreases the size of community and some argue threatens the representation of these broader associational groups. However, Smith (2001) argues that public charter schools may serve as associational democracies, representing groups of citizens whose needs are not being met through the larger public school district.

Inclusion: Dahl notes that democratic representation requires opportunities for all citizens, if they choose, to participate in decisions that affect them. In addition to regular open school board meetings in traditionally-governed public schools, most school districts have ongoing relationships with community groups that allow for the discussion of school issues that affect the greater community. For example, representatives of senior citizen groups, local Rotary clubs, local government groups, and service organizations and school leaders discuss issues of mutual concern. Charter schools also may have such liaisons with community groups, but little work has been done to examine how charter schools interact with the larger community.

Public education, because its outcomes affect virtually all citizens in a community, is a complex web of goals, interests, and constituencies. Reaching some consensus on the "ultimate agenda" (Dahl, 1998) of schooling in such an environment, therefore, depends on an ability to address those varied interests. Choice mechanisms attempt to simplify the interests and goals of the citizens they serve by creating specific cultures or environments into which parents and students join (Miller-Kahn & Smith, 2001; Lubienski, 2003). In this way choice mechanisms may divide the public sphere into a number of separate communities. "Pluralism" as Fuller (2004) uses the term, is not a function of one school serving many interests, but many different schools serving different singular interests. However, charter schools are public schools that must be open to all students. The public nature of charter schools creates a need for charter school authorities to be responsive and responsible to a broader array of interests simply those of the parents and students the charter schools directly serve.

A focus for study: Policy design and its impact on participation in Michigan

The ability of citizens to participate and deliberate in decisions that affect their public schools is an important consideration in the making of school governance policy. Landy (1993) puts it this way: "The government cannot make good citizens, but its choice of actions makes that regimen (of citizen participation) relatively easier or harder to follow" (p.24). Ingram and Schneider (1993) convey a similar sentiment when they write: "Policy design sends messages about what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving and undeserving, and what sort of participation is appropriate in democratic societies " (p. 68). In the last decade, Michigan's policymakers have made significant changes to the state's educational policy design. It is important to consider the

changes to the policy landscape in Michigan to understand how these policy shifts might affect the nature of citizen participation in school decision-making and ultimately the relationship between the school and its community.

Michigan has long been considered a local control state. The United States Constitution put the responsibility for public education in the hands of the states, and Michigan, in turn, put the responsibility of public education in the hands of local townships. Until recently, citizens in Michigan school districts directly controlled school financing by voting on local taxes for the operations of local schools. Michigan residents continue to consider it their right to participate in the governance of their local school districts.[2] However, the local control of citizens in public school decision-making has dwindled significantly in the last 10 years due to a set of educational policies that changed the politics and control of public schooling. The first of these changes had to do with Michigan's introduction of school choice policies.

Three years after Chubb and Moe (1990) published their call for public schools to be more responsive to parents, Michigan's governor and legislature began to implement a series of policies that would effectively increase parental control in public education. In 1993, Michigan became one of the first states in the nation to experiment with public charter schools. The state's charter school legislation was one of several policies implemented to increase school choice in Michigan (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 2000).

According to the Revised School Code of Michigan, any individual or entity in the state may apply for a contract to organize a public school academy (PSA), as long as the academy is not affiliated with a church or religious organization. The policy also

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[2] Findings from a Michigan State University 2003 State of the State Survey indicate the majority of Michigan residents continue to want a say in local public school decisions.

stipulates that PSAs – which are more commonly called public charter schools - are not bound by geographic limitations and may enroll students from anywhere in the state. PSAs must be under the oversight of a state authorizer, which can be a state university, a local community college, a local intermediate school district, or a local public school district. The authorizer is responsible for making sure the PSAs meet state and federal regulations, and authorizers are responsible for the oversight of PSA boards of control. Individuals or entities proposing a PSA must submit a plan for board organization, including names of potential board members. The authorizer is responsible for approving the individuals to serve as PSA board members. The state put a cap of 150 on the number of public school academies that can be authorized by state universities, and limits the authorizations by local bodies to public school academies that are within their geographic boundaries. Operating funds for PSAs come from a per pupil foundation grant provided by the state. PSAs do not receive building and site funds and do not have the ability to ask voters for building and site funds.

Despite the lack of building funds and the daunting tasks of starting a school from scratch, Michigan's experiment in the development of public charter schools grew quickly. A newspaper article from the state's capital noted that 82,000 students attended 216 charter schools in 2004, up from 1,200 students attending 12 schools in 1994. The article also noted that Michigan has the fifth-largest number of public school charters in the country (Putnam, 2004).[3]

[3] The number of university authorized charter schools reached its limit of 150, but one of the state's tribal community colleges, which has a state-wide service area, has become the third largest authorizer in the state. Many consider the use of the tribal college's ability to authorize public school academies state-wide as a loophole in the law, which was meant to curb the growth of public school academies state-wide (Putnam, 2004).

Also in 1993 and 1994, legislation was passed to promote the free movement of students from district to district, first by legislating schools of choice, in which students have the opportunity to leave a home district for another, and second, by making a majority of school finances dependent on student enrollment. The inter-district school choice legislation allowed students to transfer out of their home school or district to other schools and other school districts, and a restructuring of school finance went into effect in 1994 that attached a district's per pupil foundation allowance directly to the student; in other words, the funding went to whichever school the student chose to attend. Michigan's passing of Proposal A in 1994 set up an environment for an education market in which charter schools could thrive.

Finally, the passing of 1994 legislation also moved the responsibility of operational school funding from local communities to the state. Local voters no longer had the ability to increase taxes to support school operations, and local school districts could no longer go to voters with such requests. This fact alone has caused a shift in how schools and communities relate to each other. However, it is the joint impact of these policies that has drastically changed the face of public education in Michigan by creating a public education market in which the control of education dollars depends on where students attend. The new system encourages responsiveness through the threat of exit, replacing democratic voice as the primary strategy for dealing with discontent (Hirschman, 1970).

While both school districts and charter schools are part of the state's public education system, and both receive public funding, the policies that direct their operations

are not all the same. Arsen, Plank, Sykes (2000) note that different policies yield different outcomes, and it is likely that the differences in the policies that direct these two types of public schools will lead to variance in how the schools relate to their local communities. For example, unlike traditional public school districts that serve a geographic service area and are responsible to the electorate within that service area, PSA's have no geographic boundaries. Policies that direct PSAs require no approval from the Michigan electorate. The only mention of the electorate in the PSA section of the School Code is if a public school district refuses to authorize a PSA. At that time, the PSA may ask for the question of authorization to be put on a ballot for a decision by the school district's electorate. Michigan's traditional public school districts boards, in contrast, are responsible to the electorate within the geographic boundaries of their school district. Voters in school districts decide who will serve as governing board members, and voters also decide issues that affect tax increases for school building funds and district organization issues such as district consolidation or annexations. Michigan PSAs by law do not have the right to ask voters for building funds; they must provide facilities from the per pupil foundation amount provided by the state.

Michigan's school choice policies and education finance restructuring together shifted the governance of public education out of the hands of the local citizen and into the hands of the parent consumer. A statement added to the School Code during the time of this shift indicates that the policies were a purposeful strategy to create a market for education aimed more at meeting what Labaree (1997) identifies as the private goals of education. The 1995 addition to the State Code, under Section 10 ("Rights of parents and legal guardians; duties of public schools") reads: "The public schools of this state serve

the needs of the pupils by cooperating with the pupil's parents and legal guardians to develop the pupil's intellectual capabilities and vocational skills in a safe and positive environment." There is nothing in the State Code that speaks to the civic goals of public schooling or to the role of public schools in the local community, although the policies that govern local public school districts maintain a level of citizen participation in school decision-making.

Michigan's 10-year history with the use of public charter schools offers an opportunity to examine how charter schools interact with communities beyond the parents and students they directly serve; it provides for the opportunity to examine empirically McCarthy's (1997) question of how different models of education (i.e. the common good model and the market model) balance accountability to shareholders, consumers, and the general public. In this study, I aim to examine how community members are represented in charter schools, what opportunities community members have for voice, what opportunities they have to access information about charter schools, and who is included in the community and charter school relationship.

The fact that there are distinct differences in the governance of Michigan's public school districts and public charter schools leads one to think that charter school policies affect the school–community relationship. Yet, very little research has examined how different policies that direct different systems of public schools address the issue of community engagement in school outcomes. Competing theories suggest there is both hope and doubt that charter school governance structure can better address the interests and concerns of all citizens affected by public schools. Only through empirical study can

we know how these changes in school governance affect the ability of all citizens to participate in school decisions.

Chapter 3

The Methodology

The study of responsiveness and representation in public school decision-making is largely a study of the relationship between public schools and their communities. The complexity of such a relationship requires a methodology that allows for in-depth examination of respondents' perspectives and behaviors in relation to the public policy that drives this behavior. For this study, therefore, I employ qualitative case-study methodology to examine representation and responsiveness in four charter schools and two district elementary schools that sit within the same urban school district boundaries. My aim is to assess if and how public charter schools are responsive to the communities in which they reside, with a specific focus on the representation of citizens in school decision-making.

A second question this study aims to explore is whether differences in school governance structures among public charter schools affect the responsiveness of school leaders and the representation of citizens in school decision-making. Dahl's (1998) political institutions for democratic representation provide the framework for these analyses. By examining up-close how citizens are represented in charter school decision-making and how charter schools are or are not responsive to the community in which they reside, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of how educational policy affects the school-community relationship.

The Framework and Questions

To begin to answer the two main questions of this study, I turned to Dahl's (1998) conception of political institutions for democratic representation. These are fundamental aspects of democratic governance that have historically been present in the structure of traditional public school districts (Tyack, 1973). Therefore they provide a basis for examining citizen representation in public school decision-making.

I approach the first question of whether public charter schools in Michigan are responsive to a larger community through the lens of democratic representation. Dahl's political institutions for democratic representation, in effect, provide the subset of questions that allow me to examine how citizens are represented in public school decision-making.[4] For the purposes of this study, Dahl's political institutions serve as five dimensions of representation, which I examine through a set of research questions. These dimensions are: 1. The ability of citizens to have a choice in who it is that represents their interests in public school decision-making; 2. the ability of citizens to freely express their opinions, concerns, and interests to public school authorities; 3. the ability of citizens to access information about public school decisions that affect them; 4. the ability of citizens to organize their interests and have their collective interests represented in school decision-making, and; 5. the insurance that all citizens affected by the decisions of the public school are included in the public representation of school decisions. Each of these

[4] Recognizing that public charter schools in Michigan do not conduct public elections, necessitates an alteration to Dahl's criteria of "elected officials" and "free, fair and frequent elections." Although the election process is a cornerstone of representative democracy, it is feasible that public charter schools provide other options for including citizen input into the choice of public representation in public school decision-making. Therefore, a more appropriate measure of representation in public charter school decision-making may be "choice in representation."

dimensions provides a point of examination in determining how citizens are represented in public charter school decision-making and how charter school.

Different respondents provide different perspectives on the representation of community interests. Therefore, another question of this study addresses the varied perceptions of representation among respondents. Data from charter school respondents, district school respondents, and community respondents is examined separately to determine how these different respondents perceive citizen representation in school decision-making. Understanding differences in perceptions across these groups helps to paint a more complete picture of how schools are or are not responsive to a larger community.

The second set of questions in this study addresses how variances in charter school governance might affect public representation in school decision-making. To answer these questions, I examined data across school governance types, while still using Dahl's political institutions as a framework for analysis. The differences in governance types among the charter schools in this study include an elementary charter school that is managed by an educational management organization (EMO), an elementary charter school that converted from 20 years as a private school, and an elementary charter school that is authorized by the local public school district. The fourth charter school in the study is authorized by a state university and is an independently managed secondary school. The research questions and sub-questions of the study are presented in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: Research Questions

1. Are public charter schools responsive to a larger community than the students and parents they directly serve?
    - A. How do governing policies and practices in public charter schools and public district schools (collectively noted below as "schools") promote or inhibit citizen representation based on the five dimensions of representation?
        - i. How do schools engage citizens in school decision-making processes?
        - ii. What communities (neighborhoods, churches, ethnic organizations, etc.) interact with schools on school issues?
        - iii. What opportunities exist for citizens to voice their concerns regarding school decisions, and what is the nature of those opportunities?
        - iv. Who represents community interests in public schools and how are they chosen?
        - v. What information is shared with citizens regarding public schools?
        - vi. How inclusive is representation in public school decision-making?
    - B. How are citizens represented in public school decisions?
        - i. From the perspectives of board members
        - ii. From the perspective of school leaders
        - iii. From the perspective of neighborhood association directors
2. How do differences in public charter school governance affect the school-community relationship?
    - A. How do the dimensions of representation compare across differently-governed public charter schools?
    - B. How do these differences affect the representation of citizens in school decision- making?

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

This study relies on a rich set of qualitative data, triangulated with interviews, observations, and document review. Using a qualitative approach provides the

opportunity to examine the complexities of relationships that help explain how school leaders incorporate the interests of community stakeholders in school decisions, and their reasons for doing so. The triangulation of interviews, observations, and document review allows for a deeper understanding of how school board members serve the public interests in their governing decisions. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) write that triangulation is a "strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to inquiry" (p. 5).

Qualitative research has a long history in sociology as a means of capturing the human experience, or as Denzin and Lincoln say, "the routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 3). They also note that qualitative research attempts to answer questions of "how" and focuses on the processes and relationships that make up the social experience. Quantitative research, on the other hand, focuses on the causal relationship between variables. While quantitative research allows for the generalization of findings due to the ability to look over a large number of cases, qualitative research focuses on a slice of the human experience to provide for a deeper understanding of social issues. Research that aims to understand how policy changes affect the nature of citizen representation in public school decision-making requires a concentrated examination of the school-community relationship. The question this research aims to answer - Are public charter schools responsive to a larger community and if so how? – is best answered through a qualitative study that allows for an in-depth look into the relationships between school leaders and individuals that make up the broader community.

I also chose to use a case-study approach to the study of representation in public school decision-making. Yin (1994) defines case-study research as inquiry that

"investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." The boundaries between public representation and public charter school decision-making are not clearly defined. Charter school policy does not require formal reliance on the will of the electorate, nor does it demand any direct responsibility to a geographic community. The absence of these requirements in the policy may lead some to assume that public representation does not exist in public charter school decision-making. However, to make that assumption would be to lose sight of the variability that such autonomy inevitably creates and the possibility that within that variability are charter school decision-makers who choose, without a mandate, to be responsive to a larger public than the students and parents they directly serve. It is this complexity that requires a more careful, in-depth look at how public representation, responsiveness and responsibility occur in the public charter school context.

Yin (1994) also notes that the blurring of context and phenomenon calls for data collection and analysis strategies that are different than those used in quantitative research designs. For example, Yin writes that cast study inquiry, "copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points" (p.13). In the case of pubic charter school responsiveness, this is very clearly the case. The various perceptions of community alone require a research method that captures the both the multiple definitions and various reasoning of respondents in regard to how they define the school-community relationship. Second, Yin, like Denzin and Lincoln (2000), writes that case study inquiry "relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion" (p.13). The

triangulation allows for a fuller understanding of how, in the case of this study, representation and responsiveness take place in public charter school decision-making. In this study, for example, I make use of interviews, observations, and document review to examine findings, in hopes that there is evidence of agreement across the various sources. Finally, Yin writes that case study inquiry "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (p. 13). Dahl's conceptions of democratic representation, along with Mintrom (2001, 2003) and Smith's (2001) ideas for the democratic potential of charter schools, guide the theoretical propositions on which this study is based.

The design for this research could be considered a single-case, as it examines the relationships that exist within one urban community. However, I have approached this work as a multiple-comparative case-study since I study citizen representation in four public charter schools and compare that representation to representation in two district elementary schools. I also examine to a smaller degree the differences and similarities in representation that exist across three different neighborhoods within the central city.

While qualitative, case-study research provides an opportunity to explore complex experiences and relationships, such as the representation of citizens in school decision-making, this approach has its weaknesses. Because case-study research is focused on a small set of data, the findings from the case are not generalizable; what may be true for communities in one city may not be true for communities across cities. By examining data from several different schools and using a comparison set of schools, I can see if similar findings are found across schools and in that way strengthen the usefulness of the study's findings. However, the data set is too small to claim that findings from this study

are likely to be universal. At most, these findings indicate potential opportunities or challenges in representation that can occur as a result of autonomous public charter school policy in Michigan. These findings also may "test" the theoretical propositions of Dahl (1998), Smith (2001), and Mintrom (2001).

Sample Selection

This study takes place within the geographic boundaries of one urban school district in Michigan. Michigan is one of the nation's leaders in developing public charter schools, and Michigan's 10-year experiment with public charter school policy provides a solid base for understanding how such policy may affect the school-community relationship, specifically the representation of community in school decision-making. In order to limit the confounding variables that potentially could exist with a set of schools across cities, I chose to focus my study on the school-community relationship within one urban school district. However, since I am also studying the variances in representation and responsiveness that might occur across different types of public charter schools, the schools in the study span the city's neighborhoods. The term "broader community" in this study means the citizens who reside within the boundaries of the local neighborhood public school. Respondents and sites for this study were selected based on their ability to present evidence of representation and responsiveness of public charter schools across different types of schools and within the local neighborhoods. Below is a description of how the schools and respondents were selected.

My goal in selecting public charter schools was to create a data set that would allow me to see how school leaders in various types of charter schools approach public representation and more broadly engage in the school-community relations. Because I

limited my study to the confines of one urban district, I needed to find enough public charter schools with enough variance to provide a good, comparative data set. To that end, I chose to include three elementary charter schools, one secondary charter school, and two district elementary schools.

The secondary charter school is included in the study because its mission speaks directly to the question of community representation in school decision-making. Examining the secondary school also provides an opportunity to see how a secondary school that aims to provide a comprehensive school experience may be different in its interaction with community than a charter elementary school. The school serves students in grades 7-12.

Like the majority of public charter schools in the nation, the remaining schools in my study are elementary schools, each with a varying characteristic that may affect how the school is managed and ultimately governed. The second school in the study is a K-6 elementary school that is located in an old Catholic school building, still owned by the Catholic Church. The school aims to develop an innovative curriculum based on the work of Reggio Emilia and to share that curriculum with other educators. This school also was chosen because it is the one school in the city that is chartered by the local public school district, a fact that could create a closer connection between the district's charter and the local community.

A third charter school was chosen because it is the only school in the city that converted from a private school to a charter school. The school's playground borders the playground of the neighborhood district elementary school, which sits directly below the hill from the charter school. The charter school has been in the neighborhood for 30

years, maintaining the same administration and mission it has had for its 20 years as a private school. The school serves students in grades K-6.

The fourth school is the only charter school in the study that serves a primarily inner city African American population. It also is the only charter in the study managed by an education management organization (EMO). The EMO oversees the principal, teachers, and school staff, the general operations of the school, including instruction, accounting, maintenance and custodial work. The curriculum is designed by the school staff, with the support of EMO consultants, and professional development of educators is provided by the EMO. The EMO representative reports to the charter school board.

I chose two district elementary schools for the study based on their proximity to the charter schools in the study. The first elementary school in the study also serves the city's inner city African American population and provides a direct comparison to its charter school counterpart. The second district school in the study borders another charter school in the study, literally sitting down the hill from the private-conversion charter school.

The respondents in this study were chosen for both their leadership roles in addressing issues of representation and responsiveness and their knowledge of these issues within the school-community context. Two school board members from each school were asked to participate in the study. In the case of the district schools, I interviewed two of the districts' school board members, who represented both of the district schools in the study. In each case, I interviewed the schools' board presidents and another board member based on the board member's availability. Including school board

members as respondents in this study was crucial to examining issues of representation and responsiveness.

Another set of respondents was made up of school administrators from each school in the study. In the case of two of the charter schools, I interviewed an administrative team consisting of a principal-like administrator in charge of instructional leadership and a superintendent-like administrator in charge of overall operations. Two of the charter schools only have one administrator. The district schools also have only one administrator, the school principal. Since this study is school-based and not district-based, I chose not to interview the urban school district superintendent. Interview data from the district superintendent would likely include reflection of a district-wide perspective, which could confound the focus of this study.

Finally, in order to capture the perspective of the citizens in the neighboring communities, I interviewed three neighborhood association directors who represented the communities in which the schools in this study reside. Each of these directors is a paid employee of the city, and each has the task of working within the neighborhood to address citizen concerns regarding public services in the neighborhood. Putnam's work on civic engagement (1993) identifies neighborhood associations as organizations of civic engagement. Interviewing the directors of the neighborhood associations was the most systematic approach to gathering citizen input.

Data Collection Strategies

Data collection for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews with 22 respondents, observations of a public school board meeting for each of the five school boards in the study, and a review of approximately 20 documents related to the

representation of the public in public school decision-making. The triangulation of data provided an opportunity to more fully understand findings and to see whether findings were consistent across data sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Yin, 1994). Data collection occurred over approximately four months, from August to November, 2004.

The semi-structured interviews with respondents lasted about an hour to an hour and a half. These respondents consisted of three neighborhood association directors, and nine charter school board members, including a third board member from the Reggio Emilia school who presented a particularly interesting relationship between the charter school and the private Catholic college that spurred the development of the school. I also interviewed six charter school administrators, two district school administrators, two district board members, and three neighborhood association directors. Interviews were guided by a list of questions relating to citizen representation in school decision-making, and specifically related to the dimensions of representation that were based on Dahl's political institutions. Questions related to these dimensions included:

1. How are citizens represented in school decision-making? (Associational Autonomy, Inclusive Representation)

2. How do citizens express their interests or concerns in school decisions? (Freedom of Expression)

3. What information do citizens have access to regarding the school? How do citizens in the neighborhood access this information? (Freedom of Information)

4. Who represents neighborhood citizens in school decisions, and how are representatives chosen? (Choice in Representation)

5. Describe the school's relationship with the community in which it resides? How does the school interact with the local community? (Inclusive Representation)

7. How do the differences in policies regarding the electorate affect the nature of the community-school relationship, the nature of citizen representation in public school decision-making? (Choice in Representation, Associational Autonomy)

8. Who does this school serve? Who is represented in school decisions? (Inclusive representation)

I also asked each of the respondents to visually describe the school's relationship to its host community, including those relationships they deem as obligatory, those they see as responsive but voluntary, and those relationships they perceive as ancillary. These visual depictions created an opportunity for respondents to brainstorm. The exercise also provided an opportunity to revisit issues of representation and responsiveness using a different format than question and answer. All of the interviews were audio taped and professionally transcribed to provide the most accurate record of the interview.

In addition to the interviews, I observed a public board meeting for each of the schools. The sample of meetings I observed was a convenience sample. Meetings were chosen based on my ability to attend during the time-frame of the research project. In the case of the school district, I attended the district board meeting. Again the fact that the district board meeting is district focused presents some difficulties for comparison, but the observation of the district board meeting was important because in the case of the district, the avenue for representation in large part is through the district school board. Michigan policy stipulates that all public schools, district and charter, must conduct

monthly open public meetings. This is one of the few requirements in the Revised School Code that directly underscores the responsibility public charter schools have to the broader public. The Open Meetings Act requirements in the Revised School Code aims to insure that citizens have access to the school decision-making process and the authority that conducts that process. Observing how these meetings are conducted is important to understanding issues of representation and responsiveness in school decision-making.

For each board meeting, I arrived about 10 minutes early and stayed for the duration of the meeting. At each meeting, I asked for or was given the meeting packet, including the agenda and other documents to be discussed. I also took notes on the number of people present at the board meeting, who those people were in relation to the school or the community (where possible), the interactions between the board members and the school administrators and or staff, and interactions between the school board members and community members. I also noted the types of issues discussed, any tensions that arose in the meeting, and any discussions directly related to the representation of public interests. I also kept descriptive notes of the accessibility to the buildings, the arrangement of the board rooms, and any other environmental aspect that may have been relevant to the study.

I also collected documents related to issues of representation and responsiveness. I examined Michigan charter school policy as written in the Michigan Revised School Code. As part of my assessment of the free flow of information in these schools, I also asked school respondents for information that reflects how the school represents or responds to the community in which it resides. I relied on the respondents to provide information to me. What I received varied, but the documents included board by-laws,

school fliers, brochures, newsletters, and in the case of the secondary school, the school handbook. I also collected board meeting minutes, agendas and various materials from my board meeting observations. In addition, I retrieved annual reports on all of the schools on-line, either through the school's Web site or through the charter school authorizer's Web site. The information I collected from the Web sites allowed me to better understand the flow of information from the school to the community in which it resides. Finally, I conducted a newspaper review of all articles that were published in the city's major newspaper, regarding the four public charter schools. An overview of the data I collected from respondents is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Overview of Data Collection

Interviews	Observations	Documents
Charter Schools:		
• SCA: 2 Administrators 2 Board Members	1 Board Meeting	Board By-laws, meeting minutes, school handbook, news articles, school newsletter, annual report
• REA: 1 Administrator 3 Board Members 1 District Liaison	1 Board Meeting	Board By-laws, meeting minutes, school newsletter, news articles, annual report, letters of agreement
• ICA: 1 Administrator 2 Board Members	1 Board Meeting	Meeting minutes, enrollment update, annual report, news articles, brochure
• CA: 2 Administrators 2 Board Members	1 Board Meeting	Board By-laws, Meeting minutes, financial update, brochure, newsletter, annual report
District Schools: 2 Board Members • ICE: 1 Principal • SEE: 1 Principal	1 Board Meeting	Meeting minutes, financial update, newsletters, committee reports (in board packet), annual report
Community:		
• DNA: 1 Director		Brochure
• SNA: 1 Director		Brochure
• SWNA: 1 Director		Brochure

Data Analysis Strategies

To analyze the data in the study, I used the dimensions of representation based on Dahl's political institutions of modern representative democracy. Mintrom's (2001) and Smith's (2001) theories related to the democratic potential of charter schools are also considered in the analysis. In particular, Smith's work that suggests charter schools may serve as associational democracies for the under-represented is related to Dahl's notion of associational autonomy, which requires an opportunity for citizens who are under-represented to find representation through organization or association with others. All of the data was coded, using color highlighting, according to the dimensions of representation. The data also was analyzed according to respondent type: charter school respondents, district respondents, and community respondents. Data also was analyzed according to the four types of public charter schools in the study: the district charter, the private conversion charter, the EMO charter, and the secondary charter.

My first analysis of the data was as one large data set. I examined all transcripts, observations and documents for evidence related to the five dimensions of representation. I also examined the visual depictions of representation that the respondents provided to see what comparisons and contrasts could be made and how this data supported or did not support findings from the interviews, observations, and other documents. I also read through the newspaper articles, taking note of issues related to charter school governance and the charter schools' relationship with the surrounding community.

Once that work was done, I broke the data down into respondent type. Doing this allowed me first to see comparisons and contrasts that existed within the different types of charter schools. School missions and board make-up emerged as items of importance,

and these pieces were further investigated to see how they affected the nature of representation in school decision-making. I analyzed data from the newspaper articles for information that either supported or contrasted evidence from the other sources.

I then examined the data for comparisons and contrasts of charter schools against district schools. Again I looked at school missions, board make-up, and similarities and differences in school leadership and how administrators interact with their host communities. I also compared the meeting observations of charter schools and the district board, as well as the information flow from school to community in both sets of schools. Newspaper accounts also provided insight into the relationship between the public charter schools and the public school district. This evidence was highlighted and examined in accordance with evidence from the other sources. All of this data was considered in light of Michigan's policies that direct the public governance of public charter schools and public school districts.

Limitations of the Study

Michigan's decade-long charter school policy allows for an examination of how charter school leaders establish relationships with the larger communities in which they reside, including how charter school leaders represent citizens from these communities in charter school decision-making. However, cultures, ideologies, and civic practices vary across communities (Putnam, 1993) so it is likely that the findings from the study will present an indication of effects of the different dimensions of participation on actual participation, but they will not tell the whole story. As Yin (1994) notes, case-study findings can inform theoretical propositions but because of the small data set, these findings cannot be generalized across cities or states.

Another limitation of this study has to do with the nature of a school district versus the nature of a public charter school. Where possible, I made an effort to compare public charter school data to district school data, but in the case of the board observations, the public charter school board meeting, which focuses on one school, was compared to the public district board meeting, which focuses on the entire school district. This difference may be reflected in the scope of the information covered at a board meeting as well as the number of citizens who participate in school board meetings. However, I saw little difference in the nature of the data I was collecting to inform citizens' ability to access information, opportunities for expression, opportunities for associational autonomy, and the inclusiveness of representation. For the analyses of these dimensions, I believe the comparison between the charter and district boards served its purpose.

Chapter 4

Close-Up: A Look at community representation in four charter schools

Elmore (1983) notes that when regulatory policies are decreased, variability in practice increases. His observation is certainly applicable to the missions of public schools. The regulations that drive public school districts to be accountable to all students and citizens in their geographic areas lead to similar missions and similar practice in meeting the scope of those multiple needs and interests. Theoretically, public school academies, free of some of the regulations district schools face, are able to create specific programs based on varying missions. One of the fundamental goals of the charter school movement is to use autonomy from regulation to create and experiment with new concepts and practices in education. As a result, the four public charter schools in this study have varying missions, governance structures, and board make-ups that lead to variability in the way school leaders interact with the local community.

This chapter presents a look at the school-community relationships in these four schools through interviews with school administrators and board members, board meeting observations, and document review. In addition to an examination of the four charter schools, the study includes a look at two district elementary schools and their relationship to the local community. The stories that follow reflect how differences in missions, board make-up and governance structures affect how each school addresses issues of representation, including choice of representation, freedom of information, freedom of expression, associational representation, and inclusive representation.

Secondary Charter Academy (SCA)[5]

SCA started in 1997 as a result of a group of parents who attempted to use their political voice to make changes for their school, but became so frustrated by their lack of power over the bureaucratic urban district and the district's superintendent, that they took advantage of Michigan's charter school policy to begin their own school. One of the guiding forces behind the founding board's interest in starting a charter school was that there were very few options for middle school students in the city. Only one secondary school in the district provided a small setting for middle school students, and that school was a gifted and talented school that required students to have a history of high academic achievement. As a result, founders reported that parents of middle school students would opt to leave the city in favor of smaller middle schools elsewhere in the area. Bethany, SCA's administrator, reported: "(The founders) had a desire to keep those families in the city so that we could have a more diverse and healthier downtown population. So that was really the big picture – kind of a community based goal for starting the school." The school's student population is 43 percent African American, 38 percent White, 14 percent Hispanic, 4 percent American Indian, and 2 percent Asian.[6]

The exodus of families from the downtown area, the lack of opportunities for secondary students to have a small urban school, and the underutilization of public downtown services and organizations underlie the mission of the SCA. SCA's Handbook reads:

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[5] The names of the schools, the city in which the schools reside, the respondents and other identifying references have been changed to protect the identity of the study's respondents.

[6] Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2002-2003.

> "The mission of (SCA) is to equip all of its students with the necessary skills and experiences which will empower them to be positive and productive citizens of a global community in the twenty-first century, while fostering an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the contributions of all people to our world" (Student / Family Handbook, 2003-2004, p. 14).

The Handbook further explains the school's efforts to instill a sense of the broader community by utilizing "community resources in downtown, exposing the students to a variety of experiences outside of the school facility, and giving them an appreciation for the value of their community and of individuals as members of this community" (p.15).

The school's first building was rented from a developer who was developing a downtown children's mall. The school had a portion of the mall for its school. The relationship between the developer and the school board soured as disagreements over who owed what ensued. Newspaper accounts indicate that the developer was claiming that the school was not paying its utility bills and the school board was claiming the developer was attempting to have the school pay for utilities they were not using. Newspaper articles also document reports of the developer keeping SCA students from eating lunch in the mall or frequenting the mall's premises during lunch hours. At one point, the developer turned the heat off on the school while students were still in session. The school board voted to leave the building, and found a new home in an independent building across from a downtown hospital.[7]

SCA's new school is a large space with partial walls separating classrooms. High school students are at one end of the building and middle school students are at the other.

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[7] River City Press, 1997-1999.

There is no gymnasium, but the school has a champion basketball team. The school uses the Y as its gymnasium, just as it uses the city's public library as its school library. The SCA, by design, is located downtown, close to the public library, public museums, the YWCA, the YMCA, and a neighborhood of historic homes, which provide a dual opportunity to meet the needs of students and the organizations themselves. The use of existing organizations and services for high school students was one innovation the school's educators and board members were hoping to test with the charter school. Barbara, the president of SCA's school board put it this way:

> "In our vision, we didn't have to duplicate things that already existed. You have resources downtown like the Y and the (theater) which are tremendously under-utilized during the weekdays. I mean kids aren't available and most adults aren't able to utilize them....By the same token, we do not provide busing, but we cut a deal with the (public) bus system to provide low-cost bus tickets for our kids. Now the kids had to buy the tickets, which is why we really worked hard to get the cost as low as we could for most of our families. But it was also giving revenue to a struggling public transportation system.... So we had a lot of reasons we did what we did."

Associational Autonomy

The autonomy of the school's board allows for program innovation, and SCA respondents say it is that innovation that allows them to meet the needs of the students who are not well-served by the large district secondary schools. Those students, said

Barbara, are either at the high end of the academic spectrum and are bored in the traditional classroom or at the low end and struggling academically.

> "I know when charters first started the battle cry was 'Oh, they're going to skim off all the best students.' Wrong. Think about this. If your child is doing well, they're happy, they're not having any problems, they're happy socially. They're not going to leave. You're going to have the students who are unhappy socially for some reasons or whose parents are unhappy with the social climate. You're going to have students who are struggling educationally, and you're going to have students who are not being challenged educationally. That's who you get. Both ends. You don't get a lot in the middle. So those are the kids we serve."

One of SCA's founding aims was to provide more city students with the option of a small secondary school in part to keep city residents from leaving the downtown area. School board members see the school as a way to increase the opportunity of students who reside in the city. As Barbara stated:

> "(The traditional district) has a selection process that has been blessed by the State, apparently, for (its select school). But charters are under such tight scrutiny that we couldn't even do the kinds of things that school does. And that's fine. But we still provide a rigorous curriculum....So our teachers are really challenged to provide for the students who come to us with a 3rd or 4th grade reading level but also to challenge the high functioning student. And all in the same classroom."

Representation of community groups in SCA decision-making is less than what might be expected in a system that requires school administrators to be responsive to

voters, or in an urban district that is under constant scrutiny through local media. However, SCA respondents note that school leaders make it a point to have input from community organizations regarding their school board nominations. The SCA board makes it a practice of soliciting names of potential board members from local community leadership organizations and the school's partnering organizations, such as the downtown YMCA, the public library, and the local theaters. That input, said SCA respondents, is an important part of their mission, which is in part to contribute to a healthy downtown environment.

SCA maintains its autonomy as an independently governed and independently managed public school. Its authorizer is a state university, and a representative from the university attends the school's board meetings. SCA does not contract with an education management organization (EMO). Board President Barbara said a contract with an EMO would take away the school's ability to build the program they want to build and meet the local needs of their students. "We don't want a management company because it's our belief that he who controls the curriculum controls the purse strings – and the bottom line. That may be well and good but we have a vision and a curriculum that we want to have, and we don't want that changed – because that's the whole reason we went to all these lengths (to charter a school)." SCA administrators echoed Barbara's statement, saying they want to set the curriculum according to the mission of the school and not the demands of the EMO.

Choice of Representation

Unlike school district boards that are elected by a majority of the electorate within the school district, SCA board members, like all of the public charter school boards in

Michigan, are appointed. In the case of this school, as well as the other public charter schools in the study, the sitting board nominates a candidate for office and submits the nomination to the charter school authorizer. The authorizer reviews the nomination and approves or rejects the nomination. In the history of SCA, the authorizer has never disapproved of SCA's board nominations. As Bethany, the school administrator noted: "The current board members do a pretty thorough screening process, and they have a pretty good idea of what specific skills they're looking for." The public charter school authorizers are the only outside body to review board nominations. Over the years there have been some changes to the way the authorizers approach the nomination process. Board President Barbara reported that the university authorizer used to require only one nomination from charter school boards, but now, as a result of public scrutiny over some public school academy board nominations in other parts of the state, the university requires two nominations. Barbara noted that the extra nomination gives the authorizer an option in case one of the nominees does not meet the authorizers' criteria. Even so, Barbara said SCA has never been denied its first choice nominee.

The sitting board strives for diversity and community representation on the board. Board members and administrators report that community representation on the SCA board is important to fulfilling the mission of the school as a downtown school. Board members solicit suggestions for board candidates from the organizations they aim to represent in the downtown area, including leadership training organizations. Like other public charter school boards, parents of enrolled students are encouraged to serve as board trustees, but Bethany reported that at no time during the school's history were there more than two parents on the board. SCA also requires at least one educator, who is not

an employee of the school, to be a part of the school's board, and looks to community leaders to fill board openings. According to the authorizer's policy that regulates the nomination of SCA board members to protect against conflict of interests. For example, SCA board candidates may not be employed by the school or employed by an organization that contracts with the school; board candidates also may not be officers of an organization that contracts with the academy, or employees or officers of the authorizing entity.

Public charter schools in Michigan do not depend on the will of the electorate for school decision-making; therefore, said board member Kathleen, charter school board members consider different interests than those represented in traditional public school district decisions. Charter school board members focus on issues of the school, not the broader community. Board President Barbara said the appointment of school board members by a sitting board allows the school to bring in leaders who are focused on the needs of the individual school and not the "special interests" that may have served to get them elected.

> "I'm well aware that public school supporters make a big hue and cry over how these board members get elected. Well, frankly, I know some of the board members who've been elected (to the city school board). I know how dysfunctional the city public school board was because you have special interest groups who will get a candidate elected to the school board who has a real agenda of their own, which is not always the agenda most school board members want to follow....At least (in charter schools) you get people who are still trying to get to the same place. To me that's a better thing."

Voting in public charter schools, said the board president, happens "with the feet." "It's much easier at a charter school for parents (to deal with discontent). If they don't like it, they can walk." The population who "vote" in a charter school, then, is limited to the parents and students who choose to attend or not attend.

Board members report that citizen voice, or the voice of those who do not have students in the school, is seldom heard. SCA respondents attribute the lack of voice to citizen disinterest. SCA board members and administrators noted that citizens may contact the school administrators or attend school board meetings if there is an issue, and SCA respondents say few citizens have done either.

Freedom of Information

SCA attempts to communicate with the community through school newsletters that are placed in neighborhood businesses and organizations. The newsletters also go home to parents of students enrolled in the school, and school partners. As SCA's Administrator Bethany explained: "It goes to parents, it goes to students, it goes to board members, former board members, and then representatives of community (organizations)....that includes basically friends of the school and people who are continuing to be interested in what we're doing. And if somebody asked, we'd add them to the list. We wouldn't have any reason not to."

Very few community members attend SCA board meetings. Said Bethany: "For the most part I think often when things are going smoothly – I mean in my experience serving on a number of boards in this community, the only time people came out was when there was an issue or a problem."

The media coverage of the school also died down once the school found its new home. When the school was embroiled in conflict with its first landlord, Board President Barbara said the school had "more media than they ever wanted to see." "We were fighting the media about every day it seemed like. But it was good and bad." She noted a story about how a media broadcast of an emergency board meeting, which she had hoped to keep "under the radar," helped the school and students.

> "We just didn't want any more publicity. It had been such a zoo. So we had to call an emergency board meeting because she couldn't authorize a $20,000 expenditure on our treasurer's word. So we faxed from here a notice of a special meeting. And (we) took off for the meeting five minutes later....We followed the (news) truck up to the building. But we authorized the expenditure and when the treasurer finally called (the vendor) about 9 a.m. and said' we're good to go. How soon can you get started?' (The vendor) said, 'we're already on it. I saw you on the news this morning and I saw you authorized the expenditure so I sent the guys over this morning at 7:30.' And so the media, as much as you don't want it, sometimes it works out to your benefit."

Since moving into a new space with a new landlord, however, the school has seen little of the media at its board meetings. Bethany reported that she sends the media notices of the board meetings and the agendas in advance of the meeting to the newspaper, but the reporter does not attend the meetings.

Freedom of Expression

Citizens who wish to address the SCA school board may do so in the open meetings portion of the public board meeting, but respondents say in the seven years

since the school has been founded, citizens have not attended the school's board meetings. Noted Barbara, SCA's board president: "Even with all the hassles that were going on with (our former landlord), we never had anybody but the media show up. Frankly, I don't think, in my opinion, most people who don't have a connection with the school system don't really show up at public meetings. " Barbara reported that a few of the neighbors visited the school when it moved into its new location to find out about the school, and some of the nearby businesses sent flowers to welcome the school to the neighborhood, but no one from the broader community has come to a school board meeting. Bethany and Krista, the school's administrators, noted that they are likely the first peoplee for neighbors or residents to approach with an issue, but they said they have received few calls from people outside of the school.

The SCA board meeting I attended was formal and professional, although staff and board members were friendly and offered to answer any questions I had. The meeting was fairly routine. Below are notes from the board observation:

> *SCA's board meeting was conducted in a small conference room in the school's office area. SCA is easily accessible, as it sits on the corner of two main streets just south of the downtown area. As I approached the door from the outside, a woman on the inside greeted, opening the door for me. It was not clear to me whether the door was locked as it had been opened for me before I approached it. Five board members were in attendance and sat at the main conference table with the school's lead administrator, who serves as the school's superintendent and general counsel. At a second table were the school principal – or learning facilitator – the school accountant, the representative from the authorizing*

university, and myself. The president ran the meeting and the superintendent provided input when asked or where explanations were needed. The meeting followed the agenda with relatively routine information and action items. The board went into closed session for the purpose of discussing the sale of property after the open meetings portion of the meeting was completed. The learning facilitator took that time to give me a tour of the building. By the time we were done with the tour, the board was out of closed session and had adjourned.

There was nothing about the board meeting that seemed to limit freedom of expression if anyone were there to express a concern. Board members seemed open and friendly and willing to answer questions.

Inclusive Representation

The mission of SCA reflects a desire to serve a diverse student body. As the mission states, the school aims to foster "an understanding of, and an appreciation for, contributions of all people to our world" (p. 15). "We wanted a social and racial mixture in our student body," reported the board president, who is a founding member of the board. The desire to have a diverse student body is coupled with the board's desire to have a diverse group of staff and school trustees who represented "a variety of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds."

SCA has a resource room and resource teacher for special needs children. In addition, the school contracts with the city school district for special education services for SCA students. However, the school's educational facilitator, Krista, indicated that there are times when the charter school does not have the resources to meet the special

needs of all students. Some students who have come to SCA, she said, are better served enrolling in a district school.

In terms of formal representation of citizens in SCA school decision-making, SCA respondents noted that members of the community are welcome to serve on the school's governing board. That service depends upon the approval and nomination by the sitting SCA board. Yet, SCA leaders see responsiveness to the broader community less in formal democratic terms and more as being connected to the community through the downtown organizations and neighborhood associations. Administrator Bethany noted that SCA sits on the border of two neighborhood associations. She said she sees relationships to community organizations as vital for the education of the child. School and community, she said, cannot be separate entities. She noted that SCA partners with community organizations to meet neighborhood needs. She said the YWCA works with girls who are at risk of domestic violence, and a local business partner that has been working to help people living in welfare become self-sufficient is working with the school to build a curriculum that addresses the needs of that population. Said Bethany:

> "So we try and introduce ourselves to different community organizations and businesses in town and figure out where our missions are overlapping. And we try and develop partnering relationships. And I think the more you open your door up to (community) and say come on in, here's what we're doing, show us how you might be able to work in cooperation with us toward that goal, I think that gives you a lot of legitimacy because you're not holed off someplace where people don't have access."

REA

Unlike SCA, Reggio Emilia Academy (REA) emerged not from parent dissatisfaction with the current administration, but out of a desire by parents of preschool children to continue the pedagogy their children were experiencing in pre-school well into the elementary years. The early child-care education program is based in the pedagogical theory of Reggio Emilia, and was run by a private Catholic college in the city for several years. About five years ago, a number of parents whose children would soon be leaving the preschool program for elementary school approached the program's director with hopes of starting a public charter elementary school that could continue the Reggio Emilia approach in elementary education. The school is developed around the idea of open communication and relationships. The mission of REA is "to continuously expand the potential of each child within the diverse community of (the city)" (REA 2003-2004 Annual Report). The student population of REA is 43 percent White, 23 percent Hispanic, 19 percent African American, 10 percent American Indian, and 3 percent Asian. Eighty-one percent of REA's students for the 2002-2003 school year were eligible for free and reduced lunch.[8]

The concept of "community" is written into REA's mission, and respondents reported that the neighborhood surrounding the school is an important part of that community. Principal Karen put it this way:

> "A cornerstone of this philosophy is that you're a part of the community in which you do your daily work – in which you live. This is your community and you're not an island, you're part of it. So it's really important that we develop those

[8] Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2002-2003.

relationships, and quite often that's not the case with communities and schools. Children and our image of children is that they need to be connected to their world. And the community has the right and responsibility to build a school. It's not separate."

Data from REA indicate, however, that so far "community' in the school relates to organizations that provide a learning opportunity for students, and not necessarily the citizens or residents of the surrounding community. Up to this point, REA respondents indicated that the activities of the school, including the school's "resource raising events" have been by invitation only, in part to develop more fruitful relationships. Respondents did say that it is the goal of REA to establish stronger relationships in the community with both organizations and neighbors, and REA would like to expand its outreach to the educational community, sharing its practice and pedagogy. To the disappointment of the district liaison, that sharing has not yet happened. She said part of the difficulty in disseminating REA's practice has been getting district staff to "get over" their tensions with public charter schools. Principal Karen also noted that she has not pushed those relationships yet because she wants to have the program in place and tested before inviting others to observe. "We're almost ready," she said.

Associational Autonomy

With urging from parents and staff of the preschool program, the Catholic college's dean developed the idea of a public elementary school charter using the Reggio Emilia approach. Board Member Mike, the CFO of the college and REA board treasurer, reported that the college president approved the idea, but wanted to make sure the school was developed in collaboration with the public school district. The college's interest in

partnering with the public school district, he said, was to provide a public school that would enhance the district's offerings and serve as an incubating ground for developing innovative teaching techniques for district educators, and the college saw the public charter school as having the autonomy to develop an innovative program that could be shared with the district schools. Board Member Kate put it this way:

> " We don't talk about being a charter, we talk about being a Reggio school. That's how we define ourselves. So the chartering was more of a means to an end than really a whole lot of our identity. But I would say our implicit understanding of being a charter - the reason we think that there should be charters is because they are experiments in education that the broader community can learn from. And I think that was some of the stated purposes for charters being developed. I don't think that's necessarily been realized very often. And I think that we see with this school that we have a potential for realizing some of that purpose of charter schools. It's not just to provide an alternative to the public schools; it's to provide a different way of doing education and seeing what you can learn about it. And when we talk about where we want to go in the future , that's one of the things that drives us."

Karen made a similar statement, saying her attraction to the school had more to do with the freedom to develop a curriculum using pedagogy she believed in rather than the development of a public charter school. "The idea of being able to be free of the larger bureaucracy to do just this (pedagogy) was what drew me here. I was never interested in starting a charter school. I'm a public school proponent personally. So anything for profit

or just for the sake of having a school closer to somebody's home, or any other reason wouldn't have interested me."

Karen noted that the mission of REA is to use its autonomy to be a lab school for area college education students and to be a model of school reform for the public school district.

> "The (district) superintendent has been out here a couple of times and he sees us as an incubation place. And we're finally getting ready to have visitors. You know you have to build the infrastructure and get set, but (now) we're at a place where we're saying bring 'em on. We'll continue to improve, but we're ready to have people see how we put the theory into practice. And that is our hope and our very basic reason for being is that this will spread."

Like SCA, REA opted not to hire a management company, although Karen noted that the Catholic college provides some of the same services that a management company would provide, such as accounting and bookkeeping. REA also contracts with the college to provide a curriculum and teaching consultant who is a specialist in the Reggio Emilia approach. The "pedogista" has a very close relationship with the principal, the faculty, and the board. The pedogista attends board meetings and participates in board discussions. Even so, said Principal Karen, the college's interest in REA is to support the board's vision for a Reggio Emilia elementary school. A management company, however, might curtail the autonomy of the school and its mission. Said Karen:

> "The last thing the school would do would be to hand that over to some management company or (the private college). That is the professionals' job here. We would never give control of that curriculum or how we do business to any

other management company because the sole purpose for starting the school was to implement this philosophy,"

Choice in Representation

Like other public charter schools in the study, the REA board nominates potential board members and votes on those nominations, presenting its choice(s) to the authorizer for approval. Like the university authorizers in the study, the public school district board approves the nominations of the REA board and has the responsibility for overseeing REA. Unlike the other authorizers in the study, the public school district is governed by an elected board, which might create a more direct link of representation of REA governance to the district electorate. However, evidence suggests the public school district board has little to do with the appointment of REA board members. The district does appoint a liaison to monitor the activities of and governance of REA, and the liaison has the responsibility of reporting back to the district board, but as Board Member Kate mentions: "(The board appointment) is pretty much our decision, although it has to be approved by the (district) board. They've really, as far as I know, they really don't seem to question. This is a blip in their screen, I think." Kate said that the district liaison also is responsible for presenting REA's budget to the district board for approval, but it appears the district board keeps a hands-off approach to REA.

The REA board nominates potential board members based on their credentials, their interest in the school and the skills they bring to the table. REA's by-laws require that at least one parent of an enrolled student sit on the board of directors as well as at least one professional educator. The by-laws note that no employees of the public school academy or the public school district that charters the school may occupy a seat on the

board. The limitations do not address conflict of interest issues with other entities, however, that are specifically mentioned in Michigan's Revised School Code, such as affiliations or contracts with religious organizations. Although the board treasurer noted that his work with the school is on a volunteer basis, SCA does have a contract with the college's pedogista, and SCA leases its building from the neighborhood Catholic church. The lease is actually run through the Catholic college, because "the church did not want to rent to a charter school." Beyond the limitations, the by-laws also state that board member qualifications shall include:

> "(a) an interest in children and their education; (b) enthusiasm for the public school academy and conviction of its purpose; (c) willingness to give time and energy to the public school academy; (d) special skills to address specific management and needs of the public school academy; (e) ability to represent the community and interpret community needs and views; (f) willingness to accept and support decisions democratically made; and (g) ability to represent the public school academy to the community." (REA By-Laws, p. 2).

There is no requirement for choosing board members based how they might represent the broader community interest.

The practice of finding board members is that the board turns first to parents of students enrolled. Board Member Mike reported: "Parents are a high priority. We also want someone interested in Reggio, and then in public education in general. And then another criteria would be someone that would be interested and have expertise in a particular area such as marketing, finance, or education." REA district liaison said the difference between board members in the district and REA board members is that REA

board members' interest is with the individual school. "The (district) board is obviously interested in the whole system. But I see the charter board as much more involved with the actual kids. The board is able to focus on this one school and what it needs."

REA' s founding board was tightly tied to the Catholic college that spearheaded the charter. The school was begun under the guidance and support of the college, and several of the school's initial board members were employees of the college. A college faculty member, who serves as a paid education consultant to the program, often participates freely in discussions of the board. Kate acknowledged the challenge in developing a public board out of the private college's charter school initiative.

> "It's interesting being a part of a founding board, particularly when the roots of this were so much around (the private Catholic college). So that (the college) had really formed this board. I was really the only outsider in terms of not having been associated with the college (or the school). I didn't have a child in school; I wasn't a staff member at (the college). So it was very much (the college's) project. And a lot of even the beginning decisions were very much (the college's) decisions. And our treasurer is still the financial person from (the college), although he manages to get clearance."

Kate said, however, the board has grown into its own entity and relies less and less on the college for decision-making.

> "I think what's happened in the last several years is a really kind of growing understanding that we are the people who are responsible for this. It isn't what (the college) tells us, it's what we are responsible for. So even with all of the

connections and support that's there – which is very valuable – we also know that when it would come down to it, (the college) has no legal responsibility or rights."

The board of the REA comprise parents or former parents of either the public charter school students, or students who were in the affiliated early childhood program. Board members also include the founding private college employees, and Kate, a local community college associate dean. REA also has a public school district liaison who attends board meetings and provides information to the REA board about district initiatives and reports back to the district board about issues related to REA.

Kate said part of the board's responsibility is to represent community, but more broadly than through direct representation. "I think we represent the community in some basic ways around fiduciary responsibility. I think we feel a responsibility for this experiment and what it is that the various communities can learn from this and how do we make sure that happens." Board President Kristin was a little more concrete in making the ties to the broader community:

> "First and foremost in my mind the school serves its students and the students' families. However, it's a very common theme in our board meetings that we are a public school. That not only are we serving our student body and the families, but we are also working on the relationships within our immediate community and within the broader community. So we have a representative from (the district) who is invited to our board meetings and typically is there. We've had the superintendent (from the district) at our meeting once since he's been hired. We do see our role as being part of the larger community."

She also noted that the role of an REA board member is to represent the public in the expenditure of public funds.

REA's principal made the point, however, that the school's legitimacy as a public charter school comes not from the direct representation of citizens, but from its accountability to state and Federal regulations. She explained:

> "We have to adhere to all the rules of the Department of Education in the State of Michigan. So we're considered a district. The difference is we have one little school building and 200 children compared to all their school buildings and their thousands of children. But we have all the same rules, we have all the same reports, the same pupil accounting, the same student counting, the same audits, the same rules for special education. All of those state rules and federal laws apply to this school."

Unlike traditional public school districts in Michigan, however, the school is governed by a self-appointed board, made up of members who are very close to the work of the school. This difference is what allows REA to focus on its program. As Board Member Mike explained:

> "When you look at (the district) board member, they're elected and ours are appointed. I think what we have is our board is focused on the school and on the services that are provided, the academic programming. So there's no political agenda, if you will. It's Reggio Emilia inspired and that's what the focus is. The focus is really on the school and the support we provide (the principal)."

However, data from REA indicate that the lack of community representation on the school's board may result in decision-making that does not consider the public needs

of public schooling. At the board meeting I attended, for example, the board decided to further delay the implementation of an elevator to make the second story accessible based on the needs of the school and not the needs of the individuals who do not have access to either the second story board room or the second story classroom. Following are notes from the meeting:

> *The board was struggling with how to handle an egress issue. A child enrolled in the school developed a need for a wheelchair and could no longer walk up the steps to her second-story classroom. After a year of trying to get accommodations for their child, the parents pulled the child from the school and found another school. The parents wrote a letter to the REA board telling in detail the frustration of not having access in a public school for their daughter. The letter and discussion were presented in open meeting, with the free use of the child's and parents' names. Board Member Kate pointed out that access to the second story had been an issue for 4 years and it is something the board needs to address. After much discussion, the board decided building an elevator in the middle of the year would be too disruptive and building an elevator separate from the school's other renovations was not an efficient use of resources, so board members recommended waiting until the summer to act. When the principal was asked if this would create a problem for anyone else who might enroll, the principal said, "We have enough numbers now that we could just say we are full." The board accepted this response as adequate for delaying work on the access issue.*

Freedom of Information

The school has a newsletter that goes to the parents and other school partners, and is posted on the school's Web site. The school hosts two events each year that are open to the community: an open house and a spaghetti dinner. The principal noted that she invites key people to those events, although she said a few community members have attended on their own. Another opportunity for information sharing is the resource raising events the school director has started, but these are by invitation only. "The whole premise," said the principal, "is that you invite key people. And you identify them maybe because they're in your area. You start inviting them in for an overview of the philosophy and a cup of coffee and to meet some of the children and take a tour and have a conversation...It's different than let's just show you who we are. It's a relationship."

Board Member Mike noted that there is little information that flows from the board to the community; communications with the community come through the school principal. Said Mike: "What the board has been involved in is a complaint or two about the facilities – it's not accessible. That's one. But we recognize that and we're trying to deal with that as we speak."

Unlike the other charter schools in the study, whose authorizers and the EMO highlight information on their charter schools on Web sites, REA's authorizer – the city school district – has very little information about the charter or its relationship to the district on the district Web site. A review of district newsletters shows that there is information about tax proposals, school reform initiatives, district-wide opportunities,

transportation for the district's traditional schools, but nothing on REA.[9] Nor does the district Web site list REA as one of its elementary schools. In fact, REA does not appear in any listing of the district's schools, although a search through the district Website did yield an annual report that included a page on REA, and there were a few references to board meetings at which REA's reauthorization or the REA liaison were on the agenda. Information about the school, however, is not readily accessible through the district's home page.

Freedom of Expression

REA respondents noted that parents and board members have a formal avenue for voice in REA school decision-making. Board Member Kate said the school has an active parent board and the school improvement team is made up of parents and staff. The board, which includes a majority of parents, also has decision-making power. Kate also notes, however, that many of the board members wear community hats , and the board takes into account other community voices in its decision-making such as the interests of the local Catholic Church, which is in essence the school's landlord, and the interests of the surrounding neighborhood. However, interviews with other board members and the school administrator indicate that participation in many of the school's relationship – building activities is by invitation only, and very little if any connection has been made with local residents. Explained Principal Karen:

> "I have to say the community-at-large doesn't really care what the philosophy of the school is. Unless they're invited in. and then when they're invited in, there are people who fall in love with it. But for the most part, I don't think they care about

[9] A review of the quarterly newsletters from 2001 through Fall of 2004 provides no information about REA. The newsletters were accessed through the district's Web site.

the philosophy of the school. In fact, my personal opinion is that the community at large doesn't give the schools enough (respect) to even imagine that they have (a philosophy)."

Board members noted that it is rare for the board to be contacted by community members about REA. The principal said that residents who have concerns about the school are more likely to call her office. She said she has received some calls from residents about parking issues. "They just come in here and tell me. We have parents concerned that we don't have an elevator and they tell me. " REA's district liaison also noted there have been times when the district board has been contacted about issues with the charter school, mostly from REA parents. "Then I would call (the REA board president) and say the REA board needs to deal with this."

All public charter school board meetings are open meetings. This is the one area of the School Code for public school academies that explicitly attempts to protect citizen voice in public school governance. Like the traditional school district board meetings, all public school academy board meetings must be posted and all meetings must be open to the public. Below are additional notes from that meeting:

As I walked up to the REA school for the board meeting, I realized I did not have the code to get into the building, but the preschool director was holding doors for parents who were leaving her program, so I walked through the open door. It did not dawn on me at the time that the door would remain locked once she left for the evening. As the board meeting started, it was clear I was the only "community" member in attendance other than the district liaison, who also is considered a community member. About an hour in to the meeting on the summer

evening, the board is interrupted by pebbles hitting the window and a woman calling from the streets: "Let me in. Hey, you guys let me in." It was Kate, a board member who also forgot her code into the building.

When I asked board members about how citizens might attend a board meeting when the door is locked, they said they had not thought of that before, although the district liaison indicated this was a problem she already identified. "That always bugged me," she said but she never brought it to the attention of the board. All of the respondents noted that it is easy for board members to forget that they are a public board. As Kate explained:

> "I think it doesn't feel very public to us. This is my own interpretation. I mean, we know it's public. We know it's an open meeting. We know anybody could get the notes and look at them. We know all of that. But we don't experience any of it. I mean, there's never anybody there. It's always just us. There's not even staff there. I think about our community college board or the public school district board, you'd have the media there and it's being recorded for television and you have staff members there. So that when you come to a contract issue or a personnel issue or legal issues, there actually is a public that will hear it. I don't think we've really confronted that."

Inclusive Representation

REA founders wanted to be chartered through the public school district in part to insure inclusivity of all students in the community. "Our intention is that the school would serve children and families in general," reported Board Member Kate. "And it is our intent that that would be a pretty diverse group, certainly in racial and ethnic ways, but also in socioeconomic ways. So we don't want to be an elite school of, you know,

people who are interested in (Reggio Emelia). We really want diverse children and families to be involved." Board Member Mike had a similar explanation:

> "We wanted to do this in conjunction with (the district) so that these children would have the benefit of a Reggio inspired elementary experience and then mainstream into the (district's) middle schools. Also, strategically, we wanted the school to be in the downtown area so that we would have a diverse population of children. And I think we've accomplished that at the school. It's about 50 percent minority."

REA has systematically created ties with community by developing partnerships with area businesses and service organizations, such as the non-profit agency housed across the street from the school. The school has a formal partnership with the nearby Catholic church, which is in essence the school's landlord, and there have been efforts to draw neighboring organizations into the school to share information and discuss issues of relevance to both the school and the community, although these "resource raising" initiatives have been by invitation only. Efforts to inform the community or share what the school has learned with the community-at-large have been minimal in the school's first four years, although school leaders say it has been important to focus on building a program before sharing it with others. "First we want a quality program for the children, and then we can bring in these other pieces," noted Mike.

One of the pieces Mike noted that has not yet been done is fixing the egress issues with the building. "We've got this great building. The downside is it is not accessible – there's no elevator." Mike said part of the delay in addressing the elevator issue is that the board wanted to work it into its building construction plan and not build an elevator

that does not fit with the bigger plan. So, the school has done without access to the second floor, where upper grade classes and board meetings are conducted. While board members are cognizant of the egress issue and appear genuinely interested in getting it resolved, as long as the school is without access to second floor programming and as long as that lack of access prohibit students from attending the program, it appears the school is in direct violation of Section 504(2) of the Michigan. Revised School Code, which states: A public school academy...shall not discriminate in its pupil admissions policies or practices on the basis of ... status as a handicapped person, or any other basis that would be illegal if used by a school district." Furthermore, conducting open board meetings on the second floor of an inaccessible building suggests the interests of disabled citizens are not being represented in the school.

The School-Community Relationship

REA, because it is authorized by the city district, follows the same employment terms as the district, which means it has union teachers. Mike explained: "It's not typical for a charter school to operate within the MEA, but that's part of the up front organization of the school." He added, "I think it's been a really good relationship."

REA has not established relationships with other schools in the area, including the district's schools in the neighborhood, even though part of the school's mission is to disseminate the RE pedagogy to educators in the traditional public school district. Said Principal Karen:

> "It's still a dirty word in traditional public school circles because we're taking kids. They don't get the kids, they don't get the money. So it's competition. And that's not what we want to do. I think we're a little different than a lot of public charters in that way. We don't really want to steal children. We want enough kids

to work with to build the school so people can see it. Because what we're really trying to do is make things good for all children. So I still think it's really hard to work together with public schools. And that's why it's pretty darn interesting that we're chartered by (the public school district)."

Mary, REA's district liaison also indicated that the district's history of tension over public charter schools has affected the ability of the charter to serve its purpose as a learning lab for teachers.

"The idea was to have people be able to spend time there learning it, understanding it, and seeing if it was something that should be instated anywhere within the district. I have a hard time even getting people to visit. There's the whole old feelings about charters."

Mary noted that when charter schools were first introduced in the state, district staff "couldn't even say the word 'charter' without being severely reprimanded. The whole concept of charters was that they're out to get us. And that's all the charters were looked at was competition." She said she thinks the tension has lightened some over the years, but in order for the district to use the charter school as a lab school, district leadership will need to show interest in making that happen. "I think it's just a hump they need to get over." Board President Kristin said:

"We've had conversations about how it is kind of an awkward situation in some ways. And that (the district) is our chartering agency and yet we do to some extent compete for children. But the other piece that we're also aware of is that we are not limited to the geographical area. And so we do recruit even outside of the city in terms of families that might be interested in the Reggio model for their kids. So

I don't think it feels like a terribly difficult thing. It's more around a feeling like we do provide an option and that we want to provide that option. "

Inner City Academy (ICA)

ICA was founded as school for inner city elementary students and was spearheaded by the pastor of an inner city Baptist church, although the school has no contractual arrangement with the church. The founders were granted a charter through a nearby state university for a kindergarten through 6th grade program. The school opened in 1998 and was located across the street from the pastor's church. The pastor and several church members served on the original board of directors, but newspaper articles of the school in 1988 reported the pastor as emphasizing the school is a public school with "no religious education and no organized prayer."[10]"It's a church school" said the pastor. "We are the founders, the people of record and in a sense, we are the owners. You won't see them praying and there won't be any religious symbols on the walls – you can't promote religion, but it doesn't mean you can't have values and morals."

ICA serves a predominantly African American population; 96 percent African American and 4 percent Hispanic, and 92 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. [11] Early newspaper articles about the school note that it had an African American focus, although ICA respondents all noted that the aim of the school is to serve the needs of the students in the inner city, not necessarily African American children. Principal Kyla explained the founder's vision:

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[10] River City Press, 9/9/1998. A1, Wilkerson, Roland "Black families turn to new charter in search of education alternative.

[11] Source: National Center of Education Statistics, 2002-2003.

"He had a vision for a school that would serve inner city youth, primarily – giving them all the luxuries that sometimes they can't have. He really wanted them to have the same opportunities and recognized that there was a need to have outstanding teachers, facilities, programming. He got together with a couple of people, who became board members, and said 'how can we do this? I want a school in the middle of the city that's not run down because our youth deserve it.'"

ICA had three principals within its first three years, hired through the education management organization (EMO) that manages the school. Its current principal, Kyla, started her teaching career as a charter school teacher in the same management company for which she currently works. She has been with the EMO since 1995. The principal joined ICA as its educational leader in 2001. Kyla has been with the school for three years.

"When the school was looking for a permanent school leader – they had a couple of school leaders come through the building – they asked, 'Would you be willing,' and I said, 'Yes. They need some stability. I'm young. I can grab this by the horns.' And I'm very happy. So it was really was kind of a movement within the same company for me. "

The mission of the school has evolved from a general focus to an emphasis on reading and higher order thinking skills. ICA also has changed from a K-6 school to a K-5, creating a greater focus on the elementary student. The school's current mission reads: "(ICA) provides a rich teaching and learning environment that produces lifelong readers that utilize higher level thinking and creative problem solving methods, possess moral integrity, master practical life skills and have sense of social responsibility" (ICA's 2003-

2004 Annual Report). Long-time board member Jerry describes his vision for ICA as a prime feeder school to the district's middle schools.

> "I'd like our children to be so good that they will be a prized catch for the draft into middle schools. Our children ought to be so good when they get out of this wonderful environment that they will be prized by other schools as an important plus to their institution. We're not there yet."

ICA's history is rich with challenges and tensions with community groups. It began with a struggle to get a land-use permit from the city commission to house elementary children in temporary buildings in one of the city's most depressed neighborhoods. The school's first building was located in a run-down area of the city and did not have adequate space for lunch or assemblies. ICA requested permits from the city to use temporary units for its classrooms, to be located in the run-down neighborhood. The city commission initially rejected the request, citing safety and landscape concerns. A June 1988 newspaper article reported that the city commission narrowly approved the use of portable classrooms for the opening of the school, granting ICA a one-year permit. The commission's first vote on the use of the portable classrooms was 4-3 against the school, citing safety concerns with respect to using six portable units on 3.5 acres for a public school. "I'm really in support of what you're doing with the charter school, but from what I can see, these are almost internment camp conditions for kids," said one commissioner who voted against the project initially.[12] Commissioners also objected to the property itself, noting the property needed landscaping. The commission changed its

[12] River City Press, June 18, 1988, Inside the City Section, page 1. Rick Wilson "Charter's portable classrooms get ok."

vote when the school amended its plan to four mobile units and a limit of 200 students and agreed to develop a landscaping plan and a safety plan for students.

According to respondent interviews and newspaper reports,[13] the search for a suitable building took more than five years and involved ongoing tensions with the city. For example, in 2002, after having expressed public frustration with the school's continued use of portable classrooms, the city commission required the school to provide monthly updates on its progress toward finding a permanent location, with the threat of repealing its permit and forcing the school to move if it was not making sufficient progress. A court decision in 2002, however, put an end to the reports, when it was ruled that public schools are not subject to local land-use rules.[14]

ICA continued to search for a permanent home, although the search continued to have its tensions, this time with the city school district. ICA board members said that the struggle to buy a building from the district was directly related to the district's unwillingness to support the public charter school movement. The evidence, they say, is in the fact that the district would not accept ICA's bid to buy a vacant district school, even though Board Member Jerry stated:

> "We were the highest bidder.[15] The papers quoted the (district) board as saying 'we're not about to do anything for them because they're competing with us and will steal our children.' ...I could see the charter school – our school – working

[13] River City Press, 1998 – 2004.
[14] River City Press, January 21, 2002, A1. by Jim Harger. "Ruling exempts schools from city zoning."
[15] ICA's bid for the vacant building was the highest, but the terms included a land contract with no payment down. It was the only bid that requested such terms. River City Press, May 2, 2003, D3. Rick Wilson and Dave Mu rray. "(ICA) made the highest bid, but the (district) isn't sure it should sell to a charter – if at all."

with the district as a feeder into middle schools with having a strong transitional program and relationships so that the children would benefit. I don't hold out a whole lot of hope that that's going to happen in the near term."

Editorials in the city's newspaper agreed with ICA board members that the city school district board was too inflexible and unwilling to work with public charter schools. A May 24, 2002 editorial read:

"(District) school board members' edginess about selling closed buildings to charter public schools is understandable, but they should get over it. The most natural future for vacated schools is to put children and teachers back into them. Ownership of the school shouldn't matter – particularly where, as with charter and traditional public schools, the taxpayers own both."[16]

Newspaper reports over ICA's bid for the project substantiate the claim that the district board was concerned over the competitive nature of the charter and district school relationship. The paper quoted the district's board president as saying: "Why would we give a sweetheart deal to a competitor who would turn around and try to steal our school. I can't imagine us giving a building to that school." However, the newspaper also noted that the district had concerns over selling buildings it might need in the future. In the end, the district did not sell its vacant property to ICA or anyone.

ICA's search for a building also included a rift with a local business district that board member Fred suggested was racially motivated. He explained:

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[16] River City Press, Editorial, A14. "From school to school: City school board should be open to re-use of building as charter schools."

"We tried to move into East Side[17] years ago. Then the socially acceptable people of East Side chose to protest a gentleman selling us a building. Enough so that the Mayor made a phone call and asked us to cancel a town meeting there for fear of a riot. This was six years ago. We almost had one. Yeah, it was ugly. Real ugly. He said a community meeting to discuss the issue led to racial aggression. "There were posters, placards. Nigger lover and those kinds of things," he said.

The overt racial incident that Board Member Fred described is presented differently in newspaper coverage. The newspaper report read: "Instead of coming together Wednesday to share their mutual concerns, those attending said the meeting erupted angrily after (the pastor) questioned whether the group's resistance was racist."[18] The president of the neighborhood business association addressed the community in a letter in the local newspaper. "Following a recent public meeting about the charter school's proposed move to (East Side), a city commissioner remarked that he was disturbed by the "lack of civility" on both sides. For any role some of our members may have played in that "lack of civility," we apologize." [19] The director also wrote: "The (association) was not trying to 'Save (East Side)' from what appears to be a group of beautiful elementary children. We too want what is best for the children....Our hope for the students would be a location adjacent to green space, necessary for healthy exercise and growing bodies, instead of the concrete and asphalt of a bustling business district." Another newspaper article reported that East Side business association members were

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[17] Pseudonym

[18] River City Press, June 3, 1999. A15, Rick Wilson "Businesses object to charter moving in "

[19] River City Press, July 1, 1999. "School debate healthy for (East Side)." Leigh Murray A13

concerned that the placement of a school in the district would force the area's landmark bars and restaurants to close. However, at least one business owner noted that "this is not just about businesses and bars....This is about changing the character of a neighborhood that took 20 years to build."[20]

Fred said the school's new location, its permanent building, which was completed in 2004, sits one block out of the historical East Side district. The new location he said is in a neighborhood that is far more "enlightened." Fred reported that the neighborhood director expressed excitement that the school would bring diversity into its community. "She says...'you're not going to be rejected just because of who you are. You might be rejected later because of who you become.' I could have jumped across the table and kissed her."

Associational Autonomy: It is clear from the ICA interviews that the founding purpose of ICA was to provide quality education to inner city children who were not being well-served by the district schools. Board Member Jerry indicated that the founding pastor's concern for the children of his congregation was in essence a concern for the children of the inner city. He put it this way:

> "(The pastor) was concerned about the children of his congregation and by extension the children of the inner city who he believed, and evidence would support, were not getting the attention they really needed to help them develop. And I say that 'evidence would support' because we find that many of the children we are getting from the public schools are one, two, sometimes even three grade levels below what they should be."

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[20] River City Press, June 9, 1999. "(East Side) residents: Change not always good" Rick Wilson. B1

Board members noted that the population of ICA is nearly all African American students from the inner city, although they said the school is not segregated on purpose. Nevertheless, said Board Member Fred, "regardless of the mission of the school, we serve the African American community in (this) part of the city." That service, he said, is necessary to provide the under-represented and underserved children in the inner city a chance for a better life. In our interview, Fred wrestled with the issue of racial segregation, the notion of racial quotas, and how that affects African American communities. He explained:

> "Out of every dollar in the African American community that comes from wages, 17 cents of it sticks around for one more trip through. If you go look at China Town in Chicago, there's a study that was done that showed something like $18 - that the dollar goes 18 times before it leaves the community because they go to a Chinese doctor, a Chinese restaurant, Chinese laundry, they go to Chinese businesses."

He went on to say that in addition to low economic returns, the African American community has lost its leadership through equal opportunity quotas and affirmative action policies, and in order to build healthy inner cities, opportunities for inner city youth must be brought up to par with the opportunities other children receive. Fred stated:

> "Businesses find good African American talent and get them inside their business so they can make their EEO quota...And now we've got C people being A leaders because we grade on a curve and there are no As and Bs left. Now this to me is a bigger challenge than (arguing about) charter schools. We are truly arguing about

the salt shakers in the dining room of the Titantic when water is coming in. We should be stepping back and saying 'what do we do to build a vibrant inner city community where this doesn't happen.' So when you back way up and want to know what we're doing as a board, we're trying to do this right here."

Unlike the other schools in the study, ICA is managed by a for-profit education management organization (EMO), and this relationship has the potential to affect the autonomy of the charter school. Miron and Nelson (2000) for example note that for-profit EMOs, through their control of curriculum, facilities, and human resources often exert control over the board that hired them. ICA board members however reported that the EMO is under their control, and the ICA building is owned by the school not the management company.

The ICA board is responsible for the oversight of the school, or in this case the work of the EMO that was hired to run the school. All of the employees of the school are employees of the management company, although the board has selection approval of the school leader. At the board meetings, it is the EMO representative that reports to the board. The difference in reporting is clear from the board meeting observations. At the ICA board meeting I attended, the principal sits next to the EMO representative at a table to the side of the board members. The public sits in front of the board members and off to the side of the EMO representative and her employees. Questions from the board were for the most part directed to the EMO representative, although the principal addressed questions specific to student services, such as the number of students who receive tutoring and the number of students who need tutoring. The EMO representative

addressed issues related to professional development of school staff, organizational issues, facilities issues, and issues related to finance.

Board Member Fred noted that the hiring of a management company is "no different than if you were to hire someone to do your lawn." He said, "Although it's a much more sophisticated problem, the concept is the same. " Board Member Jerry also explained the use of an EMO:

> "We don't have the infrastructure that a public school system has with a number of schools. And by combining with other schools and having a management group do the recruiting, do the training of teachers, provide the supervision, do the management of the facility, work on all of the compliance issues that are mandated by the state as well as the compliance for building codes and fire regulations and all of the myriad regulatory issues - the (EMO) provides all that kind of thing as well as support for us. We had talked about doing it ourselves. We said we wouldn't do it as well, where they have a number of schools and they can afford to do the kind of in-service training that would be very difficult for a single school to do."

Principal Kyla noted satisfaction with the level of support the EMO provides, both for the school and her own professional development. She said she has a lot of independence in her role as principal, and ICA is "site-based managed." However, she said, the EMO provides support for finances, payroll, human resources, grant writing, test preparation, teacher evaluation, and professional development. Kyla noted that ICA develops its own curriculum but the EMO provides curriculum coaches to the school. The curriculum

coaches provide ICA educators with tools such as pacing guides and guidelines for lesson plans.

At the board meeting, it was clear that board members felt comfortable questioning the EMO representative and her staff and asking for financial reports and other needed information. Board Member Fred said the relationship with the EMO has evolved over time, but there was a point where ICA nearly severed ties with the management company because the staff was not staying on top of deadlines and requirements, like making sure all staff had the proper certifications. It took a while for the board to push back, but eventually Fred said the EMO resolved its issue and the relationship is "stronger because of it." He explained:

> "As the guy who owns the grass, I (noticed) the grass ain't growing. But you don't really know if you never grew grass before. You assume, maybe it takes a long time. Well, then at some point you say 'this is bullshit. I don't think this is right.' And so there came a time when we had a tough meeting. And we came very close to ending our relationship. But because of that, we're stronger for it. I do not feel uncomfortable picking up the phone and calling the CEO of the company that's got probably 70 schools and expect a call back before the sun goes down. It'll happen."

Choice in Representation

ICA board members were asked to serve by the founder, the pastor of an inner city Baptist church. Two of the nine board members are parents of students in the school. "The rest of us are too old to have children in school," noted Board Member Jerry. The other five are considered leaders in the community, including a retired vice-president for

marketing at IBM, a local grocery store director, a retired Christian book publisher, a General Motors purchasing agent, an associate director for the local YMCA, an entrepreneur, and an employee with an inner city youth service organization. Three of the board members in addition to the pastor, who also is a board member, are members of the pastor's church.

Like the other charters, the charter authorizer – in this case a state university – approves or rejects board member nominations and oversees the work of the ICA board. The sitting board nominates potential board members by a two-thirds majority vote. Fred noted:

> "The unique thing about a charter board unlike an elected board is that we have the ability to solicit candidates based upon needed skills. So if for instance there's an election process and nine people get elected, there's a possibility that none of them may have accounting skills or none of them may have marketing skills. And it's not only a possibility, it's likely. In our situation, when we look at adding a board member, we look at a need or a skill before we go to the marketplace to try to find someone that has both a heart (for) the school as well as the skill required to facilitate our work."

Fred also noted that the board typically turns to professionals in the community and people who have demonstrated a commitment to the inner city. The ICA by-laws require at least one parent to sit on the board. ICA currently has two sitting board members who are parents of enrolled ICA students. Although the ICA board has responsibilities to the university authorizer and ultimately to the state of Michigan, Fred

said the board represents the students they serve as well as parents "who want to make a choice."

Board Member Jerry also noted the difference between elected school district boards and appointed charter school boards. He drew on his experience as an elected school board member in another city to make the comparison. "I guess because I was elected by the electorate, I was representing them. At the same time, I guess I thought I was representing the children as well. Here, very clearly I'm representing the children's interests." Jerry also pointed out that when he was a district board member he head to deal with a lot of bureaucratic issues, including negotiations with five different unions. As a board member of ICA, he said, "We don't have that."

Principal Kyla also noted that the decreased bureaucracy of ICA helps board members focus on the needs of the students in the school. "I like the way board members are selected. I think they do a fine job. They care about children and that's what I want." Kyla also said ICA gets its public legitimacy through its reputation and integrity. "As long as I'm doing what I have to do which is to educate children and abide by the laws of the land, (being political) is not a priority for me."

The ICA board of directors includes a variety of community members connected in some way to the interests of the inner city, in large part through the Baptist church that serves the neighborhood. Five of the ICA board members are also members of the Baptist church. Only two of the board members have students enrolled in the school. The focus of the school and the board is on the students and parents of the school as well as the children of the inner city.

ICA respondents report that very few individuals outside of the school have approached the board. At the board meeting I attended, the board discussed the possible use of the school's gymnasium by a group from the local Baptist church. The board decided since the school was so new and the school staff was still working on procedures for its use with its own students, that it is not yet ready to make the space available to others. Board Member Jerry explains:

> "I don't want us to be viewed as isolationist in any way. I want to protect the building for the children. I'm not trying to squirrel it away. To the extent that we can (share the building) in a way that is meaningful and protects the interest of the children, I'm willing to consider that. My concern at the outset is that we're just in this building. We don't even know how to manage it yet. And then to start renting it somebody else, I think it's a little premature."

ICA's board members are approved through the charter school's authorizing agency. Fred reported that the university authorizer has increased the role it takes in the nomination approval process. "They have in the latest documentation full authority to make changes (to the board) if they need to." He said ICA's board nominations have never been rejected, although he noted the university authorizer has made changes to boards in other schools. However, in ICA's board minutes of August 31, 2004, the authorizer is quoted as saying that the new changes for board nominations and approval are "not intended (for the university) to control the selection of board members for its charter schools" but more to provide consistency in the board selection process among the university's charter schools. Principal Kyla described the relationship with the

authorizer as one of compliance. Although she noted the university is "very, very helpful, they're very much for accountability."

Freedom of Information

While the ICA respondents were open in interviews about ICA and its relationships with the community, access to the school administrator and access to materials were demonstrably more difficult in this school. Scheduling an interview with the principal took more than a month of phone calls and interviews. The principal needed to get clearance from her supervisors including the board and her EMO representative. Multiple requests for board meeting minutes and by-laws did not materialize, although minutes of three of the board's 2004 meetings are available on the school's Web site. Much of that difficulty may be the timing of the research. ICA was in the middle of its move to its permanent building, increasing enrollment by nearly 100 students, and the principal was hiring and training several new staff members. Part of the difference in responsiveness, however, may be related to the school's affiliation with a for-profit EMO. For example, the EMO's presence at the board meeting created another noticeable layer of control. Notes from an ICA board meeting observation indicate this control:

> *I walked into the classroom that was being used for the ICA board room and reached for the board minutes and board packets that were sitting out on the table. I greeted the principal who introduced me to the EMO representative. I also was introduced to the board president. I walked over to the public sitting area where there was one other person. I introduced myself to a man who introduced himself as the representative of ICA's authorizing university. I sat down and realized I did not have an agenda or meeting materials, so I looked*

around and saw the materials were sitting on the table in front of the EMO representative. I walked up to the table to get a packet. As I reached for the packet, the EMO representative put her hand on the materials, looked me sternly in the eye and stated: "The principal will hand the appropriate information out to you." I sat down and waited to receive my agenda and materials for the public meeting. I could see the board members preparing for the start of the meeting. The meeting got underway and there was no sign that the principal was going to distribute a board packet to me. I leaned over to the authorizer and asked what materials he had in his hand. He told me they were the board agenda and meeting materials. I asked him how he received the materials, and he told me the materials were on the table for anybody to take. These were the same materials I had attempted to retrieve 10 minutes earlier. He motioned to me to pick up the materials, which I did, to the visible dismay of the EMO representative.

The protection of information by the EMO representative may be linked to an organizational culture within that EMO. A study on the freedom of personnel information among public schools in the city done by the city's newspaper found that this particular EMO was one of a two EMOs that refused to provide information to the newspaper, saying none of its information "is subject to FOIA."[21] State policy has subsequently changed to require the release of such information, but prior to the state requirement, some EMOs maintained that their private status protected them from making such information public, even if requested through the Freedom of Information Act (Miron & Nelson, 2000).

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[21] River City Press, March 26, 2000. "Public, private issues collide in teacher information." Ed Golder. A 23

Like other public school charters, ICA distributes information to its parents and students, and provides enrollment brochures to neighbors in late summer. The school also runs recruiting advertisements in the newspaper and on the radio in the fall, and ICA hosts a school carnival, which is publicized in the newspaper and on the radio. The school's Web site also provides information about the school. Yet, Board Member Jerry said there is little information that goes from the school to the community.

> "We've had a few articles in the (newspaper). Our president is communicating with two organizations. We're doing some communication with (the senior home). (Our principal) is now on the advisory board of the Salvation Army, which will be a reach in the community. But there isn't a lot beyond that other than (information) through the parents that I'm aware of."

Freedom of Expression

More than any other charter in the study, ICA has engaged in public debate and deliberation with the broader community over the location of ICA, the use of public land to house ICA, the purchase of existing properties, and finally the move into their permanent location.[22]ICA respondents report that community members are free to contact them either through the school office or through the board to voice their opinion or objection to school policies or events. The board meetings are conducted in a classroom in the school's building. The building is easily accessible, and the door to the building at the time of the board meeting was open for board members and others.

Respondents say very few individual community members outside of the parents served by the school have attended board meetings or addressed the school administrator,

[22] These events are discussed at length under the heading "School-Community Relationship" below.

although they said there have been times when concerns have been raised by parents and others in the community. Principal Kyla noted how residents of the senior home across the street from the new building attended a staff meeting to get to know the people at the school. "They told me they wanted to come and meet everyone. They wanted to talk to the staff and get some feedback, and it was really cool." Kyla also recalled that there was more active community voice prior to the move to the new school. She said:

> "They were concerned and they were just really saying, 'When are you guys going to get something for these kids?' And I know that in prior board meetings they had come and said, 'Hey, we don't like the conditions there. It's not school worthy.' I do know that they were for awhile quite vocal in that community."

ICA leaders also have made a point to meet with neighbors or community groups about issues of concern, such as the destruction of trees on the school's new site, the safety of the school's original modular units, or the concerns raised when the school was looking at buying a building in a nearby business district.

Inclusive Representation

Representation of the broader community at ICA includes representation of the senior home across the street, the environmental group that is concerned about the school's landscaping, and the neighborhood association that may potentially set up an office in the school building. But ICA's core focus of representation remains the families in the community who have not had the opportunity to take advantage of school choice. Board Member Jerry explained: "Our population is virtually all inner city Black children. We do have probably a dozen or two Hispanic children. There are a few Caucasian children I think from the same geographic area. Last year we had 95 percent of our

children eligible for assisted or free lunch." Eleven percent of ICA students are receiving special education services.

While ICA board members say the school has focused on serving the inner city African American community, ICA's new location has the potential to change the demographics of the school. Board Member Fred noted that the school is enrolling some students from its new, mostly White, neighborhood. "We have several people in the school this year from the neighborhood. Not a lot. Our enrollment will change if when they go home at the end of the school year their parents tell other people that they were served well." He said that even if the demographics of the school change, the mission will not.

> "It can't. We actually provide choices for people who can't afford choices. You don't have to be Black to be enslaved. Economic slavery has a predominant color, but it isn't an exclusive color. So people that have choices and have resources will not choose us. They won't choose the (city district schools) either. They'll choose St. Josephs or God knows where. But they'll choose something. But people without resources that want a choice, they're still our constituency because they don't have resources."

ICA is the only charter school in the study to provide busing, and its bus service extends beyond the city, into several neighboring cities in the county. Fred noted, "So we're actually zip code independent. So if you want to make a choice and you happen to live four miles away, we can facilitate that choice."

While the focus of ICA is on the students and families they serve, Fred also noted that public charter schools are part of a state system of public schooling, which, through

the use of public funds, represents the taxpayer. He said part of the role of the ICA board is to represent the taxpayer through sound financial decisions. He said, however, that the inability to work with the district school has curbed his ability to be as economical with taxpayer money as he could be. For example, Fred reported that the struggle to buy a vacant school from the school district was an example of taxpayer money being wasted on a new school building when a vacant school building existed in the same neighborhood. Said Fred, "The absolute loser is the taxpayer. It's the taxpayers who pay for those empty buildings. The taxpayer is going to pay for my new one." Fred also noted that ICA's building, if the school were ever to close, is protected from being taken over by the state. "We own the building, so if we were to go out of business, our creditors would take over."

The School-Community Relationship:

ICA's relationship with the community in trying to find a permanent home was fraught with tension, but ICA attempted to engage the broader community in deliberations over its place in community. Even with ICA's final move to its new location, the school leaders reached out to the neighborhood leaders to address issues or concerns regarding ICA's move into the community. One of the first groups it addressed was an environmental group that was concerned about the trees that would have to be cut down to build the school. As Principal Kyla remembers, "The environmentalists were not that excited. You know, I can understand that if that's your stance. Mine was children." ICA subsequently worked with the group and agreed that ICA's students would work with the environmentalists to replace some of the trees when the school was

built. "It's been great. We're not trying to hurt the environment. We just want to get the children in a good place."

ICA's school has little relationship with the other public schools in the city, and its relationship with the school district has been tense. Board Member Fred said the antagonism the district has with ICA and other public charter schools has "poisoned" the school's relationships. He explained:

> "I received a donation of $88,000 from the business community to bring Marva Collins and her methodology into our school for a year. A very courageous business man did that, but because he felt he had to explain himself to the school district, he told them that this little error in judgment on his part was not going to impact his overall commitment to public school education....If I go solicit funds from a business, they're going to make sure that it's okay with the school district to help me....So I'm here to tell you that the public school board has poisoned the community's view of a charter school so that relationships are extremely difficult."

Board members report that early on ICA attempted to forge partnerships with the city district, envisioning the charter could be a feeder school for the district's middle schools, but the relationship between ICA and the city school district was too tense and often adversarial. Part of the tension is related to the district's distrust of public charter schools as schools that "steal" students away from the city schools. Yet, members of ICA also operate in a competitive spirit. At the school's board meeting, the EMO representative congratulated the board and school staff on increased enrollment. "The

buzz in the (city) school district is how ICA has grown and how it is taking (the district's) students. So congratulations."

Although interview and observation data from ICA indicate a level of competition, Jerry expressed an interest in being seen as a part of the public school system. He explained the paradox this way:

> "I don't want to view ourselves as competing with the (district) schools. This community needs a strong public school system. There's no question about that. By the same token we feel that there are a large number of students because of the sheer volume in the public schools who are not getting the specialized attention that they need to fully develop. And they've got some other impediments at home and other things that we need to try to find ways to supplement perhaps in a way that public schools can't because of size. At the same time I know that the students (who) are attending here are not attending somewhere else. And so the sense is that it's taking away from the financial base, but I don't know that it's adversely impacting their educational opportunities. I think we're enhancing the community's education of children by providing small units, which can focus more on a more discrete group of children. "

ICA respondents say the school has stronger relationships with the private, parochial and other public charter schools in town. ICA collaborates with these schools for shared services such as providing bus service to these schools when they need buses for field trips or special events. ICA respondents also say the school has a good relationship with the Intermediate School District. Principal Kyla stated: "We're very connected with the ISD. They are quite crucial to us." Kyla said the ISD provides

auditing and accounting services to ICA on a contractual basis and also supports public charter schools with regular charter school meetings at the ISD. The meetings primarily provide a venue for receiving information about regulations or policies that are new or in development. The school's transportation staff take classes through the ISD.

ICA also is working to develop strong relationships with the neighborhood association and business association in the community around the school. Board Member Jerry explained:

> "The immediate community we're in - there is a community association and a business association and (our president) has taken the initiative to be in touch with their offices. He's been to some of their meetings, he's made presentations to them, and told them about what we're trying to do. The garden club, which is just to the north of our property, wants to work with our children to plant trees on our back corridor. They want to work with us and we want to work with them on landscaping. It will involve the children. At the (senior home) immediately across the street we are looking at a cross generational program. Our children have already been over there to visit the residents and some of the residents have been to visit the school. We would like to be part of not only the immediate community, but the greater community serving these children. That's what we're trying to do."

When asked what kind of responsibility such a relationship puts on the school, Jerry replied:

> "We'd like to have the community see us as an organization which they can support because we're helping to educate children that will have an impact on that

community in the long term. And that support, we haven't even defined what all that means. We would like to involve business owners in activities here. We have talked, for instance, about providing an office for the neighborhood association. We haven't done that yet, but we have space in the building and we will be looking at those kind of alternatives."

Jerry also noted the school is trying to be good neighbors to residents while preserving the integrity of ICA's assets, "which we have a fiduciary responsibility to do." Jerry summed up his hopes for the relationship between the community and the school this way: "We have to be at peace with the community in which we're living, and we have to be viewed as a constructive and productive part of that community."

In talking with Board Member Fred about ICA's obligation to the neighborhood, he noted that it is law that defines obligation and the public charter school is obligated to obey the law. Responded Fred:

"I mean I want to be a good neighbor. Do I have to be a good neighbor? Laws take care of neighborhood, right? So the laws of the land take care of my obligations. So everything (else) is voluntary. I choose to buy my local stuff from the local bakery for my open house. I choose to invite the Neighborhood Association to use my facility. I choose to give the neighbor a dollar a year lease on a piece of property so he can park his truck. I choose all of those sorts of things. Now legally, I'm obligated to the tax payers to open my meetings up, to obey the Sunshine Laws[23], and to use discretion on fiduciary matters and eventually go get the kids educated or else my kids will fall behind and they will

[23] "Sunshine Laws" require most regulatory meetings and decisions be open to the public.

be left behind and I'll be on a bad list. And when that bad list happens, eventually I'll be out of business. I choose not to go out of business."

Conversion Academy (CA)

Conversion Academy (CA) became a charter in 1994, one of the first schools to be granted a charter in the State of Michigan. Originally a private elementary school founded in 1971, the school converted to CA charter school when Michigan's charter school policy went into effect. The husband-and-wife administration team that founded the private school also run the charter school. Tom tends to the non-instructional administrative duties and Nancy serves as the school's head instructional leader, or school principal. Both are retiring at the end of the 2004-2005 school year.

The CA administrators report that the mission of the school did not change with public charter status. The mission was always to create "with our parents an innovative and caring learning community that will enable all children to become independent thinkers, nonviolent problem solvers and responsible citizens ready to contribute in an interdependent world."[24] Goals for the school include developing students to "become self explorers, seekers of knowledge, effective communicators, and future planners."[25] Respondents report that the school has always aimed to serve a diverse population. The school's student population is 47 percent African American, 40 percent White, 12 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Asian. Forty percent of the students receive free and reduced lunch.

Associational Autonomy

[24] Source: CA's Web site.
[25] Ibid.

The autonomy of CA can be seen in the fact that its board is made up entirely of CA parents, and board members indicated that the CA board has little authority over the school's administrators, in part because of the previous longevity of the school as a private school. One board member noted that she is looking forward to a new administration, one that she can help shape. Tom, she said, "is unshapable." The board president also noted that the school's culture did not change much when it went from a private school to a public charter school. He said, "It was Tom and Nancy's private school and it is Tom and Nancy's charter school."

Nancy noted that public charter schools are not nearly as autonomous as they were meant to be. The charter school authorizer, she said, operates at a level that is too micromanaging for innovation and creativity to take place. She explained:

> "The idea (of charter schools), which always sounded really good – but it's never really happened - was that you would create schools that were free from some of that bureaucracy so that they could design programs and sort of experiment with different ways to work with children and teach children in different learning styles and so on and so forth. In reality, we've never really been able to do that because charter school have been under the microscope to a huge degree."

Unlike SCA and ICA, there is little to indicate that CA is using its autonomy to represent an under-represented or under-served population, or like REA attempting to build a program for the purpose of sharing innovative teaching practices with the larger education community. CA administrators noted one of the reasons they switched from a private school to a charter school was to open up their program to greater number of

people and a more diverse population, but there is little in the data to define that population. CA Board Member Cathy said CA offers an alternative to "public schools."

CA also has autonomy over its building, which is owned by a private foundation to protect it from a takeover by the state if the school were ever to close. Cathy explained:

> "When charter schools were first established there was something in the law that basically said that if a charter school did not succeed that its assets could be seized and become part of the State again. And so this school wasn't a building that we were rented, it was a building that the previous private school had already purchased – or was purchasing. So there was no way they were going to let the assets go back to the state when they had already spent all that time and money investing in it. So they created the foundation."

Cathy said the foundation has a board, but CA Administrator Tom is the only one she knows who is on that board. None of the CA members sit on the foundation board.

Choice in Representation

The CA school board chooses its members primarily from the parents of students enrolled in the school. Board Member Cathy noted that the school has advertised for board members in newspapers at times. Cathy also said people are not showing interest in board seats, Tom, the school administrator, will call parents and ask if they would be interested in serving on the board. Once board nominations are made, CA's authorizer comes out to the school to conduct interviews with the board candidates. Explained Tom: "They have a process where they require certain application materials and they review that. Then they come and interview each potential board member. And then they

approve, they say yes. So it's just basically the board members are appointed by the existing board with the approval of the authorizer."

Although the administrators noted there have been community members who have served on the board in the past, all of the current board members are either parents of enrolled students or parents of students who have been enrolled in the school. Board Member Cathy explained: "We have tried to solicit people from the community but their dedication just isn't the same for a small school."

Like other charter board members in the study, CA respondents said an appointed board allows for sitting boards to identify board candidates who will fit the needs of the school and focus on school priorities. Board Member Cathy explained:

> "Appointment allows the board to select who they think is the best qualified rather than popular vote - and you know money and politics come into that. And that really has no place in the public schools as far as I'm concerned. You know, in our charter school, to be on the board there is no political gain. I suppose it may look good on your resume, but I'm not sure where that's going to get you in life."

Cathy also said that an election in her school would not "make sense" because so few people are interested in serving on the board. "You'd be voting for the one person who is there." The CA's Administrator Tom indicated that the public nature of district boards creates too much scrutiny for school board members to focus on the interests of the school. Explained Tom:

> "I think of a local school system and how much dissidence they seem to have there, and I think it's because one of the ways they try to win their battles is by electing board members who will support those positions. I think they also have

the disadvantage of being under the public eye so much more. There are media at most of their meetings. You can watch them on TV. And they're trying to satisfy so many people."

In contrast, Tom said he does not remember media ever coming to a CA board meeting.

Steve noted that even though board members are appointed, they are public officials responsible for public funds. "We've got a strong responsibility to the State of Michigan, to tax payers, to be honest and fair and spend money wisely and maximize the amount of money that we spend that goes directly toward the education of students at CA." Steve said the board is responsible to the "entire school community," which he defined as teachers, students, parents, and the charter school authorizer. "We feel that (the authorizer's) oversight of us is pretty careful. If we don't finish our notes properly, they know." He went on to say that the authorizer's oversight of the charter school is more in-depth than most people realize.

> "When I heard the claim politically that charter schools don't receive any oversight, I just have the hardest time believing that is true. Do people realize? I mean we have reporting requirements. (Our authorizer) gave us a new board orientation guide and there are at least four pages of reporting requirement dates. There's a calendar, and you have to provide information in a timely way through the whole school year. There are three kinds of tests that the school does on its students and those tests are published in the paper. So I don't think it is that nobody is looking over our shoulder."

Administrator Tom agreed.

"The case is that they require a lot of us. They are on top of us all the time making sure that we complete the paperwork that we have to complete for the State. Making sure that we comply with the laws. Making sure that we file our federal papers with regard to constitutionality and prayer in the schools. Anything that there is to check I get e-mails from them saying did you do that. So they are on top of us all the time."

Administrator Nancy noted that the level of accountability to the charter school authorizers exceeds the level of accountability district schools face.

"I taught in a public school for three years before I started working (at the private school), and so I'm pretty sure that most schools don't have the oversight that charter schools have. Certainly other schools have their district, and they have the state, and they have some of the same things over them that we do. But they don't have an authorizer."

CA respondents report that the concept of "community" is important to the school, but the concept is defined more in terms of the school community - the students, their families and the school staff. To that end, Board Member Cathy noted that her primary role is to represent the parents in the school. "We're trying to make sure that the parents' voices get heard and that we just start paying attention to what the administrator is doing." She also said she expects her role as a board member to change with the search for a new administrator. She said:

"I think there'll be more oversight, more monitoring of what's going on. And we'll have a chance to shape the administrator a little more. Right now, there's no chance to shape Tom. I mean he's unshapable at this point. Or even Nancy for

that matter. I've enjoyed them. I know they've done a great job, but it's time, I think, for them to move on and for somebody new to come. I think the board will have an increased responsibility because of that."

Board President Steve noted that the school has to be responsive to the city's school district area "because that is where we are drawing from," but he also said the school is not very responsive to the local community. "I think we have a dim awareness of the local community and a hope – a kind of flickering hope – that we would connect with that community. But in fact that's probably in the future." The future, Steve said, may lie with the hiring of a new school administrator.

Freedom of Information

CA sends information home from parents via a weekly newsletter and publishes information on its Web site, but the school sends little information to the local community. The Web site includes a history of the school, the school's mission and goals, the parent newsletter, and notices of upcoming events and announcements. At the time this report was written, the CA Web site also included a posting about open board seats. Even so, board president Steve noted that the Web site is not as informative as it could be. He said:

"Our Web site doesn't really have a lot of information, frankly. It's a volunteer maintained Web site. I think the board can do a better job in the future of keeping our minutes there, keeping our public information really public. We do post the stuff, of course, but it'd be more accessible if we (posted on the Web)."

Steve also noted that a school Web site is not a good match for getting information out the general public because people not connected to the school will not go to the Web site. "I don't think we have a systematic way to communicate with the local community."

Even information about enrollment is not particularly widespread said CA respondents. CA does not distribute much recruitment information or hold open houses for community. "We don't tend to do that," said Tom, "because we don't have that many openings. And so it's easier or more productive for us to make appointments for people and show them through individually rather than sitting in a room full of people and showing slides of videos of the best of CA." Tom did say that CA may do a little advertising with fliers and newspapers during enrollment periods, but not much. "It's expensive and not necessary for us."

Cathy noted that CA attempts to teach students that they are a part of a greater community, but she said she does not believe the community is well-enough informed about the school. She said:

> "I don't know if the community sees us as an entity at all. I mean we are educating our students about the community, but I don't know that the community is really educated about us much. I don't know that people really know who we are or what we're about. I don't even know if people in my neighborhood – and I'm only two miles from the school – even really know that this school is there, or that it is a charter school.

She also noted that community members in general know little about charter schools, and again suggested more could be done to publicize information about what charter schools are and where they are located. "I mean we're 10 years old and there are still people who

don't understand that they don't have to pay for a charter school. " Media is one way that information can get to the broader community, but administrators Tom and Nancy noted that they have not had any media cover their board meetings.

CA respondents noted that they are attempting to provide more information to their school community – to the parents and staff in their school – through what they hope to be an annual State of the School meeting. Respondents said the meeting will focus on school funding and the administrative search. "It is our first annual meeting," noted Steve. "Somebody on the board thought it was important to give people an idea of where we stand. I think one of the things primarily is to give people a sense of how we're going to be in tough shape if things (with state funding) don't change."

Freedom of Expression

Citizen expression may happen at CA like any of the other charter schools in the study: through public comment at the school's public board meetings, or directly through the school administrators. CA respondents say they do not hear from the broader community, however. Said Steve, "Besides professionals who have come to (board meetings) to give presentations, it's a handful of people who've ever come (to the meetings). So it's a pretty quiet corner of the educational world."

Yet, like REA, the CA board meeting I attended was conducted behind a locked school door. The following is from the author's observation notes:

> *The board meeting I attended was held in a locked school building. I was surprised to see the doors were open when I arrived, and I had the thought that this school holds its meetings in an accessible building, but as soon as I arrived I*

was greeted by the administrator who greeted me and then walked past me to the door and said "I'll be there in a minute. I just need to lock the door." The doors are locked in the building for safety's sake. The school does not have security guards to watch the building while the meetings are taking place. CA's board meeting was conducted in the gymnasium at the opposite end of the school from the school entrance, so it would be difficult for anyone to be able to enter the meeting after the meeting got started.

Inclusive Representation

Although it is difficult to define the parameters of who is represented in CA decision-making, CA respondents made clear that the focus of representation is on the students and parents enrolled in the school. As a public charter school, CA must have open enrollments and if more students are interested in the school than there are openings, students are selected by lottery. However, CA also conducts an entrance interview with prospective parents and students, which Nancy said is important for parents because some kids need "more of a traditional structure than what CA offers." She said CA's non-grading policy and the practice of students calling the teachers by the first name is somewhat of a culture shock to some parents, so it is important to let parents know up front about the school's structure. Nancy said the school also requires parents to sign a participation agreement. Single parents must agree to participate in the school 20 hours a year. The requirement is doubled for two-parent families. Said Board President Steve: "You have to be involved, and if you're not involved, you're given the heave ho – at least that's the threat."

Both board members noted that the charter school draws primarily from the city's public school district area, but also reaches beyond the city limits. The board president spoke in terms of CA being a public school and open to anyone who wants to make the choice to come to CA. Another board member, Cathy, said it serves "any parents who want an alternative to public school education."

CA's focus is on the student and family that chooses to attend the charter school, although respondents indicate that the school strives for a diverse population. Explained Board President Steve:

> "I think we serve families that want to have a choice in an environment that is somewhat diverse and is caring. We're realizing that we're not connecting with the Hispanic population as well as we would like, and that is our most immediate neighborhood and our greatest potential for growth. So adding an English as a Second Language Program and strengthening what admittedly is a really weak Spanish record, those are two priorities we have."

CA administrators reported that one of the reasons they applied for charter school status was to be a more inclusive school. Said Tom:

> "We had been for a number of years frustrated. We were trying to serve a diverse community and people from different economic backgrounds, operating a tuition-based school. We didn't want to be exclusive and it was frustrating for us to be eliminating people that wanted to come here."

Tom said the push to keep tuition low also kept the school on the financial edge. "We were not able to pay staff what we wished we could pay them. We ended up being kind of a training ground for teachers." Moving to charter status, Tom said, has improved the

school's ability to hang on to teachers. " We virtually have the same people now that we've had for seven years." The school's population is also diverse, with 47 percent African American, 40 percent White, 12 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Asian. More than 40 percent of CA's students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

While respondents report ongoing activities with community agencies and groups to provide students with learning opportunities beyond the school walls, activity with these groups is for the benefit of student learning; it is not a function of representing community in school decision-making, although the service students provide to the organizations in community benefits the organization to some degree.

The School-Community Relationship

CA administrators report that their relationship with the broader community – the community beyond the parents and students served in the school – occurs mostly as a result of the learning partnerships they create for their students. The school works with the local environmental agency on conservation projects and gardening projects, for example. CA also works with a foster grandparents group that provides volunteers for the classrooms. The school also works with another volunteer program called HOST – or Helping One Student at a Time. The program brings in volunteers from the business community to work with students. Beyond the connections the school makes to community for the sake of student learning, CA administrators said they "don't consciously think about it," but must be somewhat aware of those relationships through their day to day dealings with parents and businesses. "When we're interacting with the business community I think we're mainly thinking of the (larger city)." Tom noted the school "has some" relationships with local business communities and the neighborhood

association. He noted that the neighborhood association provides a vehicle for connecting students to service-learning opportunities.

Tom defined the role of school in community as providing "support to the missions of the community agencies and service to others." Nancy noted the difficulty in defining a school community. "Community gets defined for you in some ways by who contacts you." Nancy added: "I think community is defined by what the school stands for, what the school believes, the philosophy, and so on."

CA's relationship with the city district school is "uneasy" according to Board President Steve because CA is a charter school and charter schools "have taken away from the numbers (of students enrolled in the district)." The relationship is tense, he said, based on the fact that "when we try to get cooperation from the public schools for using their buses, we can't get it. They don't want to do things that they perceive are directly supporting a charter school." CA Administrators noted that they received more cooperation from the school district when the school was a private school. Tom noted:

> "Very early on they refused to let us use their co-op for school supplies. As a private school they let us do that." Nancy remembered: "We could buy used desks or paper goods. We bought all our school supplies through them. But then when we became a charter school...."

Tom also explained his effort in trying to establish an accounting contract with the district:

> " I went through about a two-week period of discussions and meetings with them. They were going to do our accounting for us. I went to meetings and explained how it would work and the people at that level were open to it, but at one point

they got word from up above saying, "No. You will not provide any service to charter schools.' It would have been a contracted service. It could have been a profit for them. They could have made money on it, you know?"

Board President Steve said the relationship between the charter school and the nearby public school also is tense:

"I don't know what the relationship is exactly with the school nearby. I think that is uneasy, too. CA put a fence up alongside (the neighboring school). CA had problems with the kids from the public school walking alongside the charter school." Steve said although there is little relationship with the district schools and the nearby church, he said it has been a "peaceful coexistence" with the nearby school and church.

Administrator Tom attributes at least part of the adversarial relationship between public district schools and charter schools to the state governor that introduced the charter legislation. "It's partly a function of some schools feeling ownership of students and the dollars, but it's also a function of the way charter schools were introduced. They were introduced with a lot of criticism." Nancy added that the rhetoric around the reason for charter schools was critical of public school districts and public school teachers.

CA administrators noted that they have seen changes in the school-community relationship as a result of the charter school movement. District schools, they reported, are much more client-based than they were before the charter policies, and district schools are more open to visitors and parents who are searching for schools. "They have to be," said Nancy. "There's competition." Tom agreed, "Each child is a treasure. Each is worth $6,700."

Charter School Findings: Comparisons and Contrasts

The answer to the question this dissertation poses, "Are charter schools responsive to a broader community than the students and parents they directly serve," appears to be, "It depends." It depends on mission, on the individual and collective visions of board members, and it depends on the structures in place that affect the governance of the schools. None of the charter schools successfully met all of the criteria for democratic representation. At least two of the schools limited expression at board meetings by meeting behind locked doors. Information flow to the community was practically non-existent in three schools, and very limited in a fourth, and representation of community in school decision-making was primarily dependent on how much input the community might have in the selection of board members and the make-up of individual boards. But there is evidence from the study that depending on a school's mission, charter schools may in fact serve as an associational democracy (Smith, 2001), representing the educational needs of the under-represented. Finally, the autonomy of public charter schools provides an opportunity for innovation. If it is in the mission of the school to share that innovation for the betterment of public education in the state, the public charter school may be seen as representing a more global interest than just the parents and students participating in the charter school program.

The mission and vision of a public charter school in many ways also drives the school-community relationship. In each of the four schools in the study, the missions and visions articulated by respondents defined "community" and how that community would be represented. SCAs mission, for example, identified an interest in working with the downtown community to preserve and build a healthy downtown environment. Part of

that mission was to serve students who otherwise would leave the city and part of that mission was to serve the needs of underutilized organizations and agencies. This mission permeated the conversations with SCA respondents and it clearly directed school leaders to keep the interests of the downtown neighborhood in mind when making school decisions. Board members also included input from the downtown organizations when nominating potential board members. ICA respondents identified its community as the inner city, and its aim to serve the inner city youth who have been underserved by the district schools. Both of these schools exemplified what Smith (2001) identified as the democratic potential of charter schools; the ability of the charter school to serve as an "associational democracy" that represents the educational needs of the otherwise under-represented.

The data from REA and CA did not indicate as strong a tendency toward associational representation, but respondents from these schools did talk about their missions in relation to "community." As Plank (1997) argued, however, "community" is a term that needs to be defined to be adequately understood. In these two schools, "community" was less about representation of citizen or neighborhood interests and more about building a "community" within the school that supports the teaching and learning of the school's students. REA respondents noted "learning in community" is an important concept in the Reggio Emilia approach. Educators and students engage the surrounding community as a learning field, rather than as a function of representing local interests in school decisions. The evidence did suggest, however, that REA is working with local agencies and businesses to develop relationships that serve both the needs of the students and the neighboring organizations. REA also discussed the idea that they aim to serve a

community of educators who could benefit from the lessons learned through REA's innovation. CA respondents also talked about their goal to build a learning community. In this case, community means the students and parents enrolled in the school, although the school's relationships with community organizations provide service-learning opportunities that benefit both the students and the organizations. CA respondents noted that the school had very little relationship with local residents.

Data from the study also indicate that who makes up the board of a public charter school affects how the community is represented in school decision-making. When the broader community is not well-represented in school decision-making, the immediate needs of the school will take precedence over more public interests like equitable access. For example, REA's board is primarily made up of representatives from the private college that spearheaded the school and REA parents and former parents. REA's decision to continue to delay action on the implementation of creating an accessible environment for both students and citizens who might be interested in attending the second-floor board meetings was based on what was convenient for the school. Here is an example where the policy of autonomous governance goes against the policy of equitable access. In another example, CA administrators require 20 to 40 hours of parent participation in school activities, or according to a CA board member, parents and students are "given the heave ho." While there is much research to recommend parental involvement in a child's education, requiring participation as a condition of enrollment is an exclusionary practice, and a board that is more representative of the larger community may be more likely to question such a practice than a board that is made up entirely of CA parents.

It is the role of the public school authorizer to ensure the autonomy of charter schools does not jeopardize issues of equity and access, and while data from interviews and documents indicate that the responsibilities of authorizers are substantial, data also indicate authorizers play little role in the oversight of how the public is represented in school decision making. The fact that none of the school's board nominations were ever rejected indicates that the autonomy these schools have extends to its ability to appoint its own governors, which can lead to self-interested governance at the expense of the public interest. Only one of the school's authorizers actively interviews board candidates and that is for a board that is made up entirely of parents. The lack of authority CA board members said they have over their administrator presents another set of issues for charter school governance. What is the purpose of a governing board if it lacks the authority to govern?

So, the make-up of the school boards make a difference to community representation, but do the differences in governance structures make a difference to representation? According to data in this study, not as much as one would think. Miron and Nelson (2001) indicate that charter schools managed by for-profit organizations run the risk of ceding control to the management organizations themselves. EMOs that control facilities, curriculum, and employees have great power over governing boards. ICA is the only school in the study to be managed by an EMO and data from this study indicate that EMOs do exercise a considerable amount of control over school programming. In the case of ICA, however, the board appears to exercise its role as the authority in control; the EMO is seen by the board as a service provider, which can be fired at any time for not meeting the expectations of the board. ICA owns its own

building, so the EMO does not have control over its facilities. Data from ICA indicate that its EMO relationship is not an impediment to meeting the goals it has set out to achieve, again in large part to the make-up of the board and the board's mission in meeting the needs of the inner city neighborhood. However, there is a noticeable difference in the autonomy of the boards in term of developing their educational program. The ICA board identified that it wanted a quality program for inner city youth and looked for a provider to provide that program. Board members were not interested in designing curriculum; they recognized that they did not have the time or expertise to do that. However, respondents of the other charter schools in the study indicated that the design of their own program was an important part of their work. Even the CA board, which primarily adopted the program of the former private school, discussed making changes to the educational program based on the needs of students and their families.

The fact that REA is governed by a local school district may lead one to think that the district governing board, which is elected by the community, would take a greater role in the governance of the charter school, but data indicate the practice of the university authorizer and the district authorizer are much the same. Each provides a liaison to the charter school, and it is the liaison's responsibility to provide support and monitor the progress of the school. In the case of the district charter school, however, there was data to indicate that district citizens may put pressures on the district board for help in dealing with unresolved issues at the charter school. However, data indicate such pressure only happened when an REA parent turns to the board for help in resolving an issue. Having a local district authorizer is not likely to increase charter school oversight if citizens do not have access to charter school board meetings or are not informed about charter school

decisions. Lack of citizen representation, in other words, makes it difficult for the citizenry to effectively use their power as an electorate to engage the district board in more charter oversight.

In some ways, the district is more hands-off or distant from its charter school than other types of authorizers. The district does not include charter information on its Web site and REA respondents indicated that the district board pays little attention to what goes on at the charter school. The fact that REA has been out of compliance with School Code policy regarding access to its second floor for four years is an indication that the district board is not as attentive to the charter school's practices as it should be. Data also indicate that the district liaison role is less of an enforcer than a communicator. The fact that the liaison has been "bothered" by the practice of meeting in a locked school but has done nothing to change that practice indicates that the district and its liaison exercises little control over the charter school board.

The district charter also had noticeably different relationships with the community than charters authorized by the two universities. The REA board has a contract with an employee of the private Catholic college that initiated the school, and the treasurer of the college serves as the treasurer of the board. In addition, the school's landlord is – in essence – the neighborhood church, although the lease agreement is run through the college and not through the church itself. REA respondents acknowledged these relationships are tricky, but they say they have taken care to make sure they do not impede on the public nature of the school. The board treasurer, for example, has a conflict of interest statement that outlines his limitations as a board member. However, it is notable that the district is the only authorizer in the study that does not limit these types

of relationships. Data from a draft of standards for authorizers by the state indicate that conflicts of interests are the responsibility of authorizers. As written in the document: "Authorizers shall establish policy and procedures to oversee public school academies regarding potential conflicts of interest, implement a system that monitors for its identification, and analyze that potential when identified."[26] It is clear from interview and document data that both university authorizers in the study have increased their standards for the nomination of board members. A revised document by one of the university authorizers in the study states that board members of its public school academies may not "be a director, officer, or employee of an company or other entity that contracts with the Academy."[27]

Data from the schools indicate that all of the schools aim in some sense to use their autonomy to provide a program that addresses educational needs in ways that large, bureaucratic schools cannot. It was in the mission of SCA and REA, however, to develop a program that could change the way education in general is delivered. In this way, these two schools' aimed to respond to the needs of a larger community by improving the practice of public education.

A look at the comparison of demographics in the charter schools and their neighboring district schools helps to explain the story (Table 1). SCA's mission was to design a school similar to that of the district's select middle high school, but one that serves a broader group of students. SCA in comparison with the district's middle high school shows greater diversity in its student population, with much greater numbers of

[26] Source: PSA Authorization Draft Standards, Central Michigan University http://www.cmucso.org/charter.asp?Link=PSAAuthDRAFTStandards.pdf
[27] Source: Method of Selection Resolution, Grand Valley State University.

African American and Hispanic students and much fewer White students. ICA, which aimed to serve the youth of the inner city – namely African American children – shows very similar demographics to the neighborhood's district elementary school, indicating that the charter school's population is reflective of the population it aimed to serve.

Also telling is the fact the other two charters, whose missions are less representative of the neighborhood and more focused on building a particular type of school, serves different populations of students than their neighboring schools. CA, which borders SEE, for example, serves much fewer students who are on Free and Reduced Lunch, have a much greater White population and a much smaller Hispanic population than the school next door. REA likewise serves a different population than its neighboring school. These data indicate that ICA and SCA are more representative of the neighborhood than the schools that have a mission less representative of neighborhood interests than program interests.

Table 1: Demographics of charter schools compared to neighborhood schools

School — Demographic	SCA (Charter 7-12)	MHS (District 7-12)**	REA (Charter K-5)	NWE (District K-5)**	ICA (Charter K-6)	ICE (District K-6)	CA (Charter K-6)	SEE (District K- 5)
White	38%	78%	43%	21%	–	–	40%	08%
AA	43%	12%	19%	14%	96%	93%	47%	57%
AI	04%	<01%	10%	3%	–	<01%	–	01%
Asian	02%	06%	03%	<01%	–	–	01%	04%
Hispanic	14%	04%	23%	79%	04%	04%	12%	30%
F&RL	N A	14%	81%	86%	92%	93%	40%	81%

AA=African American; AI=American Indian; F&RL=Free and Reduced Lunch

*Statistics taken from the National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002-2003

**Data from these schools are being used for comparison sake only; otherwise, these schools are not part of the study's data set.

The relationship that the charter schools have with their host communities is limited to a few budding partnerships with local organizations and businesses. SCA and ICA respondents described more effort at reaching out to the broader community than the other charters. This again, may be related the missions of these schools. These schools aim to represent the needs of the neighborhood by serving the underserved students in the city's downtown and inner city, respectively. While the mission of REA is to reach out to the education community, respondents reported that that work has not yet been done.

Finally, all of the charter school respondents noted that their relationships with the city school district and the district schools are tense, if not outright adversarial.

Respondents noted that the cause of the tension is in large part the competitive nature of the state's school choice policies. Data indicate that the district board was unresponsive to local charter school boards' attempts to collaborate with the district through contracted food services, the purchase of vacant property, and in the case of CA, the continuation of arrangements it had had with the district as a private school. The mission of the schools had little effect on easing tensions with district schools. Even respondents from REA, the district's own charter, indicated that district schools see them as competition and have not embraced the charter school as a potential pilot of best practices.

Chapter 5

The District Schools

The school choice policies that were implemented by the state in 1993 and 1994 came about because of the perception that public school districts were not responsive to the needs of parents and students. The large, bureaucratic systems of schooling not only prevented school districts from responding to needs but also buffered them from accountability (Chubb & Moe, 1990). In essence, then, Michigan's school choice policies attempted to force responsiveness of public school districts by infusing exit into the school system as a way to deal with discontent (Hirschman, 1970).

Data on district schools in the study are intended for two reasons: 1) to provide a comparison to the charter schools as to how public school districts address issues of community representation and school-community relationships; and 2) to understand, in part, how Michigan's choice policies affect the relationship between the public school district and public charter schools, and ultimately how that relationship affects the representation of community in public school decision-making.

The mission of River City Public School District is "Stronger /Better /Together," highlighting the value of interdependence between the schools and city. River City Public School District enrolls more than 24,000 students, has 5 high schools, 6 middle schools, 44 elementary schools, 20 alternative education programs, 11 special education sites and an adult education program. In addition to the district schools, the district also charters the REA school, but REA is not included in the districts list of elementary offerings. Two of the district's elementary schools, Inner City Elementary and South East

Elementary, were included in this study. Respondents from these schools included the school principals and two members of the district board.

Inner City Elementary

ICE is noted as the district's most troubled school. It sits in the heart of the inner city and its building is one of the district's oldest and most run-down. The school serves 325 K-6 students. The school's population is 93 percent African American, 4 percent Hispanic, 2 percent White, and less than 1 percent American Indian. Ninety-three percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The school district shut down ICE in 1993, citing poor student performance on test scores. The district recruited Sharon, a teacher in another of the district's schools to serve as ICE's principal in 1995. With the passing of a school bond proposal to build new buildings in the district, ICE was identified as the first school in the district to be rebuilt. Plans are underway to knock down the old building and build a brand new building in the same location. Respondents said the new school will be the first new building in the neighborhood in decades, and the board president, who is a community developer, said he expects that the new school building may spur other positive developments in the neighborhood.

Principal Sharon has seen a turn-around in her school since the school reopened. She said:

> "When they closed ICE in 1993, not one child from (the school) had gone on to college in over a decade. And 75 percent of the children from ICA did not graduate from high school in over a decade, and then no one passed the MEAP

test two years in a row. Not one child. Plus the environment was sick and the parents were very hostile. And the standards were just so low."

Now, she said, she is getting invitations for high school graduations and induction ceremonies for honor societies from children who attended ICE. Principal Sharon's focus for the school has been to develop a climate conducive to learning and to rebuild relationships with parents. The school's belief statements are as follows:

"A positive environment enhances the development of the whole child.

Children should be provided with a variety of learning experiences to meet each child's diverse needs.

Children have the right to a safe and orderly school climate.

Parental involvement is a crucial part of developing lifelong learners." (ICE, 2003-2003 Annual Report).

Principal Sharon considers her job a spiritual calling that requires her to lead the community in its support of the school. "What I believe I have done by the grace of God has been to convey what God (wants for) these children and because of that the public has just reached out." Sharon said the community gift giving to the school exceeds all of the other schools in the region. "One year the district had a major budget cut and I was going to lose our social worker, our counselor, all these key things and I needed $138,000, and one woman gave me $150,000." Sharon noted that the school has a partnership with the nearby church, which provides 200-300 volunteer hours a year. Churches are important to the school-community relationship she said because churches have a tradition of ministering to people in need, and inner city public schools, she said, are also a ministry to people in need.

Sharon said her philosophy in turning around the school is to reach out to the families of the children, to treat the children as her own, and not to lay blame for student circumstances but to provide students what they need to be successful in school.

> "So when children show up dirty, with dirty uniforms and smelling bad, instead of going 'Isn't that awful,' we do home visits and we wash the children's clothes. I have a closet down the hall just full of uniforms, clean shirts, underwear, socks, whatever children need. So that we're not just saying to the parents, your child is dirty....It is bad that their parents would let them come to school like that, but what is worse is that you know better and you let them stay that way. So that's when we started washing the clothes and making sure (the children know) that the grown people in your life are supposed to take care of you. And that they know they have a back-up plan: if things aren't going right at home, you've got us."

South East Elementary (SEE)

South East Elementary's (SEE) playground borders the playground of Conversion Academy. The two schools have been back to back since CA first opened as a private school 30 years ago. SEE serves 275 K-5 students. The student population is 57 percent African American, 30 percent Hispanic, 8 percent White, 4 percent Asian, and 1 percent American Indian. Eighty-one percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school is a language center for the district, with students speaking 11 different languages. The school also serves students from a local homeless shelter, which sits within the school's boundaries. SEE's mission is as follows:

> "The staff at SEE is committed to and accepts the responsibility to educate all children to meet or exceed all grade level expectations. We believe that learning

rules of appropriate behavior and being part of a community is necessary for children to develop into well-rounded citizens. Our belief is also that students need to continue to express their individuality in a creative way in the learning process." – 2003-2004 Annual Report

Jenny, the principal of SEE noted that students come from various sections of the neighborhood, which is divided into ethnic pockets. Despite the divisions, Jenny noted that the school and neighborhood are like "family."

Associational Autonomy

The concept of associational representation in democratic societies provides for individuals who may not be able to effectively represent themselves to find representation in association with others. In an urban school district, this type of representation is likely to be found at the board level, but data indicate that it also is found at the school level. District board members noted that the district responds to a variety of groups including the African American Men's Group, a Hispanic group, and a Second Language Parent group. Board Member Andie said while it is healthy that the individual groups have their own representation, she said at times it is a challenge to address the needs of separate groups instead of working together as one community. "There's a feeling that we need to all be in the same room at once." She did give an example, however, of the importance of associational representation in the district schools. She explained:

"We had a Native American group come to us and say, 'You know we're just so offended by the (school's nickname) Chippewa Indians. We are just really offended.' And when you sit down and look at it you go, 'yeah, I can see where you're coming from. You really aren't a cute mascot, you really living people.

Maybe living people shouldn't be treated as mascots.' And I understand how it all started. All of the streets around the old Chippewa School are all Indian name streets. I can see how it happened way back then, but it's not appropriate now."

Andie said the district board made the decision to change the name of the school and the name of the school mascot in response to the request by the Native American group. That change, she said, offended another group of citizens in the community – namely alumni of the Indian-named school. She said the incident exemplifies the balance district boards must strike in working with a large community. In many cases, it is a matter of weighing one group's interests against another's. She said: "Well (the alumni) are offended because I'm changing a little bit of (their) past versus (the Native Americans) are offended because I've turned them into a cartoon." The district, she said, appropriately changed the name to be more inclusive of the citizens the district serves.

Like two of the charter schools in the study, the two district schools in the study serve specific populations of disadvantaged families, and in many ways their principals use their position to advocate for the needs of the neighborhood and not necessarily the needs of the district. Sharon noted, for example, that schools must have a good relationship with their district boards because the boards support the school activities, but the district board and the district office is "just a parenting umbrella" to the school. Sharon said the school is an integral part of its inner city neighborhood and part of her work with the district board is to keep the neighborhood intact. She said when the district began talking about a new building for ICE there was some talk about moving the location, but she was adamant about keeping the school in its original neighborhood.

"I said what do you mean where are we going to build it? Right here. The same place the children always come. We have a bad habit in this nation of whenever we build something new we move it away so other kids can't get to it. And the kids right here never experience anything like that. So that kind of shut all of that talk down right off the bat. So then we took a look at this site."

Sharon's advocacy extends beyond the school doors, however. She said she sees her role as an advocate for the disadvantaged youth in her school and the families in the neighborhood, which means it is her responsibility to enlighten the community that sits outside of the inner city. Citizens outside of the inner city, said Sharon, are often unaware of the needs of the inner city, and it takes a connection between the broader community and the school to bridge that gap. To that end, Principal Sharon sits on a number of community boards. She joined the city's zoo board recently and told this story:

"I go in there and I'm trying to be quiet. And they're talking and they're good people. They're good people. But they were going to raise the fee. They were saying what a wonderful year they had had. They had made all this money and they were way over their projections, and then they said they were going to raise the fee. And I'm like why would you raise the fee and poor kids can't come now. So I tried to just say, 'Well, now if everything's been so successful this year and you made excess, why would you raise the fee when there are poor children who can't go now?' And they just looked at each other. They weren't bad people. I said, 'My whole school – the whole population of poor kids – they don't go to the zoo. They can't. It's gotten to the point where it's a major thing if I've got four kids that can go. We have to read about it. We can't go.' And they were like,

'Really?' So long story short, as a result of that one meeting, out of that one dialogue came a new program called Jump, and it pays for poor children and their families to go to the zoo two times a year, and it's got a bus pass, too."

Sharon noted that the zoo is only one example of the types of activities her students do not have access to. The city is rich with cultural opportunities but she said those opportunities are not accessible to poor inner city children.

Sharon also uses her autonomy to direct the priorities of the school. While the state's department of education, for example, has targeted the school as a school in need of improvement on the state's assessment test, the school's principal remarked that her priorities are not the test, but the children. "The inner city schools – there's so many barriers that when they start telling me the most important thing is getting them ready for the MEAP, I just have to laugh." Part of the problem, Principal Sharon noted, is that the students in the inner city cannot compete with suburban students who have a strong support system and "everything they need." She said, "Here I've got a kid who starts kindergarten and they have had the 0 to 5 gap – just a big black hole. And we're trying to fill that hole up as fast as we can. Well you never really fill it up."

SEE's principal indicated that she advocates for the needs of the local neighborhood in the same way that ICE's principal does. However, she noted that SEE represents a number of different groups, including non-English speaking families, and youth from homeless shelters. Jenny said the school provides a place of continuity for the transient youth and families that make up her school population. She said: "You want those children to feel comfortable in one location. So they might move several times but be bused to us – so that we are the continuity for them."

Choice in Representation

Unlike in public charter schools, voters have a direct say in the choice of representatives who make up the district's board. In this way, voters in district schools have direct input into how they are represented in school decision-making, although there was some disagreement among board members as to how citizens are represented in a city-wide election. The district board president noted that the city-wide election does not fairly represent the needs of the individual neighborhoods as evidenced by the imbalance of neighborhood representation on the school board. The district board is made up of 9 citizens who are elected from a city-wide pool of candidates. Four of the members reside in the city's South East side, two are from the North East, two are from the North West and one is from the South West. While the city-wide election allows for all citizens in the district to pick its public school trustees, Michael noted that a ward election system would be more fair and more representative of the city's constituents.

Board Member Andie, however, said that as an official elected city-wide, the responsibility of board members is to represent the city as a whole and not individual neighborhoods. She said the role of the district board member is to serve "as an interface" between the community – the parents of school children and the community that does not have kids in school - and the school. She said:

> "We have a social responsibility because we produce the people who are going to sell them their goods, produce their goods, drive on the same street with them, live next door to them, work for them perhaps, employ them perhaps. This is why there is a social interest in maintaining strong public schools to begin with, because we affect everybody."

Board President Michael agreed that the district board has the responsibility to represent all citizens in school decisions. However, he said the immediate neighborhood that surrounds a school should be of greater concern than the community at large.

> "If you were to think about it in terms of concentric circles, at the core it's the families of the school system itself, because they have the greatest interest. The second would be I believe the neighborhood around that school and everything that's made up around those neighborhoods. So that could be neighborhood associations, business associations, businesses, hospitals, people that have a vested interest. And then the next concentric circle would be the folks in the city because the city can't be healthy if we don't have healthy public schools. So for me it's a matter of concentric circles, and if you look at the whole pie, it's everybody, but I think we have to prioritize where are responsibilities lie."

Respondents noted that one of the main differences between representation of community in the district and representation of community in charter schools is that the public school district does not turn students away. Board Member Andie said it is a "source of pride" with her that the district schools serve everybody. She explained:

> "Charter schools are perfectly free to say 'I'm sorry, the 3rd grade is full.' We're not. And I think that is a very important thing. And I'm actually kind of proud of it. It doesn't matter if we have too many 3rd graders. Your 3rd grader has a room with us. It's one of the challenges, but it is a source of pride for me that we do serve everybody no matter when they walk in, no matter what they present with."

The district board members also said they have the responsibility of serving the interests of the State.

The fact that district board members are elected and not appointed means different things to the two district board members. Board Member Andie notes that the election process in the district board election gives the decision-making power to all voters in the community, and it is the responsibility of the community to understand how the decisions they make in the voting booth affect the school district and the community. For Michael, the election provides for a "theoretical" legitimacy of office from the city's electorate. However, practically speaking, he said legitimacy of office comes from the same place as it does for public charter schools: producing a good product that attracts parents to the school.

One of the disadvantages to the election process, according to Michael, is that it attracts candidates whose interest may not be the best interest of the kids. He said there are three types of candidates who run for office in an urban school district:

> "The first kind is going to be someone that just really wants to be involved in the system and feels they can make a difference. That's a good board member – you know, somebody who understands their role and serves it and does their role well. The second type of board member I think is somebody who has political aspirations. It's a fairly easy election process. I mean, you get a hundred names on a list and you run a campaign. It's an easy first step into the political realm. The third type of person that I think an urban school board would attract would be somebody that has a personal axe to grind. And that spectrum's pretty broad. They're mad about something in the school system so they're going to come in

and they're going to take it over. Or maybe they think that the public school system in America is the answer to all evils. Or they have some ideological viewpoint about what public schools are."

The motivational differences among board members can cause problems for an urban school system. He explained:

> "It can hurt you because if you look at just those three things, there's competing values. If you care about the system, you're in the first camp. If you're trying to gain higher political office, you don't want to be controversial. So then you're dealing with things out of political motive and maybe not out of what's best for kids."

The differences in the way individual board members behave also have an effect on the school-community relationship. Michael noted one long-time district board member who has been abrasive in his talk against charter schools, home-schooling, and parochial schools. This member is unique among the members of the board, and yet the voice of the one board member can create a negative relationship with the larger community. In other words, he said, having a board member who "blasts" choice parents is detrimental to the district and to the community. "If we're out there trying to gain support on an initiative or a bond issue for which we need all of the (city's) voters or on a bond issue, I think offending charter school parents, parochial school parents, and home school parents is certainly not the way to engender love and support from those organizations."

All of the district respondents noted that the district schools represent the larger community interest in part through the relationship between the presence of a neighborhood school and residential property values. Respondents noted in the case of

charter schools that correlation does not exist. Michael noted the investment of residents into the neighborhood school goes beyond real estate, however. "Our schools are by and large filled by an attendance area. So people who live within that neighborhood send their kids to that school. So they have a lot more vested interest as opposed to someone who drives in, drops their kids off, and leaves." Michael also made the point that school closings in a district affect the whole community in a much more dramatic way than a charter school closing would.

> "The political ramifications are far reaching beyond just closing the school down. The City Commission had to be involved because of the public interest in that property. We had some empty land that we're selling and if we were any other landowner, the highest bid wins. But we're not. We're a landowner that happens to be a public school system. So we have to have all these contingencies and all these assurances from the buyer in regard to what the use of the building is going to be. Because from now until I don't know how many years from now, the public will always equate that property to our school system."

The principals of the two district elementary schools in the study said they recognized that the residents in their school area are their constituents, but like the charter school principals, both principals said their responsibility is primarily to the students and parents of the school. Neither said they thought the difference in how board members are chosen in districts and charter schools makes a difference to how community's needs are addressed in schools. Principal Sharon said, rather, that the difference is in the school leadership and the vision of school leaders. SEE's Principal Jenny said that representation may depend more on the type of school than on the difference between election and

appointment. "You could have someone that sits and heads a charter school that could be a neighborhood person," just as an elected district board member may be. She also noted that charter school board members could be individuals "that's never seen the neighborhood or never been associated with it." Another issue with community representation in charter schools, noted Jenny, is that the community is to a large extent unaware of the public nature of charter schools. CA , she said, has been in the neighborhood for 30 years, and even though it has been a public school for the last 10 years, the community still thinks of it as a private school.

The district's governing relationship with REA garners little attention from the district board. However, Board Member Andie noted that if citizens were to come to the district board to with a concern about the charter school, it would be up to the district board to make sure the issue is resolved by the school. Otherwise, Andie reported that the responsibility of the district board is to ensure that the school meets its legal deadlines and obligations. "We don't have anything to do with the day-to-day operations of it. We sign off on whoever they say they want on their board, but we don't pick their board . We don't interfere with it. We charter it, but we don't interfere." She added: "It is the way chartering works that we're supposed to keep our fingers out. The ISD said it best – they said noses in, fingers out."

Freedom of Expression

The freedom of citizens to express their concerns to a school district is monitored in large part through the exercise of voice in public school district board meetings. Public district board meetings are open to the public, and respondents said board members as public officials are typically available to the public to address concerns or issues that

come up. Board Member Andie explained: "Anybody can call us up. Our phone numbers are published. They're on our Web site. They're right there. Anybody can and does call me up. Our e-mail is not published as readily, although we have an e-mail address where everything can go to our board secretary and she sees to it that we get it." Andie said the board provides two places in the board meeting for public comment, and anyone who addresses the board will receive a written response if one is requested.

At the board meeting I attended, it was clear that community voice was a large part of the district's meetings. Following are observations from that board meeting:

> *As I approached the district administration building for the 6 p.m. board meeting, I noticed the entrance and parking lot was well lit and the doors were unlocked – not propped open for board members as they were in the charter school meetings – but unlocked, freely opening and shutting. I walked in with several others. I was 15 minutes early. A security guard greeted people as they came in and pointed the way to the auditorium in which the meeting would be held. There were two entrances into the auditorium. At both entrances were long tables with stacks of papers. They were copies of the meeting's agenda and documentation. The packets were thick and available for anyone as they walked in. There was no one monitoring the distribution of packets. I sat in the back center of the auditorium so I could take notice of people that might be coming into the meeting. There was a steady flow of people and by the time the meeting started, I counted 65 people sitting in the auditorium, a diverse mix of women and men. Some were noticeably district staff, but it appeared by the way people were dressed and how they were talking that the majority of people in the audience were community members.*

There was a television news interview taking place with ICE's Principal Sharon at the front of the auditorium. Board members were bustling about ignoring the interview.

The agenda for the meeting was short, with some board recognitions the district called "celebrations," the discussion and action of a small land sale to a community development group, and some staff reports on finances, enrollment, construction and the possibility of a year-round school at one of the schools. Yet the meeting lasted 3 1/2 hours due to the volume of public comment. The following notes from the board meeting attempt to capture the exercise of community voice in the district board meeting:

After the board made its recognitions to a community volunteer and school staff for the work they are doing in the district, the board president then addressed the audience and explained the procedure for public comment. He said each person is entitled to 3-minutes to make their comment, but asked since there were so many people in the audience that if there were a group of people together making the same comment, if individuals would consider consolidating their time. He also asked that if individuals were there to either support or not support the sale of property to a certain community development organization, if they would simply make their support known by saying support. And if they were there to support the sale of land to the other community development organization that was interested in the property if they would make their support known simply by saying support for the other organization. About 20 people spoke, with maybe five to seven of them taking full use of their 3-minute period. During this time people were

flowing in and out of the meeting. The board closed the first public comment about 7:10 p.m. at which time 10 to 15 people left the room.

From 7:10 p.m. until about 8:40 p.m. the board heard from staff, who reported on various initiatives in the district, including school construction, which included a discussion of the needs of neighborhood residents. The board also heard about district enrollment, and a year-round school initiative. At 8:40 p.m., the board took action on its proposals and opened up public comment again for items not on the agenda. This time the board heard from a passionate mother about the transportation needs of her student. My notes read as follows:

Once the action was taken, another 15 to 20 people left the room. After the action items were taken care of, there was a second public comment for items not on the agenda. At this point, a woman addressed the board asking for the district to transport her child from her house to the school of choice in which the child is enrolled. She made the point that the child's neighborhood school is listed as a "failing school" and therefore, by law, she said the district had to provide transportation for her child to the school of his choice in the district. She argued: "My son should have transportation to his school and he does not have transportation. He is the only one in his neighborhood who has to walk a mile or more to school." The board did not respond to her request and when she asked for a response, the superintendent replied: "We have reviewed this and given you an answer. I do not believe you will get a different answer this time either. We are doing what everyone else is doing in this situation." The woman asked the board

for a copy of the district's policy and the board president said he would send her a copy of that policy.

At the end of the discussion, the board heard from the district education association president who presented the district's business manager with an award. At 9:10 p.m., the board heard board comments, and the meeting adjourned about 9:30 p.m. The district board meetings are video-taped and run on the district's television station for approximately two weeks, until a new meeting is taped.

Board President Michael noted that while the board tries to be responsive to the concerns of citizens, it does not always do the best job of responding to citizen needs.

> "You know it's one of three things – we're going to handle it right, we're going to overreact, or we're going to drop the ball. And dropping the ball usually involves not taking the claim seriously or realizing that the problem that was presented has such huge structural implications that there's no way you can figure out how to solve it so you just kind of throw your hands up and say, 'Oh well, that's just the way it is,' rather than get in and try to find a different way to deal with it."

Board Member Andie noted that the responsibility for voice is a two-way street. She said voters have a responsibility to use the avenues for voice that the district makes available. The turnout for voting in the district, said the board respondents, is typically about 8 percent. Said Andie:

> "When we're running an election we say this is the closest form of representative government you're ever going to get. The person who represents you may end up living next to you. How often are you going to live next to the president? This is what's going to affect the quality of life in our city. The community has got to pay

attention. If you're seeing the school board isn't setting sound policy, isn't demanding accountability from their one employee, if the board isn't if doing the job that needs to be done to maintain the schools which are at least as an important chunk of the infrastructure as the sewer system, if the community at large isn't seeing what they want to see about how their schools are running, it's the community's responsibility to vote."

Michael said in his view the district does a good job of getting input from "everybody" when it comes to school decision-making. "I think we do a fantastic job gaining community input on almost all levels of the decision-making process." He gave the example of a 360-degree evaluation in which principals and teachers will be evaluated not only by their supervisors, but the community that uses their services. "We'll eventually have parental input directly reflecting on teacher evaluations in a reasonable kind of way."

Michael also mentioned that community has voice in school decision-making through a number of community liaison committees set up through the district. The school leaders meet regularly with the City leaders, for example, and the district superintendent also meets with what is called the CEO Roundtable, which includes heads of major industries in the area. There is another group called the Education Reform Initiatives that includes representatives from all of the foundations in the city. Finally, Michael noted the district board meets regularly with the local community college board to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Andie said the voice that the community has in the public school system is important to the health of the whole city. By contrast, she said, the lack of citizen voice in charter schools is dangerous to the health of the city:

> "Charter schools were founded on the basis of non-interference from the community at large. You are separate. You are nimble . You aren't carrying the weight of the community. You may react however you want. Well, that's good except when you get so many of them that they are now part of the infrastructure of the city. And you can't say you're independent anymore."

At the school level, ICE's Principal Sharon noted that community members can take part in decision making by volunteering to represent the community on the School Improvement Team, although she also said the school makes the invitation to either groups or individuals they'd like to have sit on the School Improvement Team. She also said all of the residents in the neighborhood are invited to participate in community forums, such as the ones the school and the district have been hosting regarding the new school's new building project. "The first meeting is tomorrow and we've got the whole community. The district sent out (notices) to over 3,000 residents in the neighborhood."

Sharon said residents' voices are important in the planning of the new building because the school will be a big part of the neighborhood, and the neighbors need to have patience with the construction process. "So we want them at the meetings to tell them w hat they can expect. That there's going to be days that we're all tired of this construction going on, and you might be awakened at 6 in the morning with a jack drill, and you need to say, "Oh, that's the school.'"

Principal Jenny at SEE also said neighborhood residents feel comfortable calling her with issues or concerns. "The door is always open. It's an open dialogue. And they laugh at me because I say I want to be more business oriented. I want it to be shared leadership, not top down. So suggestions are always welcome." Jenny said she feels in the neighborhood as if "we are all family," although she said she does not feel as though CA is part of that family. "They're up there doing their own thing. I don't know if they want to be a part of what we're doing."

Freedom of Information

The district has many avenues for the dissemination of information to the community. Andie noted that the only pieces of information that are not accessible by the public are pieces related to contract negotiations, anything that would violate the rights of a student or a family, and superintendent reviews if the superintendent asks that they be conducted in private. "We are definitely very interested in making sure that we're as open as we can possibly be about everything without violating somebody's rights."

The district has a newsletter that is mailed to every household in the city four times a year. The newsletter includes contact information, test information, the school calendar, and news updates. The district's Web site is extensive, and includes pages for board information and meeting notes, administration and communications from the superintendent, news and events, athletics, student services, district services, transportation, human services, the school calendar, information on the school bond project, pages and links to individual schools, and a page about the city itself and the partnerships that exist between the schools and the city-wide community. The district also has a cable television station that broadcasts board meetings and school events, and

all board meetings are covered by area media that disseminates information to the public through the newspapers and television news programs.

School newsletters go out to families of students in the district schools once a week, but like their charter school counterparts, individual district schools send little information to neighborhood residents who do not have children in the school. However, both principals noted that they make a point of communicating information about the school to the larger community. ICA Principal Sharon said every Friday she tells senior citizens about what is going on in the school and school forums are open to community to express issues of concern or interest. SEE Principal Jenny said she tries to keep the community informed about school events through the school marquee, which she said neighbors pay attention to.

Inclusive Representation

District respondents noted that the public school district serves everyone in the city, and representation is inclusive. Sharon noted that ICE serves " whoever shows up at the door. That's what the mission of the public schools is – to educate and better the lives of every person who shows up at the door. So it's not exclusive." She also noted that who shows up defines the priorities for the school. A district school that serves poor children who do not have support at home will have different priorities than a school that can turn away students who do not meet the school's expectations. She noted a friend of hers is a charter school principal in town who asked her why the public district schools let the children participate in the school program if they exhibit poor behavior. "And I told her, 'So where do they go?'" Sharon said she has seen students come back to her school after being encouraged to leave a charter school. She said:

"The charter schools have a way of if you don't work well with them, if things don't go smooth, they let you know that you need to go to your neighborhood school. And we've had kids return here from charters because of that. And that's one thing I believe charters need to stop (doing). If they're going to call themselves a public school, the state needs to hold them to the same standards. If a child shows up at a lot of our charter schools and has behavior issues, they do not get to stay."

SEE's Principal Jenny described her school community as inclusive of "the neighborhood, the parents, the church, all of those affiliated with the surrounding neighborhood." Jenny also noted the differences she sees between the district school and local charter schools.

"With the district school we take children no matter what. We can't selectively screen if there are behavior issues. We can't choose to release them. We continue to teach them and work with their needs. Behavior problems in a charter school, if they become too apparent, they can make them leave, revoke their transfer, and then they will be absorbed back into the public (district) school."

Jenny said the district offers the special education services charter schools cannot offer, and so often charter schools will contract with the district to provide those services to student. The relationship between the charter and the district she said is "two-way street that feels like it is going one way." She said it is frustrating to her to see the charter schools rely on district programs but then be selective in the students they serve.

The School-Community Relationship

The district respondents, namely the district board members, clearly stated that the district works hard to maintain a strong relationship with the community at large. Even the principals who noted that their responsibilities were primarily to their students and parents, indicated that they, too, have significant relationships with the broader community. For example, ICE's Principal Sharon notes that the success of the school is reflected in part in an improved relationship between the school and community, and her work in building that community.

> "When I first got here, (the residents) were bitter about the school. They had no respect for the school....I think pretty much everybody had kind of started looking at it as a lost cause back then. And it took awhile for them to take ownership again and want to be a part of it. Now we have a lot of people who come and who (do) different things for the school."

Part of what Sharon does to draw in the community includes reaching out to citizens by talking with them on the street, in the grocery story, or providing services such as the Friday lunches to senior citizens. "The food truck has turned into a wonderful opportunity to go and talk to our neighbors right around us every Friday. And if something is going on at school, I announce it at the food truck." Sharon said:

> "I'm trying to (get) the old feeling of the village where even though they're seniors they look out for the kids. And they look out for the building. And all the different cousins of these kids. That's why I think we probably almost never have incidents of graffiti or anything because I try to – even when I'm walking down the street I'll see some of the bigger cousins and say, 'how are you doing? How's

school going?' Or, 'You're really smart. You need to be back in school.' And take the time to build community like that."

District respondents indicated that the district also has relationships with other schools in the area as well as the Intermediate School District. Board Member Andie noted that she sits on the ISD's Intermediate Association of School Boards to connect to other schools in the county. The relationships with other districts, she said, are healthy for all the schools. Explained Andie, "We have this ability to sit down and say, 'Alright, legislatively what's hurting you? Or what do you need to see happen? Or what would happen if this were passed?' And it's allowed us a forum to try to sort it out so that we don't step on somebody else's needs without knowing about them." The district also has formal relationships with parochial and private schools, but district respondents report that the district has very little relationship to area charter schools, and the relationship the district does have with charter schools is tense. Andie noted:

> "There are charters that we can prove come-on to our kids to come to them and magically after count day they can't serve them anymore. And so we get this sorting kind of action....And it happens marvelously year after year. Especially kids with learning disabilities. What it means is they routinely scoop, pick out the more able, higher SES kids and filter back the lower functioning kids and hand them back to us. And that scooping action and filtering action creates a false image in our public schools of what our public looks like. There's no way on earth that this city is 72 percent living at the poverty rate. But my schools are. And the more mechanisms society has for scooping out what's making it and

dropping back (what's not), the harder my pool becomes to deal with. The harder it is to educate and provide opportunity."

SEE's Principal Jenny relayed a similar story of charter schools recruiting students for count day and then sending them back to the neighborhood school. She said that type of selection process can "tear the (school-community) relationship apart." She said:

> "We'll have children that have been in our schools for weeks, and automatically, almost the day before, the parents will get a call (from a charter) and say bring them in the next day. So you've had relationships with children or families forever, and they think it's going to be better. And they'll leave on that hope, and they'll call you within three weeks and come back. So it's like sometimes I feel like we're the revolving door for money, when it happens like that. We know we're going to lose them, but you don't feel so bad when that was a life choice they made. But when you feel like they're snatched from you, it makes you feel a little resentful."

Board President Michael was more discriminating in his criticism of charter schools, saying he has much respect for some charters, but little respect for charter schools that are out to make a profit. "Well we actually have a charter school – a school that we charter, so I wouldn't say necessarily that we're against charter schools. Frankly, I think it depends on what premise one has about charter schools and why there's a need for charter schools. If you are of the sort that has the premise that charter schools are necessary for competition then there cannot be a relationship between charter schools and public schools." Michael said, however, there he supports the work of certain charter schools that are designed to help students at-risk or disadvantaged students -charters like

SCA or ICA, for example. Said Michael, "When it comes to helping the struggling kids, there's no corner on the market. If you want to come into our schools and help struggling kids and struggling communities, man, I will open the door wide for you." He added that any of the four charter schools in the central city are schools for which he has high respect. The schools he does not respect are those that locate around the periphery where to get a higher per pupil foundation rate "and then pick off our students. I don't believe there is a lot of room for wanting to work with them, frankly."

District School Findings: Comparisons and Contrasts with Public Charter Schools

Data from the district respondents indicate that there are both differences and similarities in the way citizens are represented in school decision-making. These data also help further explain the relationship between the public charter schools and the city's school district. This relationship is important to understanding how community is represented in the overall system of public school decision-making.

One of the main differences in how citizens are represented in district schools versus charter schools is, of course, the difference in the election process. District respondents note that although turnout in school elections is typically quite low, district board members indicate a much broader scope of responsibility than their charter school counterparts. One district board member said his responsibility is to the school, its neighborhood, and ultimately to the entire district community. Another district board member indicated that in her view district board representation must be city-wide in order that the district does not become divided over neighborhood issues. In one sense, then, one board member's view of representation aligns more closely to the idea of associational autonomy than another. If representation were by wards, it is likely that

board members would act in ways to advocate the interests of their neighborhoods over the interest of the district.

The idea of associational representation is as present in the district as it is in the charter school. ICE's principal in particular exemplifies the notion of a school representing an underserved population. By taking her advocacy beyond the limits of the inner city neighborhood and out to the greater city community, the ICE principal's efforts to represent the needs of the inner city neighborhood extended further than that of the charter school that also exhibited a sense of associational representation. SEE's work to represent the various needs of the school neighborhood, including those of transient students and non-English speaking families, also indicates a level of associational representation.

Unlike charter schools, the school district disseminates information to the community-at-large and district respondents say the district leaders work hard to keep the community informed. Media coverage and ongoing television broadcasts of district board meetings, quarterly newsletters that go to all residents of the city, and a well maintained and comprehensive Web site make information about the district and its schools relatively easy to come by. The charter schools in the study, in contrast, make little information available to residents of the neighborhoods in which the schools reside, let alone the city's community-at-large.

There were stark differences in the way board meetings are conducted in the district schools and charter schools. The district school board meeting was truly open to anyone who walked through the district office doors. The doors were unlocked, the entrance was well-lit, and all materials for the meeting were laid out for anyone to take.

More than 65 citizens attended the meeting, and many of those in attendance spoke up during the public comment section of the meeting. The presence of the citizenry and the media creates a level of responsiveness for district board members that does not exist in the charter schools. Given that the district serves a city of more than 100,000, with a school population of about 25,0000, it is expected that more citizens would turn-out for a district board meeting than a single-school charter board meeting. However, the accessibility to the meeting and the freedom of board information was a notable difference in how expression and information is handled in a public school district versus a public charter school.

Data from the district board meeting also indicated, however, that while citizens are given the right to speak, what they have to say may or may not be adequately addressed. District board respondents acknowledged the difficulty in adequately addressing individual concerns. Part of the problem, they said, is the need to weigh the benefits of the individual over the benefit of the many. Such was the case with the woman who hoped the district would provide busing for her child, a service she said she was entitled to by law. The board responded to her request for a copy of the district policy, but the superintendent told the woman not to expect the decision of the district to change, because he said, "we're doing what everyone else is doing." While charter school data indicates the charter schools get very few statements of concern from their constituencies, there appeared to be a greater attention paid to such concerns. This difference in responsiveness is likely a function of the size of the school and the size of the communities the charter schools represent (Dahl, 1998; Mintrom, 2001). However, it is clear that the structures for democratic representation are more comprehensive and

systematic in the district school system than in the charter schools. How well those structures are used is a matter for consideration.

Chapter 6

Community Response

In order to understand the school-community relationship and more specifically citizens views of how they are represented in school decision-making, it was necessary to capture the voice of the citizen. The city in which this study takes place is one that has a network of neighborhood associations run neighborhood association directors who are employed by the city. The directors are responsible for addressing residents' interests and concerns, particularly those related to the city's public services. I talked with directors of three of the city's neighborhood associations. All of them consider the neighborhood school crucial to the health of the neighborhood. Director Terry serves the downtown and inner city area. The Downtown Neighborhood Association (DNA) hosts SCA and serves residents who attend ICA, which is housed near the border of DNA but does not sit within its geographic designation. Director Carrie serves the southeast area (SNA) that houses CA, and Director Rachel serves the South West (SWNA) area, which houses REA. Each of the neighborhoods has different characteristics that lead to differing needs, but all of them identify the school-community relationship as a priority of their work.

DNA

The Downtown Neighborhood Association serves the area that was the city's first neighborhood. There are 1300 structures in the neighborhood and approximately 4,000 households. It is a high rental area. It encompasses the neighborhood that houses the Secondary Charter Academy (SCA) and Inner City Elementary (ICE). Inner City Academy (ICA) sits just outside its border. In addition, the neighborhood houses a

district middle school, two district high schools and one child development center. Terry has been working with DNA for 20 years.

The work of the DNA in large part is to preserve the historical character of the neighborhood. The DNA was started in 1968 when the area was marked for demolition under an urban renewal initiative. Explained Terry:

> "It was out with the old, you know. They wanted to build nice single story homes with a lot of green space. A few neighbors got angry because they couldn't get mortgages on their homes. There was one woman who lived in one of the two Frank Lloyd Wright houses in the neighborhood and no banks would lend her a mortgage. She was furious. So she talked to more and more neighbors ... and she rallied about 125 people who formed DNA."

Terry noted the city's long-time mayor, before he was mayor, was one of the initial neighbors fighting for the preservation of the neighborhood. The downtown neighborhood eventually was designated an historical neighborhood and was spared from the urban renewal project.

SNA

The South East Neighborhood Association serves 5,500 households and houses four city elementary schools including South East Elementary (SEE). It also houses Conversion Academy (CA). SNA's Director Carrie noted that the neighborhood is divided into ethnic communities with various needs.

> "The needs of this neighborhood are needs of a lot of new immigrants and people with changing relationships because the neighborhood has changed so significantly demographically. Over here you have a highly African American

population. And the needs there are different than the highly Hispanic population. And over here it becomes more and more white middle class. So how people view their schools is different based on their socioeconomic needs and their language needs."

Carrie works as the president of the area's non-profit development corporation, and in the summer of 2004 signed on as the SNA's executive director.

SWNA

The South West Neighborhood Association serves 16,000 residents, the majority of whom live in multi-family homes. Director Rachel said the rise of multi-family homes has been problematic in the neighborhood because it puts a lot of people into small spaces.

"The neighborhood went on decline after they put in the two highways right through the middle of the neighborhood and destroyed a lot of family networks and a lot of school relationships and neighborhood bonds. Then it became profitable to convert what were once single family homes into multifamily homes. So we have a lot of small homes with small yards with a lot of people living in it. So it has proven to be a problem in the neighborhood."

Rachel began her position with SWNA in January 2004. The organization itself has been around for 30 years.

The School-Community Relationship:

The community respondents see it as their job to foster school-community relationships particularly with the district schools in their neighborhood. The relationship between community and school is very important, noted SWNA's Rachel:

"There are three things that make up a really good neighborhood, and that's having a healthy business district, really good schools, and active neighbors, residents. And so even if you don't have kids in the schools, having good schools increases your property value, and it betters the neighborhood as a whole. It's an important key. Kids going to school and doing well is of benefit to the neighborhood."

The respondents see the charter schools as independent schools with little tie to the neighborhoods, but at least two respondents noted that the district schools are not particularly responsive to neighborhood needs either. These respondents noted that the charter schools have been good neighbors, and in some ways more accessible than their district counterparts. Stated SWNA's Rachel: "I think it's easier for a charter school to respond in that they have a lot less bureaucracy to go through. So their ability to make decisions is a lot quicker and a lot less watered down from the top."

Community respondents reported that the bureaucratic, top-down management of the district in large part dictates how the neighborhood school leaders will relate to the local neighbors. Terry noted, for example, that the relationship between the neighborhood and the district had been very tense, but is getting better with the new superintendent. "A whole new day has started here." Rachel noted that the previous superintendent was more responsive to her neighborhood's needs than the current administrator, who placed a neighborhood school back on the chopping block after the neighbors fought for its survival with the previous superintendent. All in all, both said it is difficult to have a relationship with the local neighborhood schools. Said Terry: "Schools are fairly closed.

You know, 'we are the educators and we know what we're doing.' They pat you on your head and be off. "

SNA's Carrie said she sees both the charter and district schools as open to relationships with the neighborhood, but in different ways. For example, the administrator of the charter school in her neighborhood regularly attends the business association meetings of the neighborhood, primarily looking to establish service-learning partnerships for students. While the administrators of the local district schools rarely attend neighborhood meetings, the administrators provide access to the district schools to the neighborhood for meetings and events. "When we need to have a meeting, those schools are willing to open their doors to us. They are more open to be community centers."

Carrie noted some fundamental differences in the way district schools and charter schools relate to community. District schools, she said, have traditionally played a role in being a gathering place for community, "a safe place for kids and families to be." With charters, she said, that tradition does not exist. She noted it is the mission of the charter school - not the expectations of community – that is more likely to establish how it relates to the community. " It's very much school to school how a charter school would (act) versus the mindset of what a public school is supposed to be." She also said the focus of charter schools is on the student as an individual whereas the focus of district schools is on children as a part of the community. "I think there's a reciprocal relationship expected where (schools) open the doors to you and you help with *our* children."

Terry also provided evidence that the neighborhood schools open their facilities up to the community. "I live right next door to the (district) child development center and

that is for sure the neighborhood playground. It's wonderful to see every generation including my daughter who has used that playground. The (district) looks at their playgrounds for neighborhood use." She also said, however, that the SCA, the charter school in her neighborhood, also provided space for DNA meetings, though the space was not very conducive to the organization's needs.

While Terry said SCA administrators are more accessible than district school administrators, she said the relationship she has with the charter school is less substantial than her relationship with the district school, in part because the charter school draws students from all parts of the city and is not focused on servicing the neighborhood like the local district school. Terry told the story of how the SCA board and staff were upset with the neighborhood's opposition to the sale of a district school in the neighborhood:

> "They were taking it personally when in fact we just really supported keeping the district in control of that school (for future use). There are 500 new households going into that area and we believed it could be a good elementary for this new neighborhood. There's not a whole lot of kids from DNA that go to SCA. And that really changes the relationship between a school and its neighborhood."

The district schools, said SNA's Carrie, cater to the needs of the community more than the charter schools. Two of the area's district elementary schools, for example, have a health clinic in the school. "So they're there to meet the social needs of the families, not just the education (of the students)." Carrie said both the district schools and charter schools are obligated to the parents and students they serve, but the district schools, because they are neighborhood based, also serve the needs of the neighborhood. The differences between how the charter school and the district school relate to the

community may be more related to the changing face of community in society, noted Carrie. She explained:

> "Our organizing efforts become efforts that are a few blocks (wide) because we can make a lot more success than a broad stroke approach that used to work back 15-20 years ago. I think that carries in the whole thing with schools and how people are very individual. We have people we communicate with on the Internet halfway across the world and we talk to them just as much or more than we might talk to our neighbor."

Representation

The community respondents noted that while community representation in charter school decision-making is rare, representation in district decisions is not as strong as they would like it to be. Rachel noted that her neighborhood is represented on the district school board by one resident who has little say on the school board. "And so for her to make a change on the board and get them to steer in a leadership that she feels is important it's proven difficult for her." Rachel also noted that residents in her neighborhood sense that neither the district schools nor the charter schools feel an obligation to the neighborhood. She explained:

> "The (district schools) have an obligation to the city as a whole to provide certain services; they don't feel like they have an obligation to meet the needs of a specific neighborhood. But the neighborhood feels like, "Wait a minute, we deserve to have local elementary schools where we can walk our kids to school and not have to bus them across.' And the ones that are near, we feel like they

have an obligation to get these schools up to par. And if there's something we can do to help, let us know."

The charter school, she said, is obligated to its target market: the students and parents it serves, and to its donors. "If they grew out of that building, they could pick up and leave and go to somebody else's neighborhood." Rachel noted, however, the district schools with the recent school closings have done the same thing.

DNA's Terry said that the district board has been frustrating to deal with and she said people in her neighborhood often feel as if they are not well represented. She also said neighbors do have the power to change the board through voting, and in fact the neighborhood has organized board campaigns successfully in the past. Said Terry:

> "We've just come through hell, quite frankly. Under the previous administration it was an absolute nightmare. The whole closing of so many schools for political reasons and trying to get information and access to decision-makers was impossible. And the school board was virtually a rubber stamp. I worked hard with the school board and I had no idea of the culture of school boards, and I quickly realized that school boards are really just the rubber stamp of the superintendent. "

Terry, who has worked with five superintendents over the years, noted that the short term of superintendents gives the superintendents "hit people" status, where they have to have "grandiose plans" to get hired and then they're given free reign by their boards. "Then there's no history," said Terry, "because they get everybody mad at them, then you have a change, and somebody new comes in with a new vision. It's just a crazy system."

Freedom of Expression

When it comes to building relationships in community, Terry and Rachel noted that their focus has been on relationships with the city schools, and those relations have not been the easiest to foster in large part because the bureaucratic, top-down management style of the district limit the amount of voice neighbors have in school decisions. The district's school closings in the past couple of years have left a dramatic and negative mark on the neighborhoods. When the respondents talked about the school-community relationship they inevitably speak in terms of the school closings. Stated Rachel:

> "We have three public elementary schools in our neighborhood—or did at least. They closed the one school that was an exemplary—it was a successful school. And the other two were what many consider a failing school or less than par - a school that a good parent probably would not want to use as a first choice to send their kids to. The school that was doing really well and was nationally recognized they closed because it didn't have the required square footage that they felt was justified to keep open. So that was a large rift in the community. The (neighbors) fought really hard. When (the previous superintendent) was here they put that on the closing list and the neighborhood successful fought to keep it open. Then when the administration switched over, they put it back and then they did officially close it. It has been closed for a year and a half, and it was devastating."

Rachel said after two years, they are re-opening the school as a pre-school program, which does in fact meet a neighborhood need. "We're excited about that," she said.

What may be most frustrating for the neighbors Rachel noted is that the residents do not have a sense that they had a say in the closing of the school. Stated Rachel:

> "We try (to have a say) but - I mean, they closed the Community Ed Center which is right here. And we have a neighborhood where people don't have cars so they have to walk. And we also have a large Hispanic population of new immigrants. And so with the ESL program that they had there and with adults being able to walk to that school, it was really important to the neighborhood - you know, in the neighborhood that really needs those types of services. So it has proven difficult to work with the public schools."

Rachel said the district is incorporating a community engagement model in the schools that aims to create more neighborhood connections to the schools, but she said the initiative is in its early stages and she is unsure how it will work. The charter school, she said, has been more inviting to the neighborhood association.

> "They've called us. They've invited us to come out and take a look. They've given us a tour of their facility. They post our newsletter. And they've asked us to help them with some fund raising in the community. They've been much more involved. And I think they've taken the effort to develop a relationship. It's the only school in the neighborhood where I feel like I can call the principal and say, Hey there's a problem or I see an issue or something like that."

Rachel noted that the neighborhood association and the residents have not been involved in the charter school as advocates, but she said that is partly due to the fact that it is seen as a good program and advocacy is not needed. "I mean it's a great asset. And we're glad that they're here." She also said the types of things they would advocate for – growth

concerns, environmental concerns – are not an issue in the school's current location. Her only concern with the school, she said, is that it takes students from everywhere, and she would like to see it more available to the students in the neighborhood.

Although Rachel said SWNA has a good relationship with REA, she would like to see more avenues for neighborhood input. Part of the issue, she said, is the way board members are appointed to the charter school. She said: "I think it hinders the ability of the neighborhood to have a stronger impact (on the school)." However, Rachel said it is not necessary to have an elected board to accomplish greater representation, but a more open process for deliberation with the charter school board, possibly appointing a neighborhood resident or SWNA representative as a member of the charter school board.

Terry also noted that the charter school administrators are more accessible than the district school administrators in large part because they are small independent schools. "They don't have the major bureaucracy to jump through. It's just more direct lines of communication." During the period when the district was looking at closing a neighborhood school, Terry said the principal, who always had a good relationship with the neighbors and was fighting hard to save the school, had to walk a fine line between the district and the neighborhood. "Principals were not supposed to be involved in this whole school closing. They were to walk the administration line."

The new district administration is more open, however, said Terry. She said she can call the superintendent any day and expect to receive a call back from him within an hour if not sooner. "I could never get through to the (previous) superintendent). And if I tried talking to her, it didn't matter what I would say, she'd tell me what I needed to know or what I needed to do. There was no public influence on the administration, and

again that's what it is. The relationship of the public schools is solely based on the superintendent."

Freedom of Information

Little information flows to the neighborhood association directors from either district schools or charter schools, although the neighborhood associations do receive the quarterly district newsletters and are able to access information on district activities through the district Web site and local media. DNA's Terry said, however, that the media's portrayal of the district contributes to the poor reputation of the district, even though the district, she said, has some excellent programs. She said: "The stuff you read in the paper – it's always the bad stuff. So I think neighbors have a really low opinion of the capabilities of the (district) schools." The lack of information to neighbors about charter schools also has negative implications. SWNA's Rachel noted that the lack of information residents receive about charter schools contributes to misconceptions about the school. She said, "They don't realize that this is free to community and that it is not a religious affiliation." Part of the misconception Rachel said comes from the fact that the school is housed in a Catholic school that has a long history in the neighborhood as a private, religious school.

The neighborhood association directors noted that the charter school administrators are receptive to bringing information from the neighborhood association into the school. Rachel said, for example, REA has regularly posts the SWNA's newsletter on the school bulletin board. SNA's Carrie said she receives little information from either the district school or the charter school, but she has more contact with the charter school administrator because he frequently attends the business association

meetings in the neighborhood to let the businesses know what the students are doing and what kinds of service-learning projects opportunities are available at the school. However, neighborhood association directors said there is very little information–sharing that goes on between the local schools and the neighborhood, although the directors said they do get more information about the district schools and the neighbors have a better understanding of the role of the district schools in the community.

Inclusive Representation

The culture of the district has not been one that has welcomed citizen input or involvement. Community respondents said that while there have been some good principals in some of the neighborhood schools, the bureaucratic, top-down management of the schools has prevented the inclusion of residents in school decision-making. Furthermore, Terry noted that the culture of the district has been closed to outside influences for so long that there is a disinvestment from neighbors as a result. She said she sees the culture changing. "I think they are finally realizing that they have to open up their doors, invite people in, embrace every partner, every support they can to make the schools the real center."

None of the community respondents indicated that any of the public schools in their neighborhoods exclude students from services, although all of them pointed out that few of the neighborhood children attend the charter schools, and that the practice of pulling students from all over the city to attend the charter schools does not help develop a neighborhood connection to the charter schools.

The fact that the charter school boards have few if any representatives from the neighborhoods also is a concern for the community respondents. Rachel noted that

having a SWNA representative on the charter school board could help bring the issues of the neighborhood to the school board and vice verse. "I would strongly encourage the charter schools to consider having a neighborhood organization representative be on their board. That way if there are issues surrounding the neighborhood where that school is located, then the association could help address those." Rachel also noted that while several of her residents attend district board meetings regularly, no one she knows of in her neighborhood attends the charter school board meetings.

Although the community respondents noted that having choice for students can be a good result of having a charter school in the neighborhood, the prevalence of too much choice and too much competition can destroy the cohesive nature of the neighborhood. DNA's Terry noted that the city has always had a choice environment with private school options, but the addition of charter schools has added to the difficulty. She explained:

> "You have such competing forces here You have this huge Christian school network that there are parents who regardless of how great the public schools or other schools are around, they're going to send their kids to the Christian schools. The Catholic schools, people are going to send their kids to the Catholic schools regardless of what other choice they have based purely on beliefs. So you've always had a large population going to the Christian and Catholic schools. And now you have a new element with the charter schools. So you're offering yet another alternative. So the city schools have to compete with a lot of other schools, and that has been difficult for them. And it is a very difficult issue to organize around because parents with options are not going to go down and fight the administration of the district. They will write a check and go to a private

school. Or they will pull their kids out and go to charter schools and provide transportation....Parents with choices - underline, underline, underline – parents with choices will do whatever they can for their children."

Terry said school choice has not been "all bad" for the neighborhood, though. Schools of choice, she said, have been responsible for keeping families in the city, and when the district opens their doors to inter-district transfers, that helps, too. "When the transfer policy is an open policy, that's when more and more people stay in the city. When they close the door, people leave the district."

Associational Autonomy

All of the community respondents recognized the autonomous nature of public charter schools, although none of the respondents spoke in terms of the charter schools representing a particular group of people. On the contrary, they spoke more in terms of charter school independence as taking away from the needs and interests of the neighborhood. As Terry noted, charter schools divide the resources for public schools with little accountability for public funds. She stated:

> "All you're doing is splitting resources. You can talk about large bureaucracies and the difficulty of it, but I just feel like here we're really splitting off into and dividing up resources and who decides what charter schools should or should not be. Where is the oversight? I haven't seen any documentation."

What she has seen - namely MEAP scores – she said has not convinced her of the need for a competing set of public schools. "The district has pretty low MEAP scores, and SCA is half of what the district scores are. So immediately, you go, well then why are we competing with these resources when they are so limited right now?

The respondents however noted elements of associational representation in the local district schools. SNA's Carrie said the schools in her neighborhood association boundaries serve very different ethnic communities and aim to meet the needs of those different neighborhoods. DNA's Terry noted that one of the schools in her area is the Inner City Elementary that serves almost all inner city African American children, with a few inner city Hispanic children. She said the needs of the school are so different that it is impossible to attract a different population to that school. The principal at ICE, Terry noted, advocates for the needs of the inner city, sometimes at the expense of turning off other parents.

> "ICE is a totally isolated school. I mean you're talking about 99 percent racial minority. It had an 80 percent transitory rate for both teachers and kids. We had many, many meetings at the school and having parents who were - you know tears flowing – talking about how they graduated from ICE, their children had graduated from there and so many of them are just functionally illiterate. And we had really very little influence. But the needs are so great that the principal's number one priority was washing machines because she said the kids really need to feel good about themselves. And they need to be able to come and wash their clothes. Well that isn't a need of my child. So why would people who don't need that help subject themselves to that school? That's where school (choice) can be so difficult because parents are very, very protective of their children."

Findings: Comparisons and Contrasts

Data from the community respondents shed light on issues raised by both charter school and district school respondents. While the neighborhood association directors

noted that the charter school administrators are more accessible and easier to work with than their district counterparts, they did not substantiate the level of relationship that some of the charter school respondents indicated existed between the charter schools and the neighborhood associations. In several of the charter schools, respondents indicated that those relationships are just beginning to develop so it may be that the charter school respondents have an idea of the kind of relationship they would like to develop, but it has not happened yet. The other possibility is that what the charter schools define as a "relationship" may be much different than what the neighborhood directors envision. The neighborhood directors, for example, are used to working with entities in their own communities for the benefit of their own residents. While they see the charter schools as good neighbors, they do not seem them as integral parts of the neighborhood community. As Rachel noted: "They can get up and leave if they want."

Rachel made the same observation of the district schools, underscoring the point that the district schools represent the district at-large and not necessarily individual neighborhoods. When schools need to be closed, therefore, the district looks at the grand plan, putting the district – not the neighborhood – first. This issue also emerged from the district data; the board president sees a need to be more representative of neighborhoods and another board members says neighborhood representation will be too divisive for the district. The focus on the district and not the neighborhood contributes to the inaccessibility of district school administrators.

The district's inaccessibility also comes from the top-down management style of district superintendents, report community respondents. The fact that residents are treated as individuals who "need to know information" about the school and not as individuals

who should have a say in decisions about the district is frustrating for residents. Terry's observation that the district administrators come across as the experts in school decision-making leads to a lack of effective voice among residents. It may be that the professional decision-making model is what led to the unresponsiveness of districts that Chubb and Moe (1990) identified in their study. Deborah Stone (1993) calls this type of leadership clinical authority, or the prescription of a solution by an expert – much like a doctor might prescribe medicine. The problem with clinical authority in social issues is that there are always competing issues and interests to consider. Using clinical authority to resolve these types of issues, she said, is "anti-democratic," because it excludes the consideration of some interests when it autocratically focuses on other interests,

The fact that the charter schools administrators are seen as accessible indicates that small, independent schools do in fact create more access to school authority. Data from charter school respondents also indicate that the when autonomy exists, it is the mission and vision of the school leaders that dictate in large degree the school's efforts to connect to the broader community. So while the autonomy that the charter schools have to develop programs that potentially could improve education for the larger community, how those programs are disseminated, how information is shared among community members, how citizen voice and interests are incorporated into school decision and the level of inclusiveness of citizens in the school decision-making process is left up to the individuals that serve as charter school board members. Who these board members are, then, greatly affects how the public interests of public schooling will be represented in charter school decision-making.

From this study, it is clear that if the public is to be represented in the decisions of all public schools, as many scholars recommend and as Michigan citizens prefer, the autonomy that may create accessible innovative programs must be balanced by the authority to maintain representation of public interests in school decision-making. Findings from the study indicate that while the district system has the structures in place that attempt to preserve citizen representation. In contrast, charter schools have the ability to create a more open, accessible environment for potential deliberation of citizen interests. Both of these systems of schooling fall short on their responsiveness to citizens in school decision-making, however (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Matrix of Schools on Dimensions of Representation

School —— Dimensions	SCA	REA	ICA	CA	ICE	SEE	District*
Choice in Representation	√	–	√-	–	√	√	+
Freedom of Information	√	√-	√—	√ –	√+	√+	+
Freedom of Expression	√	–	√-	–	√+	√	+
Associational Autonomy	√	–	√	√–	+	√+	+
Inclusive Representation	√	–	√	–	+	+	+

+ Very Strong; √+ Strong; √ Fair; √- Weak; – Evidence contrary to representation
*Ratings for the district are shown for comparison sake. As can be seen, the political institutions of representation operate more fully on the district level than the school level.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the evidence for representation on the five dimensions varies across charter schools and across district schools. While the district, for the most part, has a system of representation that aligns to Dahl's criteria, these schools could do

more to create a more open system representative of the citizens in the school neighborhood. For example, even though district board members are represented, data indicates that the representation of elected board members is not distributed evenly across neighborhoods. The private-conversion school shows the least evidence of representation, due to the school's all-parent board and meetings conducted behind locked doors. A more extensive version of this matrix with a more complete account of evidence for the ratings by school can be found in Appendix A.

Chapter 7

Representation in the Age of Choice: Implications for Policy and Research

It can be said that a function of public policy in a democracy is to ensure the democratic aims of society are upheld in the public sphere. Public policy in the past has created structures in the public school system that pressure school leaders to resist excluding the voice of citizens from the school decision-making process and in essence oblige schools to be responsible to the public they serve. The opportunity for citizens to vote on school issues casts all citizens as stakeholders in the public school system and makes all citizens important to school leaders. Keeping all citizens well informed through regular newsletters, open door policies, media coverage, school television programming, and visible and accessible open meetings also preserve avenues for citizen representation in public school decision-making by making the governance of public schools transparent to its public stakeholders.

The study of representation in the four charter schools and two district schools in one city is a small glimpse into how public school policy, and specifically charter school policy, can affect public representation in school decision–making. The data set in this study is small and the data are not generalizable. However, evidence from the interviews, observations, and document review suggests that charter school policies that do not explicitly oblige authorities to be responsive to the broader community may not be sufficient in protecting the public interest in charter school decision-making. When the pressures that force responsiveness are lifted, as they have been through the Michigan Revised School Code for Public School Academies, the responsiveness of schools to the

larger community depends almost entirely on the individual interests of the individual school boards. As can be seen from this study, the mission of these boards in relation to the broader community is variable, and consequently so is their level of responsiveness to the community-at-large. Findings from this study also indicate that the structures of representation present in a public school district may be diluted when filtered through a large, top-down, bureaucratic system. Information flow to citizens in the public school district, for example, was strong at the district level, but little information about the local school was distributed to citizens in the neighborhood. This chapter discusses the implications for policy aimed at preserving the representation of public interests in public school decision-making, whether that decision-making takes place in a school district or a public charter school.

Based on evidence from this study, it is possible that Chubb and Moe (1990) were right that the large, bureaucratic systems of urban public school districts curtail responsive to parents, or citizens for that matter. When neighborhood schools closed in the district, respondents indicated that it was the interests of the district as a whole – not the interest of the neighborhood – that influenced the decisions regarding which schools to close. Furthermore, respondents noted that the voice of citizens regarding their local schools was either ignored or placated during meetings with school authorities. However, data from the study also indicate that neighborhood school leaders take seriously their responsibility to the neighborhood in which the school is located. That responsibility includes the education of all of the neighborhood children, the care of the neighborhood school and property, and the provision of community services such as the Food Truck for senior citizens ICE provides or the language services that SEE provides.

Data indicate that charter school leaders do not have the same sense of obligation to the neighborhood in which their schools are located. With a focus on autonomy, Michigan's charter school policy lessens the requirement of charter schools to be responsive to the broader community. Charter school boards are accountable to a charter school authorizer, not the local electorate. As a result, charter school boards experience more freedom to operate as they see fit, nominating their own board members and running meetings in accordance to the needs of the school. While the charter school policy aims to provide more autonomy to charter schools in part to spur innovation and responsiveness to parents, the policy does not eliminate charter schools' responsibility to the public-at-large. The Michigan Revised School Code for Public School Academies maintains the requirement for open and accessible board meetings. However, data from this study indicate that the autonomy the charter school policy provides may overshadow the responsibility charter schools have to the larger public. For example, there were boards in this study that conducted their board meetings in locked school buildings, and charter school board respondents noted how their own charter school boards acted more like private boards than public boards, with little connection to the public-at-large.

It is the autonomy of charter schools, however, that allows them to create schools that address specific student needs. In this way, data indicate that public charter schools have the potential to serve as "associational democracies," representing public interests that have gone under-represented in large school districts where the majority rule (Smith, 2001). Yet, data from the study indicate that there is a temptation to focus on the interests of only those students and parents enrolled in a school, once the school has reached its capacity. This is a danger Mintrom (2001) noted when he discussed the democratic

potential of charter schools and the possible threats to democracy that these schools may pose. Protecting public interests in public schooling may require more than good will or good intentions on the part of charter founders and board members; it might require policies aimed at ensuring public institutions like public schools maintain a sense of responsibility to the public. Ensuring that public schools adhere to a set of criteria, like the dimensions of representation as defined in this study, may be a good start. Public schools that provide choice in representation, the free flow of information, avenues for expression, ability for associational representation, and representation that is inclusive may do a better job representing and responding to the interests of the broader public by creating closer ties to the public-at-large.

On one hand, then, we have independent public schools that because of their small size and site-based governance may be more accessible and potentially more innovative than their district counterparts. On the other hand, these schools lack the sense of obligation to the public that district schools face. Dahl notes that our democratic and market structures co-exist in a sort of contemptuous but inseparable relationship. He writes: "Democracy and market-capitalism are like two persons bound in a tempestuous marriage that is riven by conflict and yet endures because neither partner wishes to separate from the other" (p. 166). The problem, writes Dahl, is that market-capitalism creates inequalities that require "government intervention and regulation to alter its harmful effects" (176). One way to deal with the balance of democratic representation and choice in public schooling is to consider policies that provide a mix of site-based governance and democratic accountability.

Chicago Public Schools implemented such a mix in 1988.[28] Empirical evidence from these reforms (Bryk, et al; Fung, 2003) suggests that such a mix can lead to positive outcomes for the community and its children by effectively increasing public participation in school decision-making and consequently increasing public support and investment in the success of the public schools. Fung writes: "Subsequently, (the councils) devised and implemented creative strategies and plans that were probably more effective than what school officials and policy makers would have accomplished on their own," (p. 137). Observe Bryk et al: "The embrace of democratic localism promoted an expanded equality whereby teachers, parents, and community members could bring improvement proposals to the table As a result, the number of channels by which new ideas might enter schools literally exploded," (p. 255).

One of the successful aspects of the Chicago reform, note Bryk et al, is the provision for a significant amount of choice. The mix of choice with increased local voice is important, they say, because it protects minorities and the under-represented from oppression by majorities in the local communities. This recommendation aligns with Dahl's (1998) conception of democracy and the market as a mutually contemptuous but necessary relationship. The issue policy makers need to consider, as articulated by respondents in the River City study, is that choice may be a vehicle for freedom for the oppressed only if choice is accessible to all. It is the structures of democratic representation that help to ensure that public services like public schooling are delivered

[28] In 1988, the city of Chicago instituted a large school governance reform that created both more autonomy and more community representation through elected site-based governance councils made up of educators, parents, and community members. The local councils have autonomy over a number of decisions that affect staffing, discretionary funding, and strategic planning.

in fair and equitable ways, and in a manner that meets the needs and interests of the citizens they aim to serve.

A focus on policy

Michigan's policies governing public charter schools were designed to give the emerging schools autonomy in decision-making without much concern for the harm that might occur from the lack of representation of citizen interests in charter school decision-making. Data from the study indicate that when public interests in school decision-making are not considered, the community as a whole suffers, and the tensions between the community and the schools increase to the point of community "disinvestment," as one respondent put it. Such a disinvestment is most noticeable when it affects public schools that are clearly part of community infrastructure. While public charter schools are less visible as a piece of the community infrastructure than public district schools, the fact that charter schools depend on public resources for their operation and aim to serve all students who choose to attend these schools makes charter schools not only a community entity but an important part of the public sphere. Stone et al (2001) contend that community engagement in public school decision-making is necessary to ensure that the equity goals of public education are adequately addressed. Evidence from this study suggests Stone et al are right.

Whether it is to ensure equity of service, public accountability for public dollars, or to honor the value that Michigan citizens place on democratic representation in public school decision-making, the representation of community interests in public school decision-making is an important and necessary component of public policy. It is apparent from this study that the variability in charter school missions and boards leads to

variability in how charter schools address issues of representation. However, the overall, systematic representation of public interests in public charter schools likely will not happen without formal policies in place that oblige school authorities to be responsible and responsive to a larger community than the students and parents they directly serve.

Data from this study is far from conclusive. However, the picture of representation gathered from these schools illustrates the need to further consider the issue of citizen representation in public charter school decision-making, possibly exploring ways representation can be increased while maintaining the kind of autonomy that could lead to innovation and greater responsiveness to student needs. Likewise, more work could be done to examine ways that district school leaders could embrace the structures of representation that are built into the traditional school district, potentially increasing citizens' access to authority and information at the school level. Below are a few possibilities:

Implications for charter schools:

- Increase representation of the public interest in school decisions by requiring public school academies to have some level of community representation on their school boards, which might be determined through an open, democratic process. Public school academies might, for example, advertise for board positions in the local community as well as in regional or state newspapers. To increase the democratic nature of board appointments, authorizers could take a more active role in the appointment process. For example, authorizers could provide written criteria for public charter school board members that includes the expectation that board members will serve not only the mission of the school but represent the public interests of public schooling. Criteria for

boards, as data for this study indicate, should also include an expectation of diversity in representation among board members so boards are not made up primarily of parents or a single entity.

• Increase the flow of information to the larger community by requiring quarterly reports be published and distributed to the community at-large. Even public choice theorists recognize a key weakness of the market strategy lies in the fact that consumers often have imperfect information. Increasing information flow between public school academies and the neighborhoods in which they reside will provide citizens the opportunity to examine what these schools are, what benefits they provide the community, and who are the school leaders citizens can contact with questions or concerns regarding the school.

• Increase access to public meetings and thereby increase opportunities for expression by obliging public charter schools to conduct all meetings in open and accessible buildings. All public schools in Michigan are subject to the Open Meetings Act, and as such all public school board meetings are required by law to be open to all citizens. While the public school academies in this study all attempt to follow the Open Meetings requirement, at least two of the four public charter schools in the study conducted their meetings behind locked doors. The doors were locked primarily because of safety concerns - a lack of security during the evening - but it is important that citizens who may want to attend these meetings are not barred from doing so because they cannot get in the door. Meetings could be held in rooms close to the school entrance so there is a better watch on who comes in the building, or it may be incumbent on each school to hire a staff member to monitor the open doors.

• Increase inclusiveness of public school academies by ensuring that all schools comply with existing laws, and charter school boards and their authorizers are held responsible for the failure of schools to comply with these laws. REA, for example, by law should have been required to address the issue of egress before opening its doors four years ago. Disabled citizens who want to attend the school's board meetings are not able to because there is no access to the board meeting room on the second floor.

Implications for public school districts:

• Increase citizen voice in public school decision-making through the development of site-based governance councils made up of community and school leaders, which oversee decisions that affect the school-community relationship. A board that is made up of school and community leaders may increase the level of responsiveness by shifting the focus of decision-making away from the "professional" or "clinical" model of decision-making to a more democratic model. Community boards provide citizens more input into the decision-making process and provide citizens an opportunity to share the concerns and interests of the local community.

• Increase the flow of information from neighborhood schools to residents in the schools' service areas by requiring local schools to share information with residents either through regular open forums, printed material, or programs like ICE's Friday Food Truck that brings the community and the school together.

• Increase the inclusiveness of representation by encouraging local school leaders to engage in community decision-making that might affect the school, such as attending local neighborhood association meetings. The interaction of school leaders with community leaders at community events may level the territorial playing field, dissolve

the reputation of school leaders as inaccessible experts, and provide opportunities for educators to understand issues from a more community-based perspective.

• Increase the inclusiveness of representation by encouraging cooperative arrangements between local school districts and local public charter schools. A more cohesive system of public schooling will result in better use of taxpayer dollars and community resources. The growth of public charter schools indicates that school choice is a welcomed policy among a significant number of stakeholders. Education policies need to consider ways to decrease the tensions between public school districts and public charter schools for the benefit of the community stakeholder.

Implications for research:

The research from this study is only an indication of how public charter school policy affects the school-community relationship and potentially the ability of citizens to engage in school decisions that affect their lives. More empirical research is needed to surface the reality of the charter school-community relationship and the possible innovations that could contribute to a more responsive and more representative system of public schooling. Questions for further research include:

• How do district and state policies attempt to balance the tensions between the democratic and market-based aims of public schooling?

• How can autonomy that fosters flexibility, innovation, and an ability to respond to market pressure be balanced with regulations that protect equity goals for public schooling?

• How does a shift toward more market-based schooling affect the fundamental ideals of public schooling in a democratic society?

• How does such a shift affect the school-community relationship?

Answers to these questions could help us better understand the changing relationships between school and community in the age of choice. Choice policies attempt to break down the expert-led, bureaucratic system of schooling that is sometimes impenetrable by the community members the system is designed to serve, but the autonomy charter school policies provide also threatens the public nature of public education. By removing charter schools' responsibility to represent the interests of the public-at-large, we risk the removal of public schooling from the public sphere. Consequently, we risk increasing the inequities that result when the full spectrum of public interests are not represented in public decision-making. Finally, public school policies that foster autonomous schools may also foster a loss of interest and support by local citizens, dissolving what has proven to be one of the most important links to the success of a school: the school's relationship to the community in which it resides.

APPENDIX A

Extended table of representation

School — Dimension |	SCA	REA	ICA	CA	ICE	SEE
Choice In Representation	√ Diverse board; community input into board-chosen nominees	- Insular board; board-chosen nominees	√- Diverse board; board-chosen nominees	-Insular, all parent board, board-chosen nominees	√ Elected by district not neighbor-hood	√ Elected by district not neighbor-hood
Information	√ Informs local businesses and agencies	√- Informs school partners, invited community members	√- Distributes enrollment brochures; some control exerted by EMO	√- Informs partners, some interaction with neighbor-hood association	√+ Informs residents through newsletters, media; little school-level information	√+ Informs residents through newsletters, media; little school-level information
Expression	√ Access to authority through open meetings, public does not attend; little media coverage	- Access to authority limited; meetings held in locked building;	√-Access to authority through open meetings, information more controlled	- Access to authority limited; meetings held in locked building	√+ Meetings accessible, open; more empowered leader	√ Meetings accessible, open; authority, top-down
Associational Autonomy	√ Serves downtown interest; aimed for innovation, but innovation not shared	√- Serves as lab school; innovation not yet shared	√ Serves inner city youth enrolled in the school; no innovation shared	√-Offers specific curriculum, no specific population served; innovation not shared	+ Serves needs of inner city, includes whole neighbor-hood, but advocates beyond	√+ Serves needs of neighbor-hood, no advocacy beyond
Inclusion	√ Represents students and some downtown school partners	- Represents enrolled families, school partners; not accessible to all	√ Represents inner city youth, particularly those enrolled in the school	- Represents families who agree to rules of partici-pation	+ Whole neighbor-hood represented	+ Whole neighbor-hood represented

+ Very Strong; √+ Strong; √ Fair; √- Weak; – Evidence contrary to representation

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