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Early charter school advocates in the United States (US) outlined how student and organizational outcomes could be enhanced through introducing market forces within the public school sector beyond those faced from private schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2003). Market forces would result in improved outcomes in all public schools as charter and traditional schools vie for students in an environment of choice (Hess, 2004). Research examining charter school competition and its effect on public schooling has focused on variations in standardized test scores as a proxy for student achievement between the two sectors (Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011, Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). This focus on outcomes has yielded mixed results with some studies indicating traditional schools outperform charter schools, while others indicate the reverse (Betts & Tang, 2011; Harris & Larsen, 2018; Loeb et al., 2011; Wohlstetter et al., 2013).

As traditional and charter schools compete, the mixed results in student outcomes have prompted some researchers to suggest the need to attend to school processes to better understand the variations in student achievement, such as how actors within schools react and act as a result of competition (Cannata, 2011; Ladd & Fiske, 2003). Some term the lack of understanding between school processes and student outcomes as the 'black box' of choice and charter competition (Davis, 2013: Hess & Loveless, 2005; Zimmer & Buddin, 2007). With principal leadership significantly affecting student outcomes (Leithwood, 1994; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), assessing how principals perceive and react to competition may provide insights into how competition among and between traditional and charter schools affect student outcomes.

Few studies have examined if and how market forces affect charter and traditional principals' reactions to school competition in ways that may change processes and/or practices

that affect student outcomes (Author & Author, 2011; Author & Author, 2019; Davis, 2013; Gross, 2011; Jabbar, 2015a; Jabbar, 2015b; Jabbar, 2016; Jennings, 2010; Potterton, 2019). Studies that have examined this phenomenon did not focus specifically on traditional principals' perceptions and reactions when faced with the introduction of charter school competition in their attendance area. This exploratory comparative case study research examined the perceptions and responses of traditional public schools (TPS) principals faced with the opening of a charter school in their attendance area. Two questions guided this research:

1. What impacts did the traditional principals perceive and experience as the charter opened?

2. How did the traditional principals respond to the perceived impacts related to the charter school opening?

Framing the Research

This research was broadly framed in Milton Friedman's (1962) free market principles as interpreted and extended by educational researchers Chubb and Moe (1990) and Hoxby (2003). Theoretically, when faced with, competition educational actors such as school principals must innovate and increase efficiencies instructionally and organizationally to retain students and the state and federal dollars that follow them, or be forced out of the market (Hess, 2004; Jabbar 2015a; Levin, 2018). Some economists and researchers, however, suggest that competition in educational markets is different than private competitive markets, and identify education as a quasi-market (Hess, 2004; Oplatka, 2002). Quasi-markets are highly regulated and education as a quasi-market is not subject to the pressures of profit. As actors in a quasi-market, principals may not be subject to the kinds of competitive pressures that lead to the intended outcomes of innovation and efficiency.

Jabbar (2015b) suggested a conceptual framework that might explain the process by which principals perceive and react to competition. Rather than focusing on competitive pressure based on traditional structural components, such as the number and size of firms in the market or barriers to the market, Jabbar suggested competition in the educational market should examine processes within the market. Competition as process focuses on how "actors in firms develop strategies, take action, and compete with one another" (Jabbar, 2015b, p. 640). Jabbar's conceptual framework examined the principal in the process of competition.

Within Jabbar's (2015b) conceptual framework, principals experience competitive pressure based on actual loss or threat of loss of students to other schools. This competitive pressure is mediated by two factors, position of the school in the marketplace and perceptions of competition. Position in the marketplace is based on the academic status of the school, such as a letter grade in state accountability and the financial stability or facilities available to the school. Based on the threat of loss of students and mediated by the two factors of position in the marketplace and perceptions of competition, principals adopt a range of strategies. The potential strategies employed include academic or organizational changes, differentiation of services, marketing/recruiting/solicitation of students, and/or no action. The outcomes of these strategies may result in attracting or losing students, improved quality and efficiency, improved academic achievement, efficient allocation of resources, segregation and stratification, and effects within the immediate educational environment such as changes within the city/community in which the school resides.

Literature: Traditional Principals and Charter Competition

The limited US research examining traditional principals' reactions to charter school competition has primarily employed a structural perspective, using distance between traditional

and charter schools as a proxy for the intensity of charter competition experienced by principals (Cannata, 2011; Davis, 2013; Kasman & Loeb, 2013; Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). Researchers initially hypothesized that traditional school principals whose schools were located close to a charter school would report higher levels of competitive pressure and changes to practice.

  In an early study of charter proximity and traditional principal perceptions, Zimmer and Buddin (2009) reported that traditional principals perceived little competitive pressure from charter competition. This occurred even when charters schools were within 2.5 miles and when there was a greater density of charter schools near the traditional schools. More than 80 percent of traditional principals reported that charter schools had no effect on organizational practice, including financial security, ability to acquire resources, teacher recruitment and retention, and retaining students.

Cannata (2011) and Davis (2013) confirmed Zimmer and Buddin's (2009) conclusions that traditional principals were not impacted by competition as measured by distance between traditional schools and charter schools. Each study examined different variables related to traditional principal perceptions of charter impact. Cannata examined traditional principal acquisition of financial resources, recruiting and retaining teachers, attracting and retaining students, and principal use of time. Davis explored how competition affected principal's emphasis on teachers aligning curricula and instruction with standards, principals' openness to new ideas and methods, number of parent teacher conferences, and perceptions of absenteeism being a problem at the school. No statistical differences were found in either study between principals facing charter competition and those not facing competition based on the proxy for competition, distance between schools.

Kasman and Loeb (2013) determined that proximity to charter schools did not impact

traditional principals perceived competitive pressure and changes to specific practices around curriculum/instruction and advertising/outreach. In contrast to the previous studies, however, Kasman and Loeb determined that other variables beyond proximity impacted traditional principals' perception of competitive pressure. Principals of schools with high levels of poverty, special education students, lower standardized test scores, and higher transfer rates were more likely to feel competitive pressure. Seventy-eight percent of principals reported a specific school as their biggest competitor and there was a significant relationship between the school being reported as a competitor and the number of students transferring to that school. The extent of competition that a principal experienced was associated with the likelihood of substantial changes in both curricular and/or instructional practices and marketing/recruiting efforts.

Building on Kasman and Loeb's (2013) results, Jabbar (2015a, 2015b) concluded that charter principals in a competitive educational environment identified specific competitors, not by proximity, but by the charter principal's perception of their status in the marketplace and schools to which they were most likely to lose students. Jabbar (2015b) also noted charter principals changed or focused on four organizational practices to be more competitive with identified rivals. These practices were improving school quality, developing new programs or niche programs, marketing, and informally screening students to admit or 'crop' them from school. Marketing was the most common practice to recruit or retain students (Jabbar, 2015b, p. 649). High status schools that were viewed as competitors had higher academic performance, less trouble enrolling students, were less likely to use marketing, and more likely to focus on other methods to compete, including improving academic programming.

Though limited, the extant research of principals' reactions and actions to competition, and more specifically traditional principals' reactions to competition from charter schools,

suggests traditional principals' reactions to competition depends on their perceptions of their competitor. As outlined by Jabbar's (2015b) framework and research, the threat of losing students, mediated by the principal's perceived status of their school in relationship to competitors in the market, may explain if and how principals react to competition.

Missing from the literature is an examination of traditional public school principals' reactions and actions to competition at the onset of the competitive process as a charter school opens, and how their perception to competition may change over time. This study focused on traditional principals' actions and reactions to competition as a charter school opened in their school districts' assigned attendance zone and followed these principals through the first year in a competitive market.

Methods and Data Sources

I used multiple case study methodology to compare three K-5 traditional elementary school principals' reactions and actions to the opening and the first year of a K-8 charter school located within the three schools' attendance zones. Multiple case studies provided the means to examine complex social phenomena (Merriam, 1998), such as principal reactions and actions over periods of time (Saldaña, 2013). The principals were the unit of analysis and purposeful sampling was used to select traditional principals who directly competed for students as the charter school opened. Competition with the same charter school became the common phenomena of the study (Stake, 2006). The charter school drew students from all three schools' designated attendance areas and was in direct competition for students with the traditional schools.

The primary data sources for this study included two 26 to 74 minute, semi-structured interviews with each traditional principal, one at the onset of the school year and one at the end

of the school year (see Appendix). Four principals were interviewed at the end of the year; one principal retired in April but was interviewed along with her replacement. As a result, seven total interviews were conducted. Secondary data source documents were used to confirm principal interview data. Documents included school board minutes, public information related to each school, and information provided by the school district and principals related to students and school processes. Pictures and recruiting materials were also collected. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using AtlasTI 8.1.

I employed a modified constant comparative process to analyze the principal interview data, using eclectic first level coding including attribute, structural, initial, and in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2013). Each principal's first and second interviews were treated as a case. The author and a graduate student completed line-by-line, side-by-side first level coding, discussing the rationale for each code in each case. We used pattern coding to develop categories for each school based on the beginning and end of the year principal interviews. Code categories from each case were combined into an overall set of themes across cases. We then examined the documents, coding each document using code categories emerging from the interview analysis; no new categories resulted from this secondary analysis.

I addressed trustworthiness in data analysis through multiple processes as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and delineated by case study researchers (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006, 2010; Yin, 2009). Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with each school (one academic year), collecting data from multiple cases, engaging multiple researchers in the coding of the data, and the opportunities for two principals remaining at their schools after data collection to audit and correct transcribed interviews and provide feedback to two drafts of this manuscript. I addressed transferability by providing the reader with a thick description of the

principal participants and their contexts, as well as eliciting critical feedback of the analysis and case write-ups from research colleagues. I developed an audit trail to address dependability and confirmability. Using a spreadsheet to document all data collected, I described the data sources by case, when and where each data source was collected, and any other pertinent information associated with each data source, such as length of each interview. Finally, I addressed reflexivity by interrogating my background related to the data. As a former traditional school principal, I attempted to bracket my perceptions of competition in the educational setting by interrogating my experiences as a principal.

School Context and Participants

Hillside, Madison, and Western Elementary Schools (all names are pseudonyms) were the three traditional school study sites. Located in a southern US state, the attendance zones for these three schools were adjacent and contiguous to each other. Approximately half of the actual landmass of each school's attendance zone was in the area of the city designated on local maps as the Grayson area. The other half of each zone was in an area of the city called the Highlands. The Grayson area was bounded by a river on two sides and highways on each of the other two sides, making the Grayson area somewhat land locked. One of the highways separated the Grayson and Highland areas.

The Grayson area was composed primarily of low-income apartment housing and minority populations, while the Highland area was composed of middle and high-income single-family homes composed of White households. Few students from the Highlands attended the three traditional schools as 40 percent of White students attended private schools in this district. The principals labeled non-Grayson students attending the schools as "neighborhood" students and only 1 to 4 percent of students at each school were designated neighborhood students. The

majority of student of each student body, therefore, were minority and poor (see Table 1), with 96 to 99% being bussed to their zoned school.

The demographics of low-income families in conjunction with high concentrations of low-income apartments in the Grayson area resulted in each traditional school experiencing high student mobility rates (see Table 2). Families tended to move frequently between apartment complexes within the Grayson area, resulting in most students transferring among these three traditional schools. While the student populations experienced high mobility rates the teaching staff at each school was stable with teacher turnover of one to two teachers per year over the previous three years. The previous three years' school performance grades of Bs and Cs for the three schools exceeded those of schools with similar demographics in the district and state.

The charter school (Charter) was a start-up school, authorized by the district, and the third school of a local charter group. Because there was no school building located in the Grayson area and children within the Grayson area were transported to three separate schools, Grayson community members had pushed the traditional board of education for a school within the Grayson area for several years. Charter did not offer bussing but was within one mile of all areas of Grayson making Charter much closer and more convenient than the three traditional schools. Although it would eventually be a K-8 school, Charter opened with grades K-5, the same grade configuration and demographics of the traditional schools (See Table 1). The Charter building was new in contrast to the traditional public schools that were built between 1939 (Hillside) and the 1960s (Madison and Western).

Four traditional school principals were interviewed in this study: Vance, Cutler, Williams, and James (see Table 3). Vance and Williams had led their schools for over a decade. Vance, the Hillside principal, retired in April of the study year, and Cutler, the longtime Dean of

Hillside, took over the principalship. Cutler and James were first year principals during the study year. James was unique as she had spent one year as an instructional coach at a charter school.

Findings

The findings of this study address four traditional school principals' perceptions and responses when faced with the opening of and competition with a charter school in their attendance area. Three themes surfaced from the data analysis – Initial Stress, Reactions, and Perceptions of Competition Over Time.

Initial Stress

Initial interviews were conducted after the school year started and prior to the October 1st final state student count that determined school funding. In these first interviews principals perceived Charter as a threat and expressed increased personal and occupational stress. Uncertainty and increased workloads contributed to principals' perception of heightened stress levels.

Uncertainty

The principals of Hillside and Madison learned informally of Charter's opening in February/March of the previous school year when they saw Charter being built and heard about it from staff or parents. Principals expressed that the lack of official communication from the district led to uncertainty surrounding Charter and reported feeling personally stressed. Williams said, "We knew nothing about the school to start. How can you plan when you don't know anything about the school, when they will open, what their curriculum will be, what grade levels to start? It was stressful." Although James was not appointed to become the principal of Western until April, she expressed that uncertainty about Charter was an issue; "It was hard to plan when you don't have a lot of information."

Uncertainty about Charter grew more intense as principals worried about losing students to the charter. The obvious consequences of losing students were loss of staff and programs as state funding followed students to the charter. Vance expressed the personal stress felt by principals due to the uncertainty of losing funding:

A lot of worrying at home. Lot of uneasy nights where you're thinking, 'Okay, they're telling me everybody's going to leave…what am I going to do?' … I mean there was a lot of stress related because in July people starting leaving and it was, 'Oh my gosh, we're going to lose a teacher. We're going to lose this. We're going to lose that.'

All three principals identified the uncertainty of providing the same level of support and programing to students as the most stressful part of dealing with the opening of Charter.

Underlying initial uncertainty and fear of losing resources were the principals' perceptions of a competitive disadvantage with Charter. Three of the four principals had little exposure to charter schools, but all realized that Charter had three competitive advantages. James specifically stated what the other principals intimated:

First, the charter is right there in Grayson. The students can walk to the school (Charter). I'm the closest of the three of us (schools) and my kids are bussed three miles. Second, parents have been pushing the board for years for their own school right there in Grayson. They want their own community school. I don't blame them. Third, they (Charter) have a brand-new school building. I had to push the district just to get rid of peeling paint and mildewing bathrooms.

Increased Workload

Principals stated that the opening of Charter had increased their workload as they added time and tasks to better compete with the charter school. As the charter opened all three

principals developed plans to mitigate student loss and increase community perceptions of their

school. Plans included additional programing, increased interactions with staff, students, and

parents, and an unfamiliar task, marketing. As Williams reflected:

> My workday just got way longer come April. I had meetings with the district, meetings
>
> with the other principal, meetings with the staff to calm them down, and me and my
>
> assistant spent hours figuring out plans for getting families to stay and what we would do
>
> if we lost a bunch of children.

Each principal expressed how planning and implementing these tasks added to their workload,

intimating that it increased their stress level.

Marketing tasks particularly were perceived as problematic. As Vance stated, "I wasn't

quite sure that advertising, marketing, and recruitment were my job." Principals expressed

frustration in their inability to match the marketing efforts of Charter. James outlined this

frustration when describing how Charter marketed the school over the summer:

> They [Charter] had a huge fair, like a carnival, with big rides; and everybody in the
>
> community saw it. Just before the year they had a big barbeque where they drew the
>
> people in. A lot of people signed up [enrolled] at the carnival and barbecue. Oh, yeah,
>
> free stuff. There's no way we can compete with that.

While student retention efforts added to principals' workload, their new marketing role seemed

to create a new work tension.

Principals also expressed that their workload had increased because of behavior issues of

students returning from Charter. Principals perceived that Charter pushed the challenging

students back to them. Cutler expressed:

> We did get a lot of their behavior problems back. According to the children and parents,

all they did was suspend. I don't think they have an alternative to suspension-tiered

program in place there like we do. I think they made it so kids with behavior problems

were pushed back to us.

The volume and intensity of behaviors of returning students required more principal

involvement and time in dealing with student issues. Principals' engagement in discipline issues

also increased because of the loss of personnel as students and money moved to the charter. As

examples, James eliminated half a counselor position and Williams eliminated the long-time

parent-liaison position, both of whom principals believed prevented student discipline issues. As

Williams stated:

> Without the parent liaison, I'm having to do a lot more of the discipline and meeting with
>
> parents. That takes time out during my day where I'm not doing other things that I need
>
> to do. I'm bringing a lot more work home in the evenings and on weekends because I
>
> can't get to it at school.

Williams' quote was indicative of each principal's sentiments that uncertainty and increased

workloads heightened stress.

Reactions

Principals responded to the perceived threat of the charter by making organizational

changes, adding programs, and engaging in marketing to retain and attract students.

Organizational Changes

Principals made organizational changes to keep students at their schools. In late spring

prior to Charter opening, the three principals discussed ideas to compete more effectively. The

most dramatic and collaborative plan was developing what they termed a "Family of Schools".

The plan would change district policy for student transfers among the three schools. If students

moved within the three attendance zones in the Grayson area, they would stay at their original

school and not be required to transfer. Vance described the process as:

> Because you move across that street you go to another school. You move down the road
>
> and you go to another school. We said, 'Maybe if the kids are moving they would like to
>
> stay with one school.' Like the kids who start with me stay with me and maybe that
>
> would help them not go to the charter school. We came up with this – The Family of
>
> Schools. The district approved the plan.

Principals believed these efforts, including the district's commitment to provide bussing,

contributed to students staying in the traditional schools. Vance explained:

> We made this Family of Schools and I know it did keep at least two families that moved
>
> out of my area and so instead of going to Madison they were going to go to the charter
>
> school and it was like, 'No, no. You can stay with me. We'll give you a bus.' So these
>
> two families stayed.

The principals believed that the Family of Schools plan helped them better compete with the

charter, lowered overall student transiency, allowed continuity in students learning, and benefited

students.

Adding and Enhancing Programs

Organizational changes in individual schools included adding and enhancing programs,

some of which required district approval. Williams and James lobbied the district to add new

programs to their school; Williams lobbied for a STEM program while James pushed for a

Gifted program. The district approved both programs and the programs attracted students and

mitigated the loss of students to the charter; Williams said, "I know we got new students outside

our attendance area to come to our STEM magnet. One mom said she decided to stay here

(Madison) because of the program."

Vance and James also added or enhanced programs that rallied resources from the community. Although Hillside had been a site for student teachers, Vance negotiated with the university to be a 'Center', providing classrooms for university instruction, increasing the volume of experiences for pre-service teachers, and bringing more pre-service teachers into classrooms. She believed that this Center would provide instructional support in the classroom if she lost teachers and had to increase class sizes. She also stated, "It's [Center] a selling point with parents in recruiting students." Similarly, James heightened the school's partnership with a local church and organized volunteers to mentor students during the school day and after school, involving over 100 students throughout the year.

Principals were not given additional resources and had to be creative in budgeting and scheduling to implement the programs with current staff, as noted by Williams, "I was losing staff, but still had to pull my teachers into the STEM program." Principals reallocated Title I moneys previously used for additional staff, such as ESL services, parent liaisons, and technology, to supplement funding to keep classroom teachers and to implement these new programs.

Retention and Marketing Efforts

With the opening of Charter, all principals outlined more aggressive plans to retain and recruit students. Principals asked teachers and staff to alert them if families were considering moving to Charter to put an "early warning system" in place to contact parents/guardians considering moving their students. Through the summer and early fall each principal met with, called, and/or sent personal notes to every parent/guardian who indicated that they were moving their child to Charter. Principals made contact to understand why they were moving their

students and to persuade parents/guardians to keep them at the traditional school. They believed they had more to offer than Charter and laid out the differences between the schools. Williams represented how she engaged with parents:

> When I met with parents I'd said, 'You need to go to that charter school and find out if it offers the programs that this school offers. You'll need to ask: Do they have Art? Do they have Music, Movement, and Drama? Are they gonna have STEM classes for your child? Are they gonna have gifted resource or Special Ed classes or Speech? How often? If your child needs Speech, how often are they gonna receive the Speech services?'

Principals also increased promoting their schools in public meetings and with informal contacts with parents. Vance noted, "We talked to them [parents] when they came to field day, for graduation, when they picked up their kids about all great things at school. So, it was a lot of word of mouth. So, we just kept talking to them."

Principals engaged in limited marketing. They sent notes to all families about the Family of Schools and placed lawn signs provided by the district in the Grayson area to let parents/guardians know about the Family of Schools. Williams personally placed lawn signs promoting the new magnet program in the Grayson and the Highlands neighborhoods. Vance purchased and placed a banner in the entry of the school noting the partnership with the local university and the new teaching center.

James was the only principal who talked about direct changes to the instructional program, curriculum, and instruction to better compete with the Charter. After her appointment and initial classroom observations at Western in the spring, James determined that teachers' literacy instruction needed improvement. She implemented a literacy program to improve instruction with a focus on English Language Learners (ELL):

I'm gonna make changes regardless, whether, because of them [Charter] or not. I'm

always going—I mean I don't believe we have it all right, ever, so you keep reflecting.

You keep refining. You keep trying to get better, so, I think we would do it anyway.

The focus on students' retention initially may have drawn principals away from changes to

teaching and learning.

Changing Perceptions of Competition

Principals discussed how their perceptions of competition with Charter changed as the

year progressed. By the end of the year, principals viewed Charter as a limited threat.

Discussions with parents of students who returned from Charter, student academic performance

and behaviors after returning, interaction with local community members, and internal discussion

with staff about changes made during the year led principals to believe their educational program

was better than the charter. Principals viewed the charter as struggling academically and

organizationally and noted a competitive advantage in their schools.

Academic Advantage

Academically, principals cited that students returning to their schools had fallen behind.

One third of the students (32 of 90) who left for Charter returned to the traditional schools by the

end of the school year (Table 2). An additional 12 students who had not previously attended one

of the three traditional schools transferred from Charter to the traditional schools. From

interviews with parents, all principals noted that students returned mainly because of their lack of

academic progress. Williams summarized one parent's comments upon returning to Madison that

exemplified parent perceptions: "They're (parents) are telling us, 'We're getting the same

work.'" She said, "We saw this work last year when they were at Madison. Of course, she

(student) is getting As, but we know this work isn't hard enough."

As principals engaged with teachers about returning or new students from Charter, they were convinced that the charter had contributed little to the students' academic progress. Williams outlined the perceptions of all three principals, saying, "I learned that they don't teach their children because, when they come to us, it's like they've lost whatever number of months they've been there." James echoed this sentiment in an example of a returning student, "She (student) wasn't a strong student before she left. Then when she comes back, she's got low grades. Her teacher says she's, you know, hasn't been exposed for half a year to the standards."

Additionally, principals noted that students' behavioral issues impeded their academic progress at Charter and many returned to the traditional schools because of discipline issues. Each principal gave examples of two or more students returning with major behavioral issues, issues they believed were exacerbated by a lack of organizational processes at the charter. James gave an example of a guardian's frustration with how Charter dealt with discipline:

> This one grandmother told us about discipline, her grandson, that they didn't know how to discipline. They suspended him after they laid their hand on him, grabbed him, pushed him. She said, 'Y'all won't discipline that way, you won't.'

Parent and teacher comments indicated to principals that their schools better supported students academically and behaviorally.

Organizational Advantage

Principals attributed student academic and behavioral problems to organizational issues at Charter. Each principal related conversations with parents and teachers suggesting that Charter had continuing issues with general school structures and management. As Vance reported, "One parent said it took too long in the carpool line. It was second quarter, and they still hadn't figured out how to organize parent carpools. She said the whole schools seemed disorganized." Williams

related another parent's frustration with Charter's management issues, saying, "This parent said she tried to check out her student and the secretary said there was no such student at the school. This was February and we got the student right after that."

Principals perceived that student academic and behavior issues at Charter were related to organizational issues of teacher turnover and lower teacher competencies. In interviews with parents, principals perceived that the charter struggled with hiring and keeping competent teachers. Cutler summarized conversations with a parent of two children who had returned to Hillside in January:

> The only thing I know is what a parent told me. She said that a lot of the teachers all are, like Teach for America [alternatively certified]. She said very young, and then they don't stay long. That's what the parents say. They come in for a couple of weeks and then they leave.

James also cited a conversation with a parent to emphasis teacher turnover at the charter: "She (student) was here. She left, she came back. Her Mom said that she never had a real teacher. She had substitutes for the majority of the first semester of the year." For these traditional principals, organizational issues of high teacher turnover and low teacher competencies contributed to their perceptions of having a better educational program than Charter.

The traditional principals also expressed that their personal interactions with the charter indicated organizational issues. Principals reported frustrations with communication and collaboration with Charter. All stated that the Charter principal never returned a phone call to them. Staff at the charter often did not respond to school and principal requests, particularly related to transferring students in or out of Charter. Williams summarized the communication issues voiced by all principals: "No, we can't get in touch with them, period, to request records.

We sent it through mail and fax, but we can't get on the phone. They won't answer their phone."
Cutler stated, "If we didn't respond to requests and phone calls like Charter, we'd be called on
the carpet and we should be. How do you run a school if can't even organize simple
communication?" The traditional principals perceived that the Charter was struggling with
simple organizational and management procedures.

Competitive Advantage

Reports throughout the year of academic and organizational issues at the charter
contrasted with the principals' perceptions of their own schools. By the end of the school year
principals expressed their belief that their schools were providing a better educational option for
students and families. Confident responses about the viability of their schools replaced earlier
responses of uncertainty and stress. Williams' uncertainty and stress in the fall about competing
with Charter turned to confidence in the spring: "I didn't have to do it [compete]. I was always
already good. I didn't have to do anything differently. They have to compete with me, not the
other way around." Vance expressed that having a better product would be the best way to
compete:

> I think the recruiting we did was enough. I think I'll get more kids back this summer from
> the charter because parents were so disgusted. If they're gonna recruit them over there
> with their bells and whistles, I can't fight that. The proof is in the pudding. When the
> parents realize that they're not learning they came back.

The principals perceived that their best competitive tool was using word of mouth to promote
their better educational product.

Principals clearly indicated that in the future they would not engage in the same level of
recruiting and organizational changes as they did when Charter opened. They were firm on two

points: 1) Their previous focus on continuous school improvement was the key to competing and 2) Competition with the charter school would still increase their workload. Williams echoed James' previous comments about the importance of continued improvement:

> We keep abreast of instructional practices all the time through continued professional development and just intrinsic, wanting to keep learning. It wouldn't matter if there is a charter or not. We keep learning. We beat the odds. Our children do better than they are supposed to by the numbers.

The principals believed that they were high performing schools because of their ongoing efforts in school improvement. They were confident their focus on school improvement would continue to make them competitive with Charter. They did not dismiss, however, the need to keep an eye out for the charter school and noted that their workload and job requirements had changed. Williams' comments represented the thoughts of each principal:

> We have to pay attention to what the charter is doing. We have all [principals] talked and we still have to include more work than before, still some stress. We have to be listening and talking to families and the community about anything new that they [Charter] may come up with to make sure we aren't blindsided.

Although principals believed their schools were superior to Charter, they also confirmed that the opening of Charter had changed their jobs and how they would operate in the future.

Principals also understood that they would remain at a competitive disadvantage with the charter in some areas, what Vance called the "bells and whistles". Cutler outlined these disadvantages as, "We still can't change things about the charter. The building is still new, they still are close to the kids, and they still can tell parents their kids can stay through 8th grade." The principals perceived, however, that their superior educational program would minimize

these negatives.

Significance and Implications

The findings of this study support Jabbar's (2015b) conceptual framework and research (Jabbar 2015a) associated with how principal reactions to competition may be mediated by their perception of the academic status of their school in the marketplace. The traditional principals in this study reacted and acted based on their perceptions of the status of their schools compared to their charter school competitor. This study extends previous research by indicating how traditional principals' perceptions about their status may change over time and how those changes in perceptions manifested in different actions over time. The study results also provide more detail on how traditional principals may determine their status in the market and the types of data principals may use to make decisions about their status.

Results indicated that over the school year, the principals in this study experienced three perceptional and related action stages in competition with the charter. In the initial stage, perceptions of market status were based on lack of information from the school district, traditional principals' lack of understanding of charter schools, and anticipated and early decreased enrollment. Initial perceptions were reinforced by conversations with parents, teachers, and community members. Traditional principals' initial reactions were based on this limited data and focused on quick organization and programmatic change. In this early stage of competition principals expressed feelings of uncertainty and threat surrounding the charter school opening, which led to principals' expressing heightened stress levels.

This study highlights how the introduction of competition may affect the wellbeing of principals. Oplatka, Fosket, and Hemsley-Brown (2002) hypothesized potential outcomes of competition and marketization on principal wellbeing and several studies have examined the

causes of principal occupational stress and burnout (e.g. Borg & Riding, 1993; Gmelch &

Torelli, 1994; Optlaka, 2007; Whitaker, 1998). To date, however, no study has examined how

the introduction of charter school competition affects traditional principals' wellbeing. Future

studies should examine how introducing competition affects principal stress and wellbeing and

what information and supports can be provided to mitigate elevated stress levels as traditional

principals initially encounter and continue to engage in a competitive environment.

No longer dealing with the "hypothetical" of the charter school opening, the traditional

principals directly compared their schools to the charter school in the second stage of

determining their competitive status. These comparisons with the charter were based primarily

on comments from parent/guardians and staff and the volume and intensity of discipline issues of

returning students. Although approximately two thirds of the students that left the traditional

schools did not return, principals focused less on this data and relied on the perceptions of

teachers and parent/guardians to formulate the belief about their academic and organizational

status compared to the charter school. Relatedly, principals did not systematically collect

formative academic achievement data of returning students, again relying on perceptions of

teachers and parent/guardians to formulate their beliefs about the charter school. Bernhardt

(2013) suggested principals should systematically collect and analyze four types of data to best

make decisions – assessment, demographic, school processes, and perceptual data. Researchers

might consider using such frameworks to further investigate how principals collect and use

various types of data to formulate perceptions of their market status and their resulting actions.

As the school year transpired the traditional principals entered a third stage in

determining their competitive status with the charter school. In this stage the principals made

conclusions about their status and formulated future actions. Again, based primarily on

perceptual data collected during the school year, all three principals determined that the charter

school was not a major threat and that their schools had superior academic programming and

organizational structures. Based on these conclusions, principals' future plans appeared to fall

back on previous patterns and actions with limited acknowledgement of the charter school in

these plans.

A limitation of this study is that perceptual data was not collected into the next school

year. The traditional principals assumed they would not lose a significant number of students to

the charter school the following year because of their superior educational programming and

organizational structures. Enrollment data for the following school year may support principal

perceptions of their schools. The next fall enrollment numbers were slightly higher than spring of

the study year. Hillside enrollment was up by six students, (354), Madison by 8 (493), Western

by four (471), and Charter enrollment down seven (424). State regulations preclude determining

if student achievement between the traditional schools and Charter confirmed principal

perceptions of a superior instructional program.

Charter school achievement data in the state is not reported the first two years a charter

school is open, nor do new charter schools receive a letter grade rating. However, the traditional

school state ratings remained the same, except for Western that moved from a C to a B- school.

Studies are needed that follow traditional principals over multiple years in a variety of

competitive contexts, such as perceptions of traditional principals with private schools as they

open, to examine how principal perceptions are confirmed or overturned with additional data,

particularly enrollment numbers and achievement data the years following the opening of the

new school.

As an exploratory comparative case study, the findings described are not generalizable.

Findings point, however, to how principals, regardless of grade levels, may react to the initial competition posed by the opening of a charter school. The four principals in this study reacted to the perceived threat of losing students and resources by changing organizational structures for which they had control. Without information or initial support by the district they used the power and control they did yield to change structures and procedures to better compete. The findings of this study suggest principals can react to competition by mobilizing the resources they control, irrespective of grade level or varying school contexts.

Context, however, may have impacts on traditional principal perceptions, reactions, and the specific actions they choose to mobilize to compete with charter schools. Do principals in various contexts, including elementary, middle, and high schools, use perceptual data differently to determine their status in the marketplace as competition begins? The principals in this study led schools that historically had been academically more successful than comparable schools. How might principals of schools with different demographics and school performance levels react and act to the opening of a charter? How might district context, including how districts prepare principals for competing with charter schools, impact principal reactions and actions? Does the pattern of three stages of principal reactions and actions as charter schools open, initial stress, reacting to threat, and perceptions of status, hold for these different circumstances and contexts? Future research should outline what principals working in various grade levels within different district contexts specifically choose to change and implement as they react to new charter competition.

This study confirms previous research that principals' reactions to charter schools are based on their perception of the school's academic status and adds to previous findings by suggesting that principals move through phases of reactions and actions as they determine their

status when thrust into competition for students as a charter school opens. These findings have implication for all principals who may face the opening of a charter, private, or even magnet school in their attendance zone. Principals need to be aware competition may initially lead to increased work load and stress as they determine the school's status in the market relative to the new school. Initial reactions may lead to decisions to increasing marketing and managing community perceptions rather than focusing on effective instructional and organizational programming. However, based on the cases of the traditional principals in this study, continued focus on improving instruction and effective school organization structures was the key to reduced stress and positive perceptions of their competitive status.

The findings also have implications for traditional school districts in how they prepare and support all principals to compete with charter schools as they open. Districts need to provide principals with information about the new school and training and support to help principals better manage work load and mobilize school organizational and instructional strategies when competing with a new charter school. With all levels of traditional principals facing increased competition in 45 US states from charter schools (Education Commission of the States, 2020), additional district support and research examining the nuances of traditional principals' perceptions and actions in competitive markets, particularly at the onset of competition, is warranted.

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Table 1
School Information

School	Free-Reduced Lunch Oct. 1	Ethnicity Oct. 1	Limited English Proficiency Oct. 1	State rating
Hillside	94%	72% Black 17% Hispanic 3% White 8% Other	14%	C
Madison	95%	77% Black 16% Hispanic 2% White 5% Other	17%	B
Western	86%	51% Black 27% Hispanic 12% White 4% Asian 6% Other	27%	C
Charter	Not reported as of Oct. 1	78% Black 10% Hispanic 8% White 4% Other	5%	New school- No rating

Table 2

Mobility

School	Enrollment August 14*	Enrollment Sept. 3	Enrollment May 5	Previous year mobility	Final mobility study year	Students moved to charter before start of school	Students returned from charter during year	Student from charter not previously enrolled
Hillside	343	330	349	50.11%	48.58%	12	4	1
Madison	470	467	486	39.33%	51.32%	50	14	9
Western	454	440	467	49.38%	40.82%	28	14	2
Charter	288	506	431		70.22%			

*Registered students prior to school starting date

Table 3
Principal Participants

Participant	School	Years principal of school	Years as principal	Background
Vance	Hillside	12	12	3 years dean at other elementary; elementary teacher and instructional coach 15 years
Cutler	Hillside	0	0	12 years Dean of Hillside; school speech pathologist 6 years
Williams	Madison	14	14	16 years elementary teacher
James	Western	0	0	20 years teacher; instructional coach charter school 1 year

APPENDIX A
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Beginning of School Year
1. Please, describe your professional background.

2. What are the strengths of (name of traditional school)?

3. How did you find out that a charter school was opening in your attendance area?

4. What impact, if any, has the opening of the charter had on your school? Staff? You?

5. What changes, if any, have you made as a result of the charter opening?

6. What concerns do you have moving forward now that the charter has opened?

7. What advice do you have for other principals as they face the opening of a charter school?

End of School Year
1. Thinking of this past school year, what went well at (name of traditional school)?

    a. What challenges were experienced?

2. What did you learn about the charter school this year?

3. What impact, if any, has the charter had on your school this year? Staff? You?

4. What changes, if any, have you made since we last spoke as a result of the charter opening?

5. With respect to the charter school, what concerns do you have moving forward?

6. What advice do you have for other principals as they experience the opening of a charter school?