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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Preparedness of K-12 Charter School Principals

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

by

Virginia Frine Smith

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Preparedness of K-12 Charter School Principals

by

Virginia Frine Smith

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Megan Franke, Chair

This qualitative study examined the preparedness of K-12 public charter school principal leaders in Georgia and how they understood their role in ensuring schools' academic, fiscal, and operational success while navigating challenges that can contribute to school closure. Grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs and systems theory, the study explored how principals' lived experiences shaped their ability to fulfill required responsibilities and the supports available to sustain their work. The study examined leaders' educational backgrounds, experiences in charter and traditional public schools, student populations, facilities, and whether schools operated as standalone or network charter schools. It further investigated principals' preparedness across key operational domains, including financial management, human resources, curriculum, community engagement, special education, staff support, enrollment, and teacher professional development. Drawing on survey data from 20 participants and interview data from 10 participants, the study found that leaders in standalone and network charter schools were similar in education,

experience, and reported preparedness. Across both groups, principals described playing an essential role in school success, yet they faced substantial challenges related to facilities, funding, enrollment, and limited resources. Although preparedness varied across domains and among leaders with different backgrounds, the findings showed that charter school leadership requires a broad set of capacities that extend beyond traditional principal preparation. Overall, the study concludes that charter principal leaders are central to school success but need stronger systems of support to navigate the fiscal, operational, and structural demands of their roles effectively.

The dissertation of Virginia Frine Smith is approved.

Louis Gomez

Kristen Rohanna

Megan Franke, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

DEDICATION PAGE

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Julia, who always instilled in all seven (7) of her children that we can do whatever we set our minds to. And whatever that is, be your very best at it. Your encouragement and sacrifice throughout my life have given me the strength to chart this journey as a continuous learner.

To my husband, Herman, my biggest supporter, my counselor, and so much more, who never stopped reminding me that I could do this and that he was so proud of me.

To my son, Willie aka Trey, who told me when I was feeling overwhelmed at the start of the program, “*You got it one day at a time, learn what you can and pace yourself, you got it.*” Your love and encouragement meant so much to me.

To all of my family and friends, particularly my nieces and nephews, this is to let you know that you are capable of achieving anything your heart desires through dedication, determination, and commitment to seeing it through, even when it feels hard.

To my Springs Charter Schools family and colleagues who supported me on this journey from the very start, reminded me what a great decision this was, and supported me at UCLA.

You are my village, one I am so grateful to be a part of, and I thank you.

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VITA

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I served as the founding executive director of a K-8 public charter school start-up in Fulton County, Georgia, for 12 years. During this time, I worked with principals, district leaders, our authorizer, and community stakeholders to ensure the charter school's success. As executive director, I witnessed the challenges that arise from the attrition of charter school principal leaders. For instance, during my ten years as executive director, the charter school had 4 new principals, only one of whom had prior principal experience. During this time, I became curious about the role charter leaders play in ensuring charters' continued success. Specifically, I became interested in documenting the challenges principals face when confronting inequities in funding and when working to uphold the charter petition standards for meeting student success ratings outlined in the charter petitions. After careful reflection and several years post that experience, I now strive to merge my professional experience with my scholarly awareness in this dissertation. I also strive to contribute to the body of literature that characterizes critical practices for ensuring charter school leaders' success in my assessment of charter principal preparation.

Having now served for nearly 20 years as an educational administrator in both public and private school settings, I have gained insight into what is required of its leaders to carry out this work. As the former executive director of a charter school, I worked alongside the principals to ensure the school's success across operations, finances, facilities, human resources, and enrollment, among other areas. During this time, I worked with other charter leaders and authorizers as a thought partner to ensure the charter school's success. For

instance, during my tenure as executive director, the four charter principals all came from traditional public schools (TPS), and none had prior charter school experience, though one was a former principal. These principal changes led to higher turnover at the school to meet the charter's demands for academic, staff, and parent outcomes. Some of the turnover can be attributed to teachers' and staff complaints, board recommendations, a lack of meeting performance expectations that would lead to student and charter success, and, at times, the principal's personal reasons. As I examined principal preparedness in this dissertation, it was essential first to understand the general meaning of a public charter school.

Defining a Public Charter School vs. a Traditional Public School

In the K-12 educational sector, charter schools are publicly funded, nonsectarian schools of choice with no political or religious affiliation. Unlike traditional public schools (TPS), charters typically operate with greater decision-making autonomy and are exempt from local and state regulations, including those requiring specialized teaching and curricula, as outlined by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2026). With this flexibility to design classrooms that best fit the needs of students and the communities they serve, charter authorizers have implemented more rigorous accountability measures based on academic, financial, and operational performance to ensure charters meet the standards set by their authorizers. This oversight determines whether the charter is approved, renewed, or closed based on its performance measurements (Georgia Charter Schools Association, 2026). This reassessment occurs at the charter's term, generally every five years, though a charter term can range from one to ten years. I have not seen a ten-year charter granted in my experience in Georgia or California with my current employer; generally, it is a five-year term. Charter schools, even those in charter networks (*multi-site*), have less infrastructure to

support school leaders. Allen & Gawlik (2009) outlined that traditional public-school (TPS) principals operate within a systems approach with district support for public relations, human resources, facilities, management, and other school-related areas. In contrast, charter school principal leaders operate like district superintendents. Charter principals manage their support systems internally, encompassing student recruitment, finances, fundraising, and human resources, while balancing internal and external pressures and upholding the school's vision for academic success. Allen & Gawlik (2009) argued that learning to lead differs between public and charter school principals. Charter school principals are expected to manage broader job expectations successfully, unlike TPS leaders. This requires a different skill set from TPS leaders, given charter school leaders' responsibilities.

Statement of the Problem

Allen & Gawlik (2009) outlined the stark differences between the duties of a charter principal and a TPS principal. My research focused on the role of the principal in charter schools to better understand how supporting them can lead to greater charter school success. My research further identified the skill set needed to manage day-to-day operations as a principal school leader, ensure that academic and fiscal responsibilities are met, and identify how these responsibilities are supported in that work. Carpenter & Peak (2013) found that charter principals are comfortable with the school community, school safety, and managing staff, but feel less confident in parent issues, conducting meetings, and academic demands. Windham (2020) documents that charter school principals face challenges ranging from facility location to recruitment and teacher training. My study built on existing research by examining how charter school leaders' support can better prepare the field to learn more

about how educational and leadership programs may better equip principals to lead successfully in charter schools.

Study Overview

In this research, I interviewed and surveyed past and present charter school leaders in Georgia to understand their lived experiences, documented what they found most successful in their roles, and examined the support they received from their authorizers or districts, as well as the professional learning opportunities that prepared them for their roles. Additionally, I was interested in the changes they would like to see to ensure the success of charter leaders and schools. Further, how those changes relate to their experience with charter school closures, if any, to understand which factors led to those closures and how to improve them.

Research Questions

This study investigated how charter principal leaders perceive their preparation and support for successfully performing their jobs and collaborating with local authorizers.

Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1. How do charter principal leaders in Georgia perceive the role they play in ensuring the academic, fiscal, and operational success of the charter school they serve?

RQ2. What challenges, if any, do K-12 charter principal leaders and executive directors in Georgia endure when navigating charter school success to avoid school closures?

Study Design

This study examined charter school principals' lived experiences in public charter schools to identify their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the support that has sustained or not sustained them in their roles. This study focused on the state of Georgia, where I served as an executive director, wearing many other hats, like the leaders in this study, and working with principals and district leaders while witnessing the successes and closures of charter school sites. As a leader in education, it is essential to acknowledge problems, as I see in Georgia, where the number of charter school closures exceeds the number of existing charter schools. To conduct this research, I used two methods: surveys and interviews. The goal was to reach current and former charter school principals. The survey focused on principal demographics, including education, credentials, student population, years of leadership experience in charter and TPS schools, and preparedness level for their role. This data provided a basis for analyzing connections between charter school successes and failures. It also provided a deeper analysis of the roles of charter school and traditional public school principals.

Study Significance

The findings of this study showed the extent to which charter school principals feel prepared to do their jobs and adequately supported by their district authorizers and local boards to succeed in their school communities. As a charter school administrative leader of sixteen (16) years, leading in strategic planning and development, recruitment and hiring, finance, and operations, I have witnessed the struggles of principal leaders in their lack of preparation for the role. Charter principals usually meet the general job requirements for education, but often have limited leadership experience in education and credentialing, and may not have experience working for a start-up charter organization. (Ni et al., 2014). This study is important because of the rising failure rate of charter schools, particularly in

Georgia; the myth or reality that charter schools are reducing TPS enrollment and, in turn, TPS funding; and how to prepare principal leaders to lead in charter schools to create successful outcomes. My research offers recommendations based on identifying challenges and barriers to aid charter school principals' success as outlined in their charter petitions, with the goal of reducing closures and creating better systems for leaders to follow. As of now, there is no standard process for establishing a charter school, including guidance on setup, staffing, securing enrollment, facilities, and operations, beyond the application requirements. Petitioners have full autonomy over what this establishment will be at all levels of school creation.

This study contributes to the body of research on principals' preparedness and adds to the limited research on charter schools by delving deeper into the day-to-day operations that support positive school outcomes. I gained a better understanding of whether there are additional leadership programs to support leaders, if needed. If the charter authorizer can offer more support or additional accountability checkpoints to highlight concerns sooner than at an annual review or charter renewal.

Conclusion

In the follow-up charters, I examined the background of charter schools, the rationale for their existence as a choice for communities, and the preparation of charter school leaders to succeed in such unconventional school environments. Next, I outlined the research methods used in this study, including the design tools, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods for examining the lived experiences of charter principals. Finally, I analyzed my data and presented my findings to my committee, outlining the themes in the

literature and concluding with the limitations of my study and any research gaps, tying this back to my research questions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As I deepened my understanding of the integral work of charter school principal leaders, I focused on their preparedness and the systems in which they operate. There is limited data on charter leaders, their roles, and the possible challenges they have faced. I started the literature review by reflecting on the background of charter schools, charter closures, leader attrition, and what has prepared principal leaders, as well as the conceptual framework underlying the study.

Charter School Background

In 1965, there was an increase in state control over education due to declining confidence in K-12 educators, leading to the Elementary & Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which supported low-income students, minorities, and students with disabilities (Doyle & Kirst, 2015). The study further examines policy changes and the pressure to use student test scores to identify student achievement and to determine educator compensation and promotion. Out of the policy changes emerged “*policy entrepreneurs*,” those committed to developing and implementing policies who were dissatisfied with the status quo and open to change - leading to the development of charter schools, as indicated in this article. In understanding the development of charter schools, it is important to acknowledge their educational successes, their failures that have led to school closures, and their impact on local communities. This informs the leadership support systems needed, which are identified in my study.

The first charter was adopted in 1991 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Charter schools then spread throughout the U.S. to over forty (40) states and include over 3600 charter

schools. This growth led to the formation of opposing coalitions and prompted policymakers to restrict expansion and impose additional state and local regulations (Doyle & Kirst, 2015). Currently, more than 46 states have charter school laws, with more than 8,000 schools serving over 3.8 million students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2026). As shown in Table 1, California has the highest number of charter schools at 1270, serving more than 700,000 students, compared to Georgia, *our research focus state*, with 97 charter schools serving 64,579 students as of the 2024-2025 school year (Georgia Charter Schools Association, 2026). Georgia approved its charter law in 1994, three years after Minnesota’s charter law was enacted (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2026).

Table 1

Top Ten States With the Highest Numbers of Charters and Closures in the United States

State	Existing Charter Schools	Closures
<i>California #1</i>	<i>1270</i>	<i>718</i>
Texas	1054	529
Florida	729	458
Arizona	560	583
Michigan	336	226
New York	350	78
Ohio	339	327
Minnesota	295	137
Colorado	260	102
Wisconsin	225	307
<i>Georgia</i>	<i>97 (#24)</i>	<i>163 (#8)</i>

Charter School Closures

Given the high cost of the experiment and the investment in developing a charter school, questions are raised about the expected life cycle of a charter school, the probability that a kindergartener will graduate from it, and how closures affect students and local communities (Burris & Pfleger, 2020). According to the United States Department of Education's Common Core Data (CCD), between 2009 and 2016, 196 to 236 charter schools closed per year. The CCD article also revealed that 18% (1,667 out of 9,413) of charters closed within their *first three years*; by year five, more than one in four charters closed at 27% (2,237 out of 8,224), 40% (2,255 out of 5,568) by year ten, and 50% (1,520 out of 3,038) by year fifteen. As this article reveals, some failures stem from low enrollment, mismanagement, and a lack of transparency, and occur in the poorest metropolitan areas of the United States. Economically disadvantaged students make up 61% of students compared to 54% of TPS students. (Burris & Pfleger, 2020). As shown in Table 1 and outlined by Network for Public Education (2026), California has the most charter schools closed, at 718, followed by Texas at 529 and Georgia at 163, more than double the number of its existing schools (Network for Public Education, 2026).

Georgia ranks eighth among fifty-one states for the most charter school closures, with one hundred and sixty-three (163) charter schools closed, leaving ninety-seven (97) active charter schools (Network for Public Education, 2026). There have been almost twice as many closures as there are open schools in Georgia. It is important to understand these closures to proactively support charter principal leaders (see Table 1). Some charter schools that closed relinquished their charters to become public schools (Network for Public Education, 2026). In some states, the number of closures far exceeds the number of opened charters, which supports my research on why closures are happening and what we can do as educational

leaders to address the challenges faced by charter leaders, reduce the number of closures, and offer more long-term stability for students, staff, and communities. Closures deplete educational institutions' financial resources. Most recently, Burris (2024) ranked the state of Georgia number three for the highest charter school closure rate, at 45%. As Burris and Pflieger (2020) noted, charter school closures substantially impact local communities by displacing students, disrupting students' learning, and affecting families' schooling options. In Georgia, families are concerned about the effects of school closures, including lowered property values, fractured communities, and the pushout of young families (Garnett, 2014). According to Kingsbury et al. (2023), 31% of African American-founded charter schools serving predominantly African American students are closed, compared with up to 14% of other charter schools. Georgia has 40% of its Black students attending charter schools (Ziebarth & Palmer, 2016).

Closed charter schools often affect low-income, African American, and Latino students. Chavez (2018) reported three leading reasons for charter school closures: facility issues, financial issues, and mismanagement. Academic achievement, the ability of the students and the school to achieve its educational goals, was also cited as a reason for charter school closures. Burris & Pflieger (2020) identified several contributing factors, including the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic, fraud and mismanagement, a lack of transparency, growing awareness of racial and economic inequities in charter schooling, the draining of district funds, and instability in charter petitions. And while I recognize the closure of charter schools, my research seeks to understand its relation to principal preparedness to lead in charter schools and the experience required not only to meet academic success but also to address concerns of mismanagement, financial, and facility, to

name a few, that were identified as motives that led to closures that also led to an increase in principal attrition.

Principal Attrition

Essential duties of a charter principal have led to lower job satisfaction and poor working conditions, which are key drivers of principal attrition, according to Taie and Lewis (2023). Principal attrition and mobility were observed during the 2021-2022 period, with a notable difference in attrition rates between traditional public schools (TPS) and public charter schools. Those who remained in their positions were identified as Stayers, with rates of 80.0% in traditional public schools and 76.6% in public charter schools. Ni et al. (2014) argued that between 2004 and 2010, charter principals stayed an average of 2.91 years, compared to 4.26 years for TPS, with retention rates of 74.3% for charters and 86.6% for TPS. This article also indicates that charter school principals leave their roles due to burnout from heavier workloads, greater responsibilities, and the daily management of school operations by age 50, whereas TPS principals leave at 57, the average age for TPS retirement. This attrition has sparked my interest in examining further the principal's preparedness for such roles to reduce attrition and support charter leadership.

Charter School Principal Preparedness

Charter school principals operate with multiple levels of decision-making that impact enrollment, hiring, curriculum, instruction, fundraising, facilities, finances, and school improvement. Traditional principals are supported by their district office and are only tasked with matters involving student academic success, teacher success, and parent engagement (Badger, 2022). Principal leaders in charter schools must learn to delegate, prioritize, and share responsibilities to avoid constraints that could negatively affect the organization's day-

to-day operations and management, according to Thomas & Lacey (2016). Further, this article outlined that charter principal leaders also meet with staff and students, address parent concerns, and hire staff, while adhering to state and authorizer regulations, legislation, and obligations mandated by the charter school board agreement. With this, principal leaders must be qualified to manage and balance the business and financial obligations and academic programming in a way that avoids putting the school at risk of failure (Thomas & Lacey, 2016).

Charter school principals generally do not emerge from traditional educational leadership programs and are not adequately prepared to perform the day-to-day functions of a charter school, argues Dressler (2001). Charter school leaders operate like district office superintendents, overseeing all school business offices and the academic goals of a school site, both of which are managed internally. Allen and Gawlik (2009) examined the development of a leadership program that distinguished between leading in a traditional school and a charter school and equipped leaders with the tools required to meet their day-to-day duties, setting them up for success in their roles. Establishing such programs will help create a system that supports charter school leaders in avoiding school closures. Such programs usually require budgets and funding to be supported by the charter school.

Charter School Funding

To better understand charter school funding, I took a deeper dive to examine differences between charter schools and traditional public schools (TPS) funding, a consistent hot topic among the charter leaders who participated in this research. Principal leaders shared that they are funded at a lower level than TPS. 22Beacon (2025), formerly known as Charter Schools Development Corporation, describes that charter schools are

primarily funded through a Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, similar to TPS. The QBE then calculates allocations based on the full-time equivalent (FTE) of enrolled students and adjusts them for factors such as gifted-student programs, students' special-education status, and grade levels. The biggest difference is that charter schools do not receive local property tax revenue, which schools rely on heavily for supplemental state funding. This has the greatest impact on State Charter Schools Commission schools, whose funding is further described in Figure 1 (State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, 2026). Figure 1 also shows that virtual schools are funded even less because they lack a brick-and-mortar school building to serve students. They serve students online. One online principal, Howard, shared: “Educating, struggling, and disadvantaged kids is hard, and trying to figure out ways to do it effectively with the resources that we are given.”

Figure 1

State Charter Schools Commission’s per-pupil student earnings

QBE Funding for State Charter Schools (FY2026)

Each state charter school will earn slightly different QBE funding based on its student population. **The average QBE per FTE for FY26 is \$5,885.**

State Charter Supplement Funding (FY2026)

	Brick & Mortar Schools	Virtual Schools
Number of Schools	48	2
Nursing Grant	\$20,000/school	\$20,000/school
Base Supplement	\$4,930 – \$7,125/FTE	\$4,750.22/FTE (2/3 statewide average)
Capital Funding	\$1,740 – \$2,959/FTE	\$434.90/FTE (1/4 statewide average)
State Nutrition Grant	\$19.42/FTE	—
State Transportation Grant	\$87.55/FTE	—

Furthermore, charter school financing shapes the principal's roles and responsibilities, including their ability to provide adequate resources and staffing. Charter schools are funded through a combination of local, state, and federal government revenues, as well as grant opportunities they can apply for. The shortfall leaves charter schools underfunded relative to their local TPS, even as they are held to the same benchmarks for student performance on state tests to ensure academic success. In contrast, TPS receives 80% of its funding from the state, which is not heavily influenced by local property taxes. This financial gap leaves charter school principals devoting more time to raising funds, negotiating with their local districts or authorizers, and supporting their boards in fundraising activities to offset the revenue shortfall (Badger, 2022). Despite funding concerns, charter school leaders face the task of combating the “myths” about charter schools that have and continue to pose potential risks to enrollment and funding. As explained further by the Georgia Charter School

Association (2026), there is no loss of funds from traditional schools because schools are funded based on student attendance, which is a parent's choice. As Georgia charter schools are funded at lower levels than traditional schools for various reasons, there are myths about this. Two key myths affect funding:

MYTH: Charter public schools take money away from public schools.

REALITY: In Georgia, public school funding follows the student, with the funding going to the public school the parents choose, whether a charter school or a traditional district school. When charter public schools are funded, there is no overall loss of public school money because charter schools are public schools. Public charter schools authorized by the State Charter Schools Commission receive state funding but no local taxpayer money.

MYTH: Charter public schools receive more money than district public schools.

REALITY: In Georgia, charter schools receive LESS federal and state money than district public schools, for a variety of reasons.

Challenges and Resources

Dressler (2001) examined the growth of charter schools, noting that 1,994 charter schools served over 500,000 students in the United States by September 2000, thereby providing parents and families with more options in public education. This growth has highlighted challenges, including, but not limited to, new federal and state policies, principals' competence in implementing educational programs, and policy changes that include all students, particularly students with disabilities and low-income students. As a result, principal leaders have felt inadequately prepared to meet the job requirements (Agbu, 2021).

Some of the challenges that lead to this inadequacy include charter principals' views of their primary responsibility, which differ significantly from reality. Some leaders feel that their three primary functions are managing staff, ensuring school safety, and building and growing the internal school community (Carpenter & Peak, 2013). According to this article, principals feel less confident in math and literacy, spend more time holding meetings and addressing parent issues, and have less time on hiring staff and fundraising. This motivated my research because, based on my experience, the principal's functions are much broader, and my study will serve as a tool that provides structure for principals' work.

One of the challenges charter school leaders have identified is limited funding that hinders their ability to meet day-to-day operational needs, particularly for new charter schools. Charter Schools Program (CSP) grants have been supported by the Department of Education since 1995 to support the creation of charter schools, expansions, the replication of charters, the dissemination of best practices, and the expansion of opportunities for underserved students to attend charter schools. (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). The article reports that CSP-Grant recipient charter schools were less likely to close than non-CSP recipient charter schools that did not receive award funds between fiscal years 2006 and 2020. Grant recipients were 2.55 percentage points less likely to close than similar charters (4.94%).

In fiscal years 2006-2020, Charter Schools Program State Educational Agencies/State Entities (CSP State) awarded the state of Georgia \$50,000,000 to support the growth of new and existing charter schools. Some of these funds were expended on start-up charter use, payroll, technology, curriculum, and other school-related expenses. Charters that never opened did not receive awards.

It also identifies the 14 states that received the most funding for charter schools that closed or never opened. This accounted for about 19% (up to \$129 million) of CSP State award funding for charter schools, as reported by the United States Government Accountability Office (2022). Georgia is eleventh on this list of award recipients that closed or never opened charters, with projected losses of up to about \$20 million (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022).

To dive deeper into my study of school closures and support, I wanted to understand what resources local districts or authorizers provide to their charter schools: no-cost facilities, interest-only loans, maintenance support, student services (*including special education*), training and development, and hiring support. In my experience as a former executive director, our school received very limited resources from authorizers. Some resources provided included special education training and facilities, along with an interest-only loan after a five-year search for a permanent facility. Prior to this acquisition, our school leased space in two churches for five years, incurring rent, utilities, upgrades to both churches, and other expenses to meet school requirements, which together accounted for more than 15% of our budget. Some neighboring districts have shared that facilities were provided at no cost to the charter school. If this were possible, it would be a significant savings for hiring and curriculum needs, as facilities are a major budget item. Georgia has been challenged to provide more equitable funding and support for facilities that support charter school students (Ziebarth & Palmer, 2016). Furthermore, I wanted to understand what training and development, if any, are offered by authorizers or local districts, including from the perspective of local charter schools. From my experience, I was invited to attend full-group district leader meetings for district updates, but leadership training was limited to the general

budget and academic reporting due to our local authorizers. What other resources and support do principal leaders feel would benefit their success in operating in their roles? What other struggles impede meeting day-to-day operational needs and ensuring student success? Were leadership challenges and closures higher in a particular community than in others?

What is the Current State of the Charter School Movement?

The current state of charter schools is further examined in Cremata et al (2025), published by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), which evaluates the academic performance of charter school students. CREDO research focuses on charter versus traditional public schools, charter schools affiliated with management organizations versus stand-alone charter schools, and the trends over time. This research also acknowledges its short-sightedness, with limited access to localized environmental, regulatory, and organizational factors that influence individual success or failure. CREDO's research is rooted in schools' academic progress, a factor in a school's success or failure. CREDO's 2023 national sample, compared with 2015-19, shows that charter school students outpaced their peers in traditional public schools (TPS) in reading and math. This factor is important to those who question the performance of charter schools and their impact on local school communities, as well as to the NAACP and the Movement for Black Lives' recommendation to issue a moratorium on the opening of new charter schools (Burris & Pflieger, 2020). This proposal came after a deep economic downturn and the novel coronavirus pandemic, amid concerns that tax dollars were being spent in the charter sector rather than reinvested in traditional public schools, thereby avoiding the drain on local school districts' budgets. In addition, earlier charter concerns included the frequency of fraud and mismanagement, a lack of transparency, growing awareness of racial and economic inequities in charter schooling,

and the instability that charter competition creates in communities. Despite these concerns, charter schools have experienced consistent growth across the U.S., particularly in Georgia.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2024) reports that public charter schools saw an increase of 80,000 students in the 2023-2024 academic year and that enrollment has grown by over 400,000 students over the past five years. And though charter schools experienced growth during and after the COVID years, traditional public schools (TPS) have lost about 1.75 million students over this period. Enrollment growth was 83,172 for charter schools and a decline of 274,412 for TPS in 2023-2024. Moreover, the state of Georgia has seen a decline in the number of new charter schools from a peak of 131 in 2011-12 to 103 as of the 2023-24 academic year, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2026). Georgia charter schools' student academic growth is outpacing that of their traditional school peers, rising from 17 percent to 60 percent between 2015 and 2019 (State Charter School Commission of Georgia, 2023). While this state and national data were available, they are limited for exploring greater detail about individual charters in Georgia.

Limited Charter School Research

While charter schools have existed for more than 34 years, limited attention has been paid to tracking collective charter school performance across the United States, including in Georgia (Doyle & Kirst, 2015). As Georgia evaluates the K-12 teacher and leader workforce, charters were not included in its reporting (Flamini & Steed, 2022). And though state-approved charter schools are considered individual school districts, they were not included in their reporting either. Interestingly, this segregation of inclusivity is evident across Georgia's agencies. For example, in reporting employees for the Teacher Retirement System, its members include all employees of local boards of education, *charter schools*, universities,

technical colleges, libraries, the Board of Regents, and other associated state agencies, as outlined in the State of Georgia Governor’s findings in this report. This report is valuable for understanding Georgia schools' K-12 test performance, leaders' educational levels, credentials, demographics, ethnicity, and years of experience, as well as how schools compare within the region. This information would be insightful for understanding charter schools' performance and the reasoning behind their success or failure as principal leaders (Flamini & Steed, 2022, pp. 29-30). Furthermore, the report shows that new leadership candidates are enrolled in preparation programs that would be a valuable tool for charter principals, but this research is not currently available. The report also speaks to retention, which is a leading challenge for charter schools, as outlined in Taie & Lewis (2023), speaking to principal attrition and mobility in their roles with “leavers” in charter schools occurring at a rate of 13.8% compared to 9.4% of traditional public schools (TPS). While this number may appear small, in smaller communities it could pose a challenge for schools seeking to recruit new principals.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

As I studied charter school principals and the work required of them, I also considered the systems that enable their everyday work and the people who support it. Charter schools have significant autonomy in their operations, principal leadership, and student enrollment, among other areas. This autonomy leads to a theory of action in which principals exercise choice and accountability, and experience deregulation, as outlined by Gawlik (2008). This study was grounded in two interrelated theoretical frameworks to further understand charter principals' work: Systems Theory (Gawlik, 2008) and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and resiliency theories (Wallace, 2021). Through this examination, the study

explored whether current systems meet the needs of the people and the organization, and what we can adapt within these systems to better address the charter school's needs.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Ensuring the basic needs of the work environment meet the needs of all staff is essential for focusing on the work at hand, particularly in this context, the charter principal leaders in Georgia. This study examined coherence using Maslow's hierarchy of needs and resilience theories, and its correlation with principals' human needs, which must be met first before focusing on role expectations (Wallace, 2021). As examined in Ni et al. (2014), charter principals are initially attracted to charter schools based on their school mission and values but soon become disheartened by the lack of job security due to the charter's flexible hiring practices and dismissal policies, and inferior salaries and benefit packages compared to those of traditional public schools (TPS). Later, this study further evaluated the heavier workloads, accountability pressures, and school operations that led me to a systems overview (Ni et al., 2014).

Conclusion

As we have reviewed in this chapter, the history of charter schools since their inception, the sources of funding for charter schools, and the rate of charter closures, we will dig deeper into this and other data and research to further identify how these relate to and aid in charter principal preparedness that supports their success or failure. Preparing principals to lead in charter environments through charter leadership programs is a vital part of this study of principal preparedness. This study examined further in my charter principal surveys and interview methods.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

There is still a disconnect between the work of K-12 public charter school principal leaders and what's required of them. This study sought to identify the role of charter school principals compared with that of traditional public school (TPS) principals, what has prepared charter leaders for this work, and what is required to be successful as a principal to avoid closure. I documented these unique perspectives because they help us understand the connection between principals' preparedness and charter school success and closure. To this end, two questions guided this study. The first question concerns the day-to-day role of principals in ensuring the charter school's success. The second question invites a perspective on how principals' needs are met in managing the challenges in upholding their charter petition. The two questions are as follows:

Research Questions

RQ1. How do charter principal leaders in Georgia perceive the role they play in ensuring the academic, fiscal, and operational success of the charter school they serve?

RQ2. What challenges, if any, do K-12 charter principal leaders and executive directors in Georgia endure when navigating charter school success to avoid school closures?

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted a qualitative study to explore charter school principals' preparedness in Georgia by examining related phenomena. Using a qualitative approach enabled me to capture an in-depth exploration of charter school leaders' lived experiences. The research

allowed me to study a phenomenon for each principal leader as it related to their site. The two methods for collecting data in this study were: surveys and one-on-one interviews with charter principal leaders. The survey provided an overview of the participants' backgrounds, education, experience, preparedness for essential job roles, and their perspectives on support. The interview examined, more personally and in greater detail, the extent to which these school leaders felt equipped to do their jobs with adequate support from their district or state authorizers, and whether and how school closures resulted from these attributes. Both methods provided in-depth details to deepen the understanding of principal preparedness.

Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from the pool of current and past charter principal leaders in Georgia. I relied on past research and data from the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia (SCSC), the Georgia Charter Schools Association (GCSA), the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), charter school websites, and local district websites in Georgia.

Participants

Participants in this study were limited to charter school principal leaders in Georgia. This included principals, executive directors, and superintendents in the Metro-Atlanta, Georgia, area, including Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett counties, as well as surrounding counties. The invitation was sent to 83 principal leaders across more than 18 counties and 32 cities in the state of Georgia. To be eligible for this research, participants had to identify as a current or former K-12 charter school leader in Georgia. There were 20 eligible respondents who completed the survey. From this group, 12 were purposefully selected for one-on-one interviews based on identified criteria, lasting up to 45 minutes,

though only 10 participated. These 10 participants were selected based on their survey responses, indicating that they were principal leaders of standalone (*single-site*) or network (*multi-site*) charter schools. Then, from this group, I further selected based on student populations being the same size for both groups to ensure parity, and then on years of charter and TPS experience, education, and levels of preparedness. On the levels of preparedness, it was important to have a range from not prepared (1) to very prepared (5), in all categories. Table 2 provides information on the survey participants' education, years of experience, and school type and location. Note that the participants were highly educated, had previous charter experience, and more than half of them were in schools with more than 500 students. Most leaders in the study were in standalone charter schools.

Table 2

Principal Leader Characteristics From the Survey

Characteristic	% of Participants
Education	
Master's degree	45%
Doctoral	30%
Specialist	25%
Years of Experience	
Charter	90%
Traditional Public School (TPS)	25%
Population	
Less than 100 students	5%
100–300 students	20%
301–500 students	15%
More than 500 students	60%
Network	35%
Standalone	65%
Location	n
Cities	12
Counties	6

Data Collection

Survey

To initiate my data collection, I administered a survey via the Qualtrics platform to charter school principals. The survey had 16 multiple-choice questions on principal educational background, years of experience in education, both traditional and public charter schools, population size, network, standalone, or Charter Management Organization (CMO), facility, and community engagement, as well as Likert-scale questions rating leaders' preparedness to lead and the resources that supported their work.

I used a descriptive review to summarize my survey data, including the percentages of principals who felt supported and of principal leaders who felt prepared to do their jobs, as well as the resources needed to better support principal leaders. (See Appendix A Survey Protocol).

Interviews

To gather more detailed qualitative data about charter principal leaders lived experiences, I conducted ten semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The interview included eight questions, plus additional subset questions, to assess principal leaders' preparedness across the categories of their role as a charter leader, preparedness, resources/operations, support, and the extent to which their needs are being met. Questions focused on what prepared the principal to lead a charter school, how well they were prepared for day one, what additional educational programs, if any, would have prepared them, what resources were available to them, and what challenges and barriers they experienced around enrollment, community engagement, facilities, and any other areas.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 20 and 48 minutes each. With each participant's permission, the meetings were recorded to help me stay engaged and were later transcribed using Zoom. (see Appendix B Interview Protocol)

Data Analysis

I initiated my data analysis by focusing on the interview data, downloading each interview from Zoom, transcribing it, and uploading it to Atlas.ti.com. After each transcription, I performed data cleanup before uploading to Atlas to ensure proper coding using pre-set themes I developed based on categories and levels of challenge, engagement, leadership, preparedness, principal leader needs, resources/operations, solutions, support, and systems. These category levels were derived from the survey and interview questions. This allowed me to develop more code within these categories to gain further insight as to the principal's experiences. Using this data, I conducted a third round of analysis in Microsoft Excel, grouping key themes into these larger buckets. Then, from this group, I completed a fourth round, called focal points, to identify the topics for my findings and discussion chapters. Finally, I conducted one final analysis, adding preexisting codes to further confirm my claims. Throughout this process, I utilized Excel to manage my codebook, analyze the data, and stay focused on my focal points.

Positionality

As a UCLA doctoral candidate in research, I work in California, where I serve as assistant superintendent of human resources for a PK-12 charter network. For this study, to avoid any positionality conflicts, I conducted my research in the state of Georgia, in a previous community where I once worked as an executive director for twelve (12) years, leading in finance, operations, enrollment, facilities, human resources, and community engagement. During this time, I worked with one of the largest charter schools, collaborating with other charter leaders to understand the challenges we faced in facilities, fiscal control, and operational resources. I hope those who may have worked with me in the past or are

familiar with my work recall that those interactions were positive and that my research is to explore ways to improve the charter work. I was mindful not to let my biases influence my experience during this process.

Credibility

While I recognized my study was prone to some credibility issues and concerns of retaliation, I hoped current and past principal leaders felt comfortable with me based on my work in the community, and engaged in open, honest communication without fear of retaliation to gain valuable research that offers this literature as a future resource to support charter growth based on factors discovered in my research. I was transparent in creating a safe space throughout the process by setting the stage for the study, explaining the value of participants' feedback, how the data will be stored and used, and what I hoped to accomplish by offering literature that can serve as a tool to advance the charter work. I made participants aware of the importance of privacy, that pseudonyms would be used, and that no names or site locations would be used in my study. Further, I have been fortunate to maintain my charter connections over the past four years since my relocation to California, as my current employer is exploring the opening of a charter school in Georgia with my support.

Conclusion

In closing, as my research sought to understand charter principal leaders' workloads and their sustainability, it examined the reasons for school closures, principal leaders' preparedness in their roles, and the operational support measures available to them. There is further interest in understanding the charters included in the closures that never opened. The surveys and interviews provided insights to guide future discoveries.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative study examining the lived experiences of K-12 public charter school principals and their preparedness for the role. In this study, “lived experiences” refers to leaders’ firsthand knowledge and the personal and professional encounters that shaped their approaches to developing charter schools as grassroots organizations, building trust with parents, students, and staff, and providing a positive public school option in their communities. The study explored how prepared charter school leaders felt to lead and how supported they felt in managing their schools’ academic, fiscal, operational, facilities, and community-engagement responsibilities. The investigation addressed the following research questions:

RQ1. How do charter principal leaders in Georgia perceive the role they play in ensuring the academic, fiscal, and operational success of the charter school they serve?

RQ2. What challenges, if any, do K-12 charter principal leaders and executive directors in Georgia experience when navigating charter school success to avoid school closures?

Summary of Findings

The findings of this qualitative study support two central conclusions. First, charter school leaders viewed themselves as playing a critical role in ensuring the academic, fiscal, and operational success of the schools they served. However, most of their attention was directed toward the fiscal, operational, and community-facing dimensions of the role. Second, charter

school principals did experience a wide range of challenges as they navigated school success and worked to avoid closure. Interview participants described difficulties securing adequate facilities and funding, obtaining additional resources such as personnel, sustaining community engagement, and addressing retention concerns related to low salaries. Yet, despite these formidable challenges, they expressed strong commitment to and satisfaction with their work. I begin this chapter by presenting evidence of leaders' preparedness for their roles, including the education, experience, and professional development that shaped their work in K–12 charter school settings. I then discuss the challenges leaders identified, including facilities, financial management, loneliness, community engagement, school culture, job security, and expectations from leaders and boards. Finally, I conclude with solutions that participants believed would most strengthen their work.

Charter Principal Preparedness

This study aimed to understand the preparedness of K-12 charter school principal leaders to lead. I explored the perspectives of charter school leaders in both standalone (*single-site*) and network (*multi-site*) charter schools, with student populations ranging from fewer than 100 to more than 500 students. The survey explored leaders' preparedness to lead a charter school across the following areas: curriculum, financial management, human resources, community engagement, special education, staff, enrollment, and teacher professional development. There was no consistent relationship between the perceived preparedness of the principals across any of these dimensions (see Table 3). No patterns emerged in how prepared principals felt based on site type, school size, experience, or education.

Table 3

Leaders' Responses on How Prepared They Felt by Area

Preparedness	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Overall	18	1	5	3.22	1.22
Curriculum	20	2	5	3.90	1.17
Finance	20	1	5	2.90	1.12
Human Resources	20	1	5	3.20	1.15
Community Relations	20	1	5	3.55	1.32
Special Education	20	1	5	2.75	1.12
Staff Support	20	1	5	3.70	1.22
Enrollment	20	1	5	3.30	1.13
Teacher Professional Development	20	1	5	3.85	1.23

Note. 1 = not prepared, 3 = prepared, 5 = very prepared.

Table 4 specifically focuses on an expected difference that did not emerge with respect to whether the leader was in a standalone or a network charter school. The expectation was that being in a network would help them feel prepared. Table 4 presents a crosstabulation of preparedness among standalone and network charter leaders in their overall feelings of preparedness.

Table 4

Comparison of Principal Preparedness by Standalone and Network Charter Sites

Level of Preparedness

	1	2	3	4	5
Standalone	8.3%	16.7%	33.3%	16.7%	25.0%
Network	16.7%	0.0%	50.0%	33.3%	0.0%

Note. 1 = not prepared; 2 and 3 = prepared; 4 and 5 = very prepared.

Although the survey data showed variation, many principals reported feeling prepared. To capture a range of perspectives, I intentionally selected interview participants whose reported

preparedness varied. Notably, several principals who indicated in the survey that they felt very prepared later described, in interviews, multiple ways they had not been prepared. Across interviews, the only area in which principals spoke consistently and positively about their ability to do the job was community engagement.

How Prepared Principal Leaders Felt

According to the survey data, 39% of leaders felt very prepared overall, 39% felt somewhat prepared, and 22% felt unprepared. As I sat in the interview with the ten principal, executive director, and superintendent school leaders on a Zoom call, we began our questions, with some sighing as they reflected on what led them to this work as charter school leaders. They sighed as they had not been asked this question in quite some time. The leaders' words help carry their feelings.

Charles, a network charter leader, shared: "I'll just say initially I felt like a fish out of water."

Cathy, a standalone principal with prior education, felt unprepared and, when asked what prepared them to lead, said: "Nothing. I mean, my 3 years as assistant principal (AP) were certainly helpful, and watching my principal do the job" but felt unprepared to deal with all of the "liaising with the board, liaising with the county, liaising with the state. So, there's a lot of paperwork and stuff like that that has to be done that is outside of the realm of what a regular principal would do."

Rosemary, a standalone principal leader, stated: "It's becoming easier over the years. In the beginning, I was stressed out a lot, because I was still learning."

Monica, a standalone principal, shared: “Words could not explain, I mean...It was chaotic, you know, at first. It just felt like drinking from a firehose.

Tony had nonprofit and teaching experience but found it hard in his job to balance building relationships, parent tours, answering questions from various stakeholders, managing federal programs, special education, compliance, students, and serving as the only administrator. He noted that, “All the different hats, and all the different roles, and all the different jobs are probably what make it the most difficult.”

Taken together, these comments illustrate the range of interview responses related to leaders’ feelings of preparedness. Although participants entered the interviews with differing survey scores, all indicated that, regardless of their education or prior experience, it was not fully possible to be prepared for every aspect of charter-school leadership.

As I examined principal leaders' feelings of preparedness, I looked at the results in relation to the top reasons for charter closures: low student enrollment (46.8%), fraud/mismanagement (21.6%), financial (10.1%), academic (13.7%), and other (7.9%), according to Burris (2024). In examining the survey data on specific areas of preparedness alongside the findings in Burris (2024), I found that leaders felt unprepared in several domains: financial management (40%), special education (40%), and enrollment (25%). And beyond this survey data, I heard stories in the interviews about being unprepared for enrollment, as well as about organizational and fiscal oversight.

Job Security and Satisfaction

Moreover, in reviewing the survey data in light of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and resiliency theories (Wallace, 2021), principals reported that, regarding salary, 35% of respondents' needs were not met, and 65% were met. For their work hours, 50% of their needs were not met, while 50% were met. For job security, 20% of needs were unmet, while 80% were met. To better understand their job satisfaction, Principal Cameron shared that "things get kind of crazy financially, you have to make these key decisions, and I know in my 3 years, I took 3 pay cuts. So, I went from \$78,000 in 2010 to \$64,000 in 2013, which prompted me to leave." Cameron shared that he is now very happy in his new role, with a 3-year contract that provides job security, an annual bonus, and a fair salary. Regarding job security and pay, Monica shared, "I have job security. The pay is not the same as what I would be getting in a district. You know, it's less. I justify it in my head that I'm happier than I would be." Sometimes, as leaders, it can feel hard to advocate for yourself, as Charles shared in "16 years I've only had one raise." Overall, principals find that their needs are met either through pay or through the flexibility of their work schedules, allowing them to set their own hours.

Education and Experience Demographics

Prior research indicates that 70% of charter school principals hold less than a master's degree (Ni et al., 2014). I analyzed the survey data on principal leaders' education and experience to identify advantages and found that 30% hold doctoral degrees, 45% hold master's degrees, and 25% hold specialist degrees. Three leaders felt their education prepared them for their roles as well at Kennesaw State University, Spelman College, and Columbia University. Angela, who attended Columbia, stated that "especially Columbia, because that program was based in charter school leadership. And then all the fellowship programs that I

was able to be in also aided in me being able to do this, so that's, BES, Georgia Charter School Association's Incubator, Transcends, and Freedom Dreams Fellowship.” The leaders' education led them to this work in education, whether through traditional or non-traditional routes.

A prior study has shown that principals come to work for charter schools as a “stopping point” to their next career path, whereas in traditional public schools, it is viewed as a “stepping stone” (Ni et al., 2014). The principal leaders' survey had both charter and TPS experiences. For charter schools, the experience levels were 10% with no years of experience, 25% with 1-3 years of experience, 65% with four or more years of experience. Then, I examined how many principals had traditional public-school (TPS) experience: 75% had no TPS experience, and 15% with for or more years. Monica shared,

People in education leave after 5 years. I think a lot of... Charter leaders specifically leave after 3 to 5 years. And there's a reason for that. I think parents...drive them out. The board is...” While the leader noted parents and the board as reasons, they also rated a 2 for being somewhat engaged with the community and not favorable on the people skills required for principal engagement and leadership experience.

On the other hand, Charles, a non-traditional network principal and former engineer, emphasizes the importance of additional work experience, noting that a principal needs business acumen to navigate the charter school's operations within the local community.

They shared:

There's a heavy, heavy burden on a charter leader. And I think that the principals that don't have business acumen are having to bear that responsibility as well. I think that's even more challenging.

Another network principal leader, Tony, who came into his role in a non-traditional way of technology and grew into his role as principal with challenges of not having an educational background and understanding, shared that,

My experience before leading a nonprofit was really helpful to me. Coming from a non-traditional route was helpful. I started as a teacher and aimed to get in. I wasn't familiar with charter schools. About 11-12 years ago, I started teaching at a private Christian school and sought certification to teach in public school. I began looking for schools offering the GATAPP program.

The third network principal leader, Jackie, who only worked in charter schools, felt her entire educational experience as a teacher, an instructional coach, and assistant principal, a dean of students, and now a principal, helped to guide her decisions as a leader, but she speaks on the challenges she has encountered as follows in navigating relationships within their county location:

We are a state-chartered school and live in a county where the district is not charter-friendly. And so, no growth was going to happen, because we didn't fall within the lines of what they wanted for their county.

As I reviewed principal leaders' work experiences, it was also important to understand the challenges leaders feel they faced.

Challenges of Charter Leaders

Participants from both standalone and network charter schools described similar challenges, including recruitment, enrollment, relationship building, and facilities. Although network charter schools may appear to have greater access to personnel resources such as operations,

human resources, and finance staff, leaders in this study often reported feeling that they still carried those responsibilities themselves.

Leaders regularly talked about how much was involved in their role, and how hard that was to manage, often comparing their work to that of a traditional public-school principal.

Tony: “The state of Georgia requires a district to do so for all the, you know, federal programs and federal funding. Anything legal with special ed, compliance, and progress monitoring.”

Cameron: “Not having a district to provide oversight and resources. You know, when it comes to data reporting, we're reporting directly to the state. We don't have a district office for human resources or professional development.”

Angela: “Keeping everybody on the train. has been the most difficult part. It's not the curriculum, it's not the system or the routine, the building, even. Trying to keep everybody happy.”

Tim: “You're the only school, you're your own system, and it's just one school. You can kind of get lost, into either your own head about what's good or what's expected, or you can, you know, I guess, the sense of loneliness.”

The charter leaders were able to describe in detail the places where these challenges emerged.

Facility Challenges. Fifty-five percent of our principal leaders in this study worked at sites where the facilities were owned, and 45% worked at sites where the facilities were rented. In rental facilities, principals are engaged in the daily challenges of facility operations and working conditions. Principal noted some of those as being in nontraditional classroom settings, like an outdoor girls' camp across a lake, an old military college building with no kitchen or cafeteria, an old city hall building converted to a school, and a 1966 high school converted to a K-8 facility with an old locker room basement later converted into usable classroom space.

Cathy, a standalone principal leader, shared: "We don't have enough classrooms, like, we just don't have enough space, period, because we're not in a real school building; in terms of challenges, like, our rent is ridiculously high." Cameron, another standalone principal, commented, "It's one building. I'm paying \$99,000 a month. \$99,000 a month for this building, and locally authorized charters pay. I know at another charter, they pay \$1 a year, because they're authorized. We have 525 kids right now." The enormous amount of rent is draining charter schools' budgets and their ability to pay comparable salaries, increase staff for student services, and fund other curriculum improvements to strengthen academics.

In addition, charter schools often end up in old facilities in need of major repairs and updates, creating additional barriers to providing suitable learning spaces. Rosemary, a third standalone principal leader, shared that they "had a lot of roof issues, a lot of roof leaks, so that has been a challenge, and currently our elevator is down, and it's going to take...I think it's \$300,000 to replace it, because a lot of the parts are outdated." While these standalone principals have shared the most concerns about facility repairs and rental costs, two network

leaders, Charles and Jackie, have been fortunate to secure two beautiful facilities from their authorizers.

Jackie and Charles shared that they have been fortunate enough to acquire facilities from their local district authorizers at a cost. Charles shared that it is very spacious in that “it's got plenty of room. It's got 100,000 ft², so we have room to grow in the facility. And our backyard is a 95-acre park. And so, you know, our backyard has a baseball and an equestrian center.” Jackie described their facility as “a new location, which is beautiful, best of both worlds; we still have the indoors and outdoors, now I think it's a matter of we're currently in construction.” Prior to this new facility, Jackie was leasing space at an outdoor camp that they had to set up every Friday evening after school hours or for weekend campers. Tony, third network principal, shared that they are leasing space in a beautiful college facility, but it's old, and repairs are challenging because it was built in the 1960's. Moreover, the college facility does not have a kitchen, so food is prepped at another location and catered to the school daily, with the added challenges of transporting food during peak traffic times and meeting the required food temperature window set by school food regulations. Network charter leaders interviewed do have more suitable, class-like school environments than their counterparts among standalone charter leaders. This could be attributed to their ability to replicate in locating buildings, while one was acquired from a local authorizer, which is a win-win for all parties involved.

The advantage of owning over renting is that the capital invested in the property builds equity for the school's future use. Rental property improvements are an advantage of upkeep to landlords. When schools are located in rental facilities, they do not qualify for facility grants, as these grants do not apply to rental property.

Financial Management

Financial mismanagement is one of the four leading reasons for charter school closures (Burris, 2024). Leaders being prepared to lead in financial management, or having a finance person on their team, is essential, though it is the charter principal leader's responsibility. While securing adequate funding is essential, it is also important that all charter leaders understand how to manage and navigate their budget outcomes. Without being prepared to lead in this essential area, the principal leader's job can be hard with heightened learning curves in financial management. In the research survey, 40% of our principal leaders rated themselves as unprepared in this area, though they also shared concerns about being underfunded and the need for more fundraisers, which are important as well.

Rosemary: "We do not have support from the state. They feel like we don't need it. They feel like we're taking money from traditional schools."

Jackie: "Second piece, which is funding. Specifically, around salaries. All of us. None of us are at maybe getting what we would get in a public school, so it truly is a choice to work as a charter because those intangibles are things that you really value."

Regarding fundraisers, some schools are still figuring this out and prefer that their board members support these efforts. Tony and Cameron look to their parent-teacher organization (PTO) for support, which provides the principal's fund, allowing them to increase teacher engagement through professional development and to purchase extra supplies beyond their small annual stipend. It allows them to celebrate and show their staff love with food and gifts, so teachers are well cared for.

While funding challenges exist, all ten principals interviewed persevere to

achieve school success through tight budgets, paying lower salaries, fundraisers, and community support.

Community Engagement

As I reviewed the survey data on community engagement, 40% of principal leaders felt engaged in the community, 40% felt somewhat engaged, while 20% were not engaged. Superintendent Cameron shared that their partnership with the local police department allowed students to engage: “The chief of police has our second graders designing their Christmas cards to go out to the community every year.” On the other hand, Rosemay, who rated unprepared in every benchmark category, oversees an international school and does engage at a state and international level, shared: “We do engage state leaders all the time. The mayor of our city has been here several times.” Charles, a network leader, shared how well-connected they are with major corporations in the community: “We've got some amazing ones with corporations such as Pfizer Corporation, Home Depot, and North Point, as well as a Church, which we honored this morning at a volunteer breakfast.”

Other leaders shared partnerships with corporations and their local Chamber of Commerce, local involvement in community events, and invitations to alumni to return to school events. As with any school, community engagement is important to the school's success within that community. It's essential to get to know your neighbors and be neighborly by inviting them to your school, getting to know local businesses and community political leaders, and attending school sporting events, grand openings, ribbon-cutting celebrations, and so on. Charles shared that the Chamber of Commerce is interested in a workforce development partnership with his school to create new programs, such as internships with local corporations.

Building School Culture

School culture is influenced by many factors, but some key elements include school safety, collegial school culture, resources, and parent engagement. This was a huge concern for Principal Jackie, a network principal leader whose school's opening was delayed by two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents and staff had been recruited for this new site, but had not seen the school location in person. Jackie was very nervous and concerned about what the first day of school would be like. Parents, staff, and students arrived at a unique yet unconventional school that opened in a less-than-favorable location: an outdoor girls' campground. Jackie describes:

We opened up at a Girl Scouts camp, which was a beautiful setting. But it showed throughout that entire experience that the story is really about resilience. Opening up, although it's a beautiful, different setting. Our classrooms were actually the cabins. And so, where the girls would sleep on the weekends at the Girl Scouts camp, we had to flip those into classrooms. And we did that every Friday for camp. Every Saturday and Sunday. Sunday evening, we had to flip the classrooms back. Opening school, the camp was out, literally up to a week before school started, so my teachers were back 2 weeks in advance, but they had 3 days to flip over the entire campus, from a Girl Scouts camp into school. And we did this for two and a half years. And our kids were amazing, our parents were amazing, everybody was on board, but when I tell you my normal days, I'm not out of the building till 8 p.m., even then, till dark, and it was scary there, dark, because there's no lights or anything; it's like a true camp. But that resiliency and the fact that I didn't lose a teacher in my first two years. Every single one who started stayed. Their first time on campus was on the day of pre-planning.

And so, in my mind, I'm thinking, oh my gosh, these folks are going to quit, and we haven't even started yet. And so, to experience and to hopefully build them up enough and really instill a sense of crew. And a sense of, you won't have to do this alone. I am here with you. That is what I believe kept them with us. And I'm grateful for every single one of them.

I shared this story because Jackie built resilience with her parents, students, and staff immediately, who believed in her and the school program by watching her actions as a leader, despite the many challenges of inadequate facilities and funding, and the absence of traditional luxuries of a school building, like a gymnasium, cafeteria, library, and traditional classrooms. Everyone was willing to buy into the plan and make it work. Jackie further describes building culture as follows:

How to build crew, and how to build a culture. In your building and sustain it. And so, those professional developments that really leaned into emotional intelligence, the ones that leaned into how to support staff who have gone through traumas from other spaces and places. Leaned into how to get buy-in, right? Making sure folks feel as though they are part of it.

Tony shared that he operates with a hands-on, student-first, then-staff mentality. They believe in a culture of growth and creating space for teachers to perform and shared that “So just really getting out of the way and allowing my teachers to be who they are, to connect with students, to meet their needs. And just to really highlight their strengths.” Charles, a network leader who also supports employees' growth that may lead them to leadership roles beyond their school, shared that:

Developing people, and I've been very fortunate in that when I think about the people that have left, they've become principals of other schools, zone superintendents, heads of departments, and central offices.”

“Resilience and grit,” as Jackie described it, but I would also say great leadership with a 100% retention rate for two years with her teachers in an outdoor girls’ camp. This school exhibited excellent teamwork.

As the charter leaders in the study worked to build a strong culture by developing their people's resilience in their work and creating space for teachers to grow, they also recognized the need for professional development opportunities to strengthen their leadership skills.

What Principal Leaders Need to Be Prepared

The key things principals expressed that would be helpful were: professional development opportunities to learn as a charter leader; more people, because they wear too many hats; board clarity in their role; work-life balance from working long hours; more pay; and an affinity group.

Cathy shared that she had no training for the first couple of years:

In the first couple of years, I didn't really do any professional development. I think the most helpful thing was being able to talk to people who had been principals or who were principals at the time.

In practicing work-life balance, Jackie shared that:

Once I leave the building, I don't take my computer out at home. If I can't respond from my phone, you won't get a response until the next day, unless it's, you know, a dire emergency.

According to the survey data, principal leaders' training occurred as follows: 20% no training, 10% yearly, 15% twice a year, 30% quarterly, and 25% monthly. As highlighted in Ni et al. (2014), principals spend a great deal of their time on administrative responsibilities rather than instruction; it's important to attend to their professional learning and development, as principals in this study have stated is needed.

Several leaders in standalone and network charters noted that the Georgia Charter School Association (GCSA) training and conferences have been a huge help in understanding charter school business and financials, as well as Metro-RESA, which offers leadership training in education, but these opportunities are not available often enough.

Lastly, during the interviews, Tony, Charles, Tim, and Monica shared the feeling of loneliness, the need for an affinity group, being one administrator at the site working in silos, and not having a central district office for support, which made the principal leader's job hard because there was no one to collaborate with. Charles shared, "not feeling the burden of the entire enterprise on just your shoulders. It has to be a crew, a team approach, that is bearing that burden." These leaders' shared affinity groups as a solution.

Several charter leaders shared the feeling of being alone, having no one to call on for ideas or support, needing a thought partner, and, when possible, having an affinity charter group to share resources and ideas. Some shared the following:

Charles: "Learn from our other practitioners."

Tim: "You're the only school, you're your own system, and it's just one school. You can kind of get lost, into either your own head about what's good or what's expected, or you can, you know, I guess, the sense of loneliness."

Monica: “You are the only one. It can be very lonely. You don't have, like, that whole community. You don't have those district meetings where you get together with your colleagues.”

As leaders, it's important for self-care to have business colleagues and partners we lean on for support, collaboration, and encouragement. Making time to engage with the networks they are connected to, grow those relationships is essential, including GCSA, SCSC, the Chamber of Commerce, and any others they have engaged with by attending monthly meetings and inviting organizations to school sites for events. This builds toward principal networks that support their work through collaboration and learning communities for leaders.

Moreover, some leaders interviewed expressed a sincere interest in collaborating with other charter schools as thought partners to create a charter affinity group that meets monthly to share ideas and resources to support each other's growth. Principal leaders are seeking more resources and funding to retain and increase their personnel, and to allow them more time on duties like “room to focus more on board management, board development, compliance relationships,” as noted by Charles.

Conclusion

This study explored the many challenges in charter leaders' preparedness in their school environments that have created barriers to establishing a safe teaching and learning environment. The leaders' survey shows a range of preparedness levels. The interviews revealed a range of areas where they felt unprepared and overwhelmed by the responsibilities they were managing. What is noteworthy in these interview findings is that the leaders rarely, if ever, discussed academic challenges or teacher support for teaching and learning. The

focus was on the fiscal, operational, and enrollment challenges. Even with these challenges, the leaders reported being happy to be in their jobs. They shared the need for more support, particularly support in managing operations and loneliness.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Even after nearly 26 years of operating within a charter network, I am often struck by how many community members still misunderstand charter schools, including the belief that they are private schools rather than public schools open to all students. That misunderstanding extends to perceptions of charter-school leadership. Although the title of principal may appear similar across charter and traditional public schools, this study demonstrates that the responsibilities are markedly different. The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which charter principal leaders feel prepared to perform their roles, how they understand those roles, and what forms of support they believe would strengthen their leadership.

In this chapter, I reflect on the significance of the study's findings in light of the research methods and offer recommendations for charter schools, future researchers, and authorizers. I conclude with my personal reflection on how this study has further shaped my understanding and opinion of charter leaders' work in charter education.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to existing research on charter principals' preparedness to perform their jobs with adequate support and resources. It expands existing research on charter school principal leaders' preparedness to lead in such environments, drawing on their lived experiences and perspectives on what is required to achieve greater success in their roles, which often involve wearing many hats. I learned about the hearts of the ten charter school participants in Georgia whom I interviewed and their desire to make positive change for students and staff in their communities. Principals lived experiences

Although survey responses varied, many principals rated themselves as prepared. However, the interviews revealed a more nuanced picture: every participant described areas in which they felt underprepared. In conversation, leaders explained that they could manage the overall workload but found it difficult to meet the full range of demands inherent in the role. They recounted challenge after challenge, tasks they had never previously encountered, regardless of their education or professional experience. The survey data alone could not capture this level of complexity.

Existing studies (Allen & Gawlik, 2009; Carpenter & Peak, 2013; Windham, 2020) outline how leading in a charter school differs from leading in a traditional public school (TPS) and the challenges that accompany it. The findings in this study confirmed that charter school leaders enjoyed their work as charter leaders, particularly working with communities, and found staff growth to be the most rewarding. But charter leaders also struggled with preparedness and felt they were not adequately equipped to perform their prescribed duties in some areas. Leaders described their job as wearing many hats, including managing staff, enrollment, academics, facilities, human resources, parent tours, the food program, transportation, community engagement, teacher professional development, and budgets. And though there were barriers to implementing these programs, principals managed on limited budgets and limited staffing to meet school goals.

Leadership Challenges

Overall, the findings highlight several key leadership challenges reported by the 20 survey participants in Georgia: inadequate funding; facility-related barriers, including the absence of traditional school buildings, high rent, and repair costs; leaders' having to wear too many hats; enrollment and recruitment pressures; the need for leadership-development

opportunities; and the need for affinity groups. The interviews confirmed that these challenges were not unique to standalone charter schools; participants in both standalone and network settings described similar concerns. Facilities emerged as especially significant because they directly affected the environments in which students and staff learned and worked. Managing repairs, academics, food service, and other operational responsibilities was particularly difficult for principals who served as the only administrator on site. In addition, some leaders in network schools explained that off-site finance and operations personnel were not always available when needed, which limited the practical benefit of those resources.

Existing research has found that some of these challenges lead to high principal turnover, as described in Taie & Lewis (2023). Sun & Ni's (2016) study revealed that 28% of charter school principals' turnover can be attributed to the challenging working conditions. And while the findings confirmed some aspects of existing research, they did not reveal charter principal attrition among this group of participants. While some working conditions posed challenges, these leaders did not report low job satisfaction during this study; actually, just the opposite. They were excited about their roles and committed to the work at hand. And while it was not my experience at the schools that I served that leaders left for these reasons, I have seen it in other charter schools.

The work is, at best, overwhelming and requires daily strategic time management. I also learned that while leaders would like more money, it was not always for an increase in their own pay; it was for more pay for their staff. It was a bit heartfelt to hear a leader say they had received only one pay increase in 16 years. I felt like writing him a proposal myself

to present to his board, though I did not. Charter leadership work is hard yet rewarding, and leaders deserve the tools they need to get their jobs done effectively.

Leadership Support Needed

Principal leaders identified the following support needed to aid them in being successful in their roles: professional development, additional personnel, board-role clarity, work-life balance, higher pay, and an affinity group. I found these supports entirely reasonable given the heavy demands of charter leadership, as also noted by Ni et al. (2014). Participants emphasized the importance of community among charter leaders, including the value of an affinity group through which they could learn from one another, identify thought partners, and build camaraderie within the charter sector. This finding resonated with my own experience as a charter leader in Georgia and now in California, where I have relied on strong professional networks for guidance on charter processes, policy implementation, compensation structures, and operational decisions. Although leaders mentioned the need for more money, their emphasis was often on offering more competitive salaries to staff and increasing administrative capacity, rather than solely on increasing their own pay.

Research Limitations

While my study's findings add value to the understanding of the preparedness of charter principal leaders and the work they carry out, there are limitations. My findings are not meant to generalize all charter schools or all charter leaders in Georgia, in particular. My study included only 20 charter leaders in Georgia to capture their day-to-day lived experiences in their roles. In addition, a much broader scope of principal leaders would be needed to draw better conclusions about Georgia charter leaders as a whole and the support they feel they need.

And while data provided by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) and the Georgia Charter School Association (GCSA) have shown strong results since the inception of charter schools, neither resource provides current-year data on the status of charter schools. Further, neither offers any research on the preparedness of principal leaders, the challenges faced by charter leaders, or the results that led to closures to better understand the reasons behind them. The national CREDO 2023 report included some charter school findings, though Georgia's data were limited. Much more research is needed in these areas, particularly research that addresses current contexts, emerging challenges, and the relationships between a charter's characteristics and leaders' experiences more closely.

Lastly, other challenges included time constraints on leaders' availability to meet and further explore their lived experiences. More conversation with charter leaders would provide even greater insight into the nuances of their experiences, preparedness, and challenges.

Recommendations for Authorizers

The goal of charter school leaders and their authorizers is to ensure the success of their students, teachers, and the charter school, and to secure a favorable renewal at the charter petition timeline of every three, five, or ten years as outlined in their petition. As this study examined the preparedness of K-12 charter school principals, executive directors, and superintendents, as well as the challenges that create barriers to success, I offer several recommendations for state and local authorizers as they consider future policy and practice. The aim is to develop systems and supports that guide new charter leaders in establishing and leading schools while preserving the autonomy central to charter operations. As Gawlik (2008) noted, deregulation also requires accountability for state and district policymakers in designing conditions that promote favorable outcomes for both petitioners

and authorizers. This study identified two recurring concerns: a systems problem and a structural problem in how charter schools in Georgia operate, including the use of facilities that are not conducive to K-12 learning, inadequate classroom space, and limited access to functional food-service infrastructure.

Based on these findings, I offer six recommendations: (1) leadership preparation before or at the start of the role, (2) mentoring during the first three years, (3) the creation of affinity groups for charter leaders, (4) stronger facility support, (5) more equitable funding, and (6) a public charter-school dashboard.

First, leadership preparation should provide charter leaders with a foundation for managing the role's multiple responsibilities. As this study showed, preparedness in curriculum, financial management, human resources, community engagement, enrollment, special education, staffing, and teacher professional development is essential to effective charter leadership. The findings revealed that some leaders entered their roles underprepared, particularly in financial management, human resources, and enrollment, and had limited access to relevant professional development. These concerns are consequential because they align with several of the conditions associated with charter school closures. I therefore recommend that charter leaders receive structured professional learning either before assuming the role or within their first 90 days. Existing supports from the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia (SCSC), the Georgia Charter Schools Association (GCSA), and other organizations provide a starting point, but participation is not always required. Participants described the value of such preparation. Angela reflected on a 9-month fellowship that provided her with the foundation to understand what it takes to open a charter school and to lead a community-based model. Jackie similarly emphasized the importance of

serving as a principal-in-residence for two years before assuming full responsibility. These examples suggest that early preparation can reduce stress, strengthen decision-making, and connect new leaders to supportive professional networks.

Second, charter leaders should be paired with a mentor during their first three years in the role. A mentor can serve as both a guide and a thought partner as leaders navigate the complexity of charter school leadership. Rosemary described the value of this support through the SCSC, noting that her mentor helped ground her and provided essential guidance during the transition into leadership.

Third, leaders identified the need for affinity groups to address the loneliness that often accompanies charter leadership. Several participants described the absence of peers with whom they could share ideas, seek advice, and process challenges. Charles characterized an affinity group as a missing structure that would allow leaders to learn from one another, feel supported, and strategize together. Rosemary echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the need for greater collaboration among school leaders. My own experience in an affinity charter group has reinforced the value of this kind of professional community. Through regular meetings, shared agendas, and open discussion, such groups can provide a safe and productive space for leaders to learn from one another and strengthen the broader charter sector. Existing GCSA affinity groups may offer a useful starting point for authorizers seeking to build stronger support networks for charter leaders (Georgia Charter Schools Association, 2026a).

Fourth, facilities emerged as a persistent and significant challenge. Several participants worked in temporary or unsuitable spaces that lacked adequate classrooms, kitchens, gymnasiums, or other features necessary for a stable K-12 learning environment.

State and local authorizers should therefore consider making unused public-school facilities more accessible to charter schools. Such an approach could reduce vacancies in local communities, make better use of existing public assets, and provide charter schools with more appropriate learning environments. Partnerships among authorizers, charter organizations, and GCSA could further support strategic facilities planning, property identification, and implementation. These supports would help leaders and boards develop more effective, financially sustainable facility plans and would strengthen the conditions necessary for school success (Georgia Charter Schools Association, 2026b).

Fifth, charter leaders consistently emphasized the need for more equitable funding. More comparable funding would allow schools to offer competitive salaries, address facility needs, and expand academic resources. As authorizers continue to review charter schools and consider new petitions, they should examine funding structures that might move Georgia charter schools closer to parity with traditional public schools, including broader access to local revenue streams.

Finally, authorizers should consider collaborating on a public dashboard that tracks charter schools in Georgia and provides annual updates on their status. GCSA currently offers a list of active charter schools, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools provides national data, but neither source consistently offers timely, state-specific information about school status, closure patterns, or contributing factors. A public dashboard could support future research, improve transparency, and help authorizers identify concerns earlier. In addition, biannual accountability checkpoints, designed as supportive rather than punitive, could help surface issues before annual reviews or charter renewal deadlines.

Recommendations for Future Research

My research focused on K-12 principal leaders in public charter schools in Georgia. Based on my findings of this study and its contributions to the literature, I offer a couple of recommendations for future research. First, I recommend that researchers broaden the scope of charter leaders to include charter school authorizers by interviewing and surveying them to better understand funding sources and resources provided to and available to charter schools, as well as the requirements for obtaining and maintaining these resources. Including charter authorizers in Georgia would enable researchers to more effectively identify best practices, resources, and areas of need across diverse school environments, thereby better supporting the schools they authorize and ensuring their success.

Second, I recommend that researchers explore with charter authorizers the use of public-school facilities by charter schools, for which the authorizers have approved the schools to operate within their districts or states. Based on this research, all ten principal leaders interviewed reported that facilities were a challenge, though two principals are using county facilities. Issues included inadequate school facilities, high rent, expensive repairs, and more, which quickly became a major long-term budget concern. Most are in, or have been in, spaces that are not suitable for appropriate class sizes, which does not enable growth in student enrollment. Further research could explore possibilities with authorizers, given that school enrollment in Georgia has declined sharply and that districts have closed school buildings throughout the Metro-Atlanta area, the primary area of the principal leaders surveyed, with districts experiencing a 65% seats-filled rate, with more than 21,000 students declined/opened seats (Modan, 2025). I see a fair compromise for facility use given this outcome.

Personal Reflection

As a result of this research, I recognize even more clearly that systemic and structural conditions shape many of the challenges identified in this study. The examples shared by participants, including a girls' camp converted into a school during the week and back into a camp on weekends, or the daily transportation of food across town to meet lunch-service requirements, illustrate not isolated inconveniences but fundamental operational barriers. These conditions point to broader systems problems that individual leaders cannot resolve on their own. Although leadership development and mentoring would help charter principals navigate the role more effectively, those supports alone cannot solve the larger structural issues related to facilities, infrastructure, and organizational capacity. Addressing these challenges will require stronger action and support from charter school authorizers.

Over the past 16 years, I have built my career in charter schools while taking on responsibilities across operations, budgeting, facilities, human resources, food services, fundraising, and other areas. Early in that work, I learned that success in charter education requires deep commitment. I chose to remain in the field, and that decision has been one of the most meaningful of my career. I have had the opportunity to witness the growth of a school I helped establish, to work with a dedicated board through two charter renewals, to support the acquisition of a permanent facility, and to help lead an expansion project that created an innovative learning space for students. These experiences strengthened my belief that public education should provide equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of the type of public school they attend. The frustrations described by participants resonated deeply with me because they reflected many of the same challenges I encountered in my own leadership journey.

This study also reaffirmed for me that charter schools require equitable resources, funding, and support if leaders are to sustain strong and innovative educational environments.

Students differ in their learning needs, and leaders differ in the ways they guide schools, but both depend on systems that provide the conditions necessary for success. In this regard, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) similarly recognizes charter schools as an educational option that can serve students well when designed to meet their diverse needs (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2026).

This research served as a meaningful reminder that charter leaders continue to need support, advocacy, and stronger systems. The lived experiences shared by participants closely reflected my own 16 years in charter leadership. Although I would like to believe that conditions have improved substantially, this study suggests that many of the same challenges remain. At the same time, it underscores the importance of continued research, stronger collaboration, and deeper community among charter leaders, authorizers, and stakeholders who share responsibility for public education need my support. Principal leaders' lived experiences are what I experienced in my sixteen years as a charter leader. I'd like to believe we've raised the bar, but this study didn't show that much has changed in the challenges charter leaders in Georgia face. This study also illustrated the challenges that still exist and require further research to bring to light additional processes, greater collaboration, and stronger community among charter leaders, their authorizers, and community stakeholders.

APPENDIX A

Survey Protocols

This survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete and will help me better understand the experiences of charter school principals and principal leaders.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary. There are no penalties for declining to participate in the survey or for declining to respond to any items.

There are no right or wrong answers in this survey. Please read each question carefully and answer based on your own experiences and opinions. The answers you give are very important. Answer the questions honestly and as best as you can. If you would like to complete this survey, you can begin by clicking the next arrow. When you have completed the entire survey, click the submit button, and you will be directed to the final “thank you” page confirming that your responses have been received. If you have any questions regarding your participation in this survey, please contact Virginia Smith at virginiasmith@g.ucla.edu. Thank you for participating in the survey!

1. What is your highest level of education completed?
 - a) Bachelor’s degree
 - b) Master’s degree
 - c) Doctorate
 - d) Other (please specify)
2. Did you hold a state administrative or leadership credential during your time as charter principal leader?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

c. In Progress

3. How many years of experience do you have as a principal in a charter school(s)?
 - a) None
 - b) 1-3 years
 - c) 4-7 years
 - d) 8+ years
4. How many years of experience do you have as a principal in traditional public school(s)?
 - a) None
 - b) 1-3 years
 - c) 4-7 years
 - d) 8+ years
5. Are you currently the principal, executive director, or leader of a charter school?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
6. What is the student population size of the most recent site you served as a principal leader?
 - a) Less than 100 students
 - b) 101-300 students
 - c) 301-500 students
 - d) More than 500 students
7. Was the charter school you most recently worked at a standalone school or a network/group of schools?

- a. Standalone
 - b. Network/Group of Schools (*More than one school site*)
8. Was your charter school affiliated with a Charter Management Organization (CMO)?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
9. Did your board secure a school facility or rent space in a church or other facility?
- a. Own/mortgage
 - b. Rent

Reflecting on your first year as a charter principal, please respond to the following questions:

10. On a scale of 1 to 5, how prepared did you feel to lead your school?

(1 = Not Prepared, 2, 3 = Prepared, 4, 5 = Very Prepared)

- a) 1
- b) 2
- c) 3
- d) 4
- e) 5

11. On a scale from 1 to 5, how prepared did you feel to lead your charter school in each

of the following areas? (1 = Not Prepared, 2, 3 = Prepared, 4, 5 = Very Prepared)

	1	2	3	4	5
Curriculum & instruction model					
Financial management					
Human resources					

Navigating community political relationships					
Special Education					
Staff and teacher support					
Student Enrollment					
Teacher training & development					

12. How often did your charter school site provide professional development opportunities related to your leadership? (Please also reflect on the professional development opportunities provided by the authorizer, CMO, Board, and/or district.)

- a) Monthly
- b) Quarterly
- c) Twice a year
- d) Yearly
- e) Not at all

13. How connected and supported did you feel to the local community?

- a. Very engaged
- b. Somewhat engaged
- c. Not engaged

14. Is the charter school you most recently worked at still exist/open?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Closing within a year

d. Unknown

e. Other

15. On a scale from 1 to 5, were your personal needs met as a charter school principal leader? (1 = No, 2, 3 = Often, 4, 5 = Yes)

Salary Paid					
Hours worked					
Job Security					

16. Are you open to further discussion in a 30-45-minute one-on-one interview, either virtual or in-person, with me as a UCLA doctoral candidate, in learning more about your experience as a charter school principal or executive director?

a. Yes

b. No

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time out of your day to meet with me and for your willingness to support my research. As I have shared, I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program (ELP) at UCLA, and I am collecting data from this interview to understand the preparedness of K-12 charter school principal leaders in Georgia.

Our interview will be 30-45 minutes. I will be recording our conversation so I can be present. Please let me know if you need a break at any time or if you need me to stop the recorder. All responses are kept confidential, and any names mentioned will be removed for privacy reasons.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Opening

- Can you tell me about your experiences as a Charter School leader?
- Is there a story that resonates with you that captures your overall feelings and experiences?

General Topics

1. **Leadership:** What kind of leader were you?
 - a. What role do you feel you played as a charter school principal leader in ensuring the school's success?
 - b. What prepared you to be ready to lead as a charter school principal?
 - c. What makes a charter principal's job hard?

2. ***Preparedness:*** What professional development was most fundamental in supporting you as a charter school principal? What structures are available for principals to learn?
3. ***Resources/Operations:*** What type of support or resources did you receive from the school authorizer in terms of financial, academic, training and development, or facilities?
 - a. How challenging was it to meet student enrollment goals, and why?
 - b. How would you describe your school facility and its ability to meet your needs as a leader? What made it great, and what presented the greatest challenges in meeting school success?
 - c. How did you manage the day-to-day needs of facilities in dealing with maintenance and other concerns while also navigating academics, parents, staff, and students in ensuring academic success?
4. ***Support:*** What support do you wish you had in your leadership role?
 - a. How did you engage the local school community, i.e., city officials, businesses?
 - b. How did you support teacher engagement?
 - c. What systems supported your work as a leader in curriculum, enrollment, recruitment, and managing those processes, i.e., online platforms, i.e., SchoolMint, Lotto Ease, Excel, others?
5. ***Needs:*** How were your needs met as a charter leader in terms of job security, pay, stability in your workload, etc.? How did you manage your role in relation to your life outside of work? How many hours per week did you work?
 - a. What would make the principal role in a charter school more sustainable?

- b. What recommendations or changes, if any, would you like to see to ensure the success of charter leaders and schools?
- 6. ***Closing:*** Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed regarding your principal leadership work in charter schools?

Thank you so much for your time participating in my research interview! It really means a lot as I conclude my doctorate studies this summer. Have a wonderful day!

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