

ESTABLISHING A TEXAS CHARTER SCHOOL:  
A CASE STUDY OF KI CHARTER ACADEMY

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my loving wife, Brittany, whose unconditional love and support is truly eternal. You are the best part of me, my cornerstone and my biggest supporter. Without you, I would not be where I am today.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

RF-Residential Facility

SBOE- State Board of Education

TAC-Texas Administrative Code

TEA- Texas Education Agency

TEC- Texas Education Code

TCSA-Texas Charter School Association

## **ABSTRACT**

The rising trend of charter schools in various counties across Texas reveals that more charter schools serving special learners' populations are needed. However, there is limited literature on the establishment process of a charter school in Texas. This study examined the establishment process of a specialty charter school in Texas, serving children and adolescents who reside in residential facilities using a qualitative case study of Ki Charter Academy. Interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data from a sample comprised of four founders and two board members. The study used social constructivism theoretical framework, constructivist paradigm, and qualitative data analysis approaches. The study found that in the process of establishing a charter school in Texas, founders encountered challenges such as bureaucracy, a demanding application process, and stymied feedback flow. However, adequate planning enabled the founders to avoid most of the risks and challenges in the establishment process. Adhering to the mission, vision, strategic goal, and best practices envisioned in the charter document also helped the charter school to be awarded. This study represents a roadmap within a small body of research that serves to illuminate the establishment process of a specialized charter school in Texas, Ki Charter Academy.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Ray is a sixteen-year-old student from a traditional public school and suffers from a mood disorder and depression. As a near last resort, a state agency places Ray in a residential treatment facility in Texas where he enrolls in a specialty charter school which serves the students that live in the residential treatment center. Ray has little to no parental support, as Ray's father is out of his life and mother is working three jobs to support four children. As Ray feels lost, he meets with the registrar and his associate principal early one morning to go over his records and transcripts. Ray needs to determine what state accredited coursework he needs to complete at this respective school to meet Texas graduation requirements.

Unfortunately, in Ray's case, not all of his records have been received yet. Ray is a product of a system that is not tailored to a student with a lot of individual needs. Ray has been in many placements and schools before the one he is currently enrolled, and this is the reason his records are taking so long to arrive. Moreover, he has been out of school for a few years. Therefore, the registrar needs to locate his previous schools and placements to piece together Ray's transcript. The residential treatment facility is Ray's last resort to remedy his previous disruptive behaviors that are exacerbated by his mental health problems.

Ray has committed various misconducts, including assault, truancy, theft, and chronic absenteeism over the past four years. A Texas school district might not be able to help a child, given that Ray's needs could not be met in his hometown. Ray needs a school that can meet his needs so that upon return to his hometown, he can be an active citizen in the respective community and be academically successful with improved

behavior outcomes. The school's registrar works diligently and quickly to gain access to Ray's records and transcripts. In the meantime, Ray is tested for fluency, phonetics, and mathematics skills to determine his appropriate grade level. Ray asks his diagnostician, "Why do people care about me, and what grade I am in?" The diagnostician explains to Ray that they care about him doing well in school and recovering his credits.

Similar to Ray, I relocated and changed schools early in my life. At the age of ten, I moved from a private school to a traditional public school, both located in a small suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Everything at the public school was unfamiliar to me, except for the content in the class. My classmates, my teacher, the climate, and surroundings were all different. There were 35 students in my class. I had strong parental support at home with one brother and two sisters, for whom I wanted to serve as a role model.

Luckily for me, my records were easily transferred to my new school, and I began my first few days completing various assessments to see what level and in what class placement I would be assigned. I finished the math assessment within one hour. All of the other students in the class were still taking the assessment, as the allotted time is four hours. I was nervous and bored, and therefore, I began to tap my pencil on the desk, creating noise in the classroom for others. The teacher shouts out to me, "Stop tapping your pencil!" I immediately stopped, but I am still distracted. I began to lean in my seat, rocking back and forth. I repeated this action and eventually fell back against the wall. A loud noise was heard throughout the classroom, as the students were still diligently taking their assessments. I heard my teacher scream once again, "Go to the office!"

I left the classroom, but I could not locate the office when a hall monitor asked



me where my bathroom pass was. I explained that the teacher kicked me out of class, and I did not know where the office was. The monitor wrote me up for not having a pass and directed me to the office. When I arrived at the office, I was met by the principal at the door. The principal had received a call from the teacher and read the write-up from the hall monitor when I arrived. The principal asked, “Are we going to have problems with you?” I bowed my head in embarrassment and said no. When I went back to class the next day, there was another assessment waiting for me. This time it was the English assessment. I was the first one to finish, and the cycle repeated itself. I opened my desk three times to get different books, each time I made slight noises, and each time I was met with a sharp reprimand from my teacher. After the third time, I was sent to the office, where the principal asserted, “We are going to have problems with you.” The principal called my mother after work to pick me up from school. I was in trouble.

The next day, I was met with my third assessment, and just like the previous assessments, I completed the exam in 45 minutes. I was chewing gum and blew a bubble, and a large pop was heard by all. I was once again sent to the principal’s office, but I never made it there. I did not want the principal to call my mother. I went out to the track and began to walk, eventually running around the track. This lasted for about an hour, until I transitioned to the next teacher. The same cycle occurred that week with my final assessment: Getting in trouble and then going to the track. Emotionally, I was not in a good place, as I had no friends and was bored, lost, and thought I was doing everything wrong. I no longer wanted to be in school.

Echoing my own story, Ray tells the associate principal and registrar a story of him being in trouble in his former public school district in the Northeast. Ray explains

that no one talked to him when this happened. In such cases, his former school's administration suspended him and then punished him by transferring him to a different school. Ray tells his teacher that the public school was trying to get rid of him because they did not know how to deal with him as well as other academically challenged students. Ray explains that when he and the other students were placed in alternative care, they went truant and never came back to school since no one held the students accountable.

After testing, Ray attends class in ninth grade. While meeting the teacher, Ray is amazed that there are only fifteen students in the class. He wonders where the rest of the students are, but he later recalls that his previous school accommodated thirty students per class. Ray asks his teacher for the reason classes were so small, and she explains that the school prefers smaller class sizes to meet the needs of their students every day. Meanwhile, one of the registrars connects with Ray and becomes familiar with him, while the teacher explains Texas' state requirements for Ray to graduate.

However, when Ray turns eighteen, he may not be able to graduate since he lacks credentials to do so. Worried that he may not graduate due to his past failure experiences, one of the principals suggests that Ray considers joining the career training program as well as a general education development (GED) degree program. This plan would enable Ray to achieve his learning goal. Ray is now a student with a personal graduation plan and an opportunity to better himself.

Reflecting upon Ray's educational career, one of the leading causes of Ray's issues in school was that he initially focused on working to earn money rather than being in school. Over time, this choice of work-over-school implied that Ray had many duties

at home, and his schools may not have realized the depth of these duties. Based on the issues Ray experienced, being placed in a specialized charter, such as Ki Charter Academy, may have been the best thing to happen to him in his educational life. In this setting, Ray received the social-emotional education that assisted with his mood disorder and depression treatment, but he also received an education genuinely tailored to his needs. This individualized and comprehensive approach to education and well-being defines the vision and mission of the charter founders of Ki Charter Academy, a school that Ray called home.

Ultimately, Ray's vision was to provide for his family when he returned to his home. Thankfully, after Ray completed his academic work and course of study, Ray procured employment, which significantly contributed to his family's welfare, a desire that he initially had. This desire was articulated by Harmston and Pliskas (2001) in their perspective that education is regarded as the foundation for a satisfying life, an enlightened and civil society, a strong economy, and a secure nation. Ray wanted nothing more than to support his family in this regard. The transformational education that Ray received allowed him to be an active citizen, care for his family, and develop a sense of self-worth at the same time.

Although Ray and I shared many similar experiences from our educational careers, my path was complex in different ways. Harkening back to my experiences, when the meeting convened with the principal, teacher, my mother and myself, all of my assessments were in a folder. The principal asked the teacher to present the assessments and in her doing so, she explained that I scored perfect in math and near perfect on all others. The teacher then began to explain that I became distracted easily and would

benefit with the prescription drug called Ritalin. She explained that this would help calm me down. The principal agreed with the teacher, and then turned the conversation to my mother who emphatically stated, “No, my son will not take drugs to help him calm down.”

My mother asked several questions that I vividly remember to this day. “Is Jerry being engaged the entire class period?” “Is Jerry allowed to do physical activity during the day outside of physical education class?” These questions resonated with me, as these questions were answered by a simple, “No,” without explanation. Upon hearing my story through other teachers at the school, I was moved to another classroom per the request of another teacher who saw me frequently running on the track. This teacher saw my skills in the classroom, as well as my need for physical activity. My new teacher made a contract with me: If I completed all my work for the day, I would be allowed to run on the track for the remainder of the class period. This contract worked out wonderfully. Not only did I complete all my work, but I was exerting extra energy without having to take prescription medication.

Unlike myself, Ray did not have the same kind of parental influence or support. Ray and I were extremely similar in that we each had a turning point. Although Ray did not have the same kind of foundational support I did, he was able to find a place where people cared about him and where his education would be tailored to his specific needs. The same happened with me in the traditional public school, with the special support of my new teacher and my parents. These stories of Ray and me serve as the main foci I attribute to starting a specialized school for kids just like us: Ki Charter Academy.

The primary aim of this study was to introduce and explain the process of

developing the charter school that Ray attended, which is Ki Charter Academy. The study analyzed the rationale and process through which the charter school was formed via authentic experiences. During the planning and establishment process, I played a critical role as one of the founders of Ki Charter Academy. My fellow founders and I had a vision to create a school to address the challenges of students, with a plan to eventually reintegrate them to succeed in their home schools. To facilitate this vision, Ki Charter Academy was subcontracted by a residential treatment facility in Texas to serve students. We envisioned Ki Charter Academy to be a local educational entity for the treatment facility, synthesizing two important social supports for students: A healthy and safe living environment and an inclusive learning environment. For a student to be admitted to a residential facility, they need to have been expelled from their home school, a disciplinary school, and have exhausted all other community efforts. In other words, a treatment facility is a near last resort for the student.

A charter school was already in existence on site. Therefore, Ki Charter would replace this respective charter. The idea incubation stemmed from the founders realizing that students needed more than the previous charter was offering students. The leadership team of the Ki Charter Academy envisioned a diverse educational model, exposing students to multifaceted programming. The programming that was proposed allowed students to reintegrate themselves as critical and active citizens within their communities. Although my story and Ray's was incredibly influential, there were various other reasons for establishing Ki Charter Academy. One of the reasons was the lack of educational opportunities for students with special needs. I found myself reflecting on my story and rationale, almost becoming one of the students that was unrepresented and underserved, if

not for my strong parental support and my parents' ability to advocate on my behalf. I felt intrigued because if such education did not work for students in their previous education setting, these settings should not be emulated in other education settings. Instead, educational leaders ought to try new strategies to get students back on track. My goal was to spark a love of learning in students and create something that students would connect to in order to continue to explore their interests, while tailoring education to the individual student. Another goal was to create active citizens in communities by reducing recidivism and improving student behavior, ultimately elevating the quality of life for everyone.

Unfortunately, Ray is one of many students who are underserved by the current traditional public education system. Most large school districts focus primarily on academic performance and overlook students with special needs, such as those who have been traumatized or who require social support and individualized education. In the case of Ray and other students suffering from mental disorders, Ki Charter Academy serves these needs by ultimately helping the learners reintegrate back to their home schools. Ki Charter Academy helps students like Ray achieve their educational goals. My story represents what can happen if certain variables are put into place to help students succeed. What would have happened if I took Ritalin? What would have happened if a teacher never took an interest in me? What would have happened if I did not have strong parental support?

If I had taken Ritalin, I would have never been able to join the U.S. Army, as when I enlisted, the Army was not enlisting people who previously took Ritalin. If a teacher never took interest in me and created a tailored education plan for me, I would

have looked at education and schooling through a very narrow and pessimistic lens. I now see education with a more positive outlook, as people do generally care about students, whether these people work in traditional public schools, of which I was a product, or a public charter school. As I am a proponent for public education, I see the value in improving the public education system so that my own educational experiences can be replicated for students like Ray. In addition, my parents instilled support, love, and the importance of academics in me and were also able to navigate the school system and advocate on my behalf, which was something Ray was not afforded. This is why I created a specialty charter school that serves students that are often overlooked and labeled. If I didn't have both parental and school support, I would not be the educator I am today. As a result, Ki Charter Academy provides nurturing guidance and a safe living environment to students, as well as an individualized learning environment, synthesizing my own experiences and providing students like Ray the education they deserve.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Notably, most public schools are not structured to meet the unique needs of each child but rather to attend to the general needs of all children (Arsen & Ni, 2012). Education should be one of the most important values that every parent should want to pass onto their children. However, learners with special education needs enrolled in traditional public schools sometimes miss this opportunity, as many public schools are not tailored to meet their learners' challenging needs (Fine, 1986). For example, in a public school of thirty students per class, it is often a hectic and daunting task for a single teacher to educate each student personally and with grace. However, this teaching strategy was something that Ray needed for his advancement and academic growth. In

this regard, the public schools have not been and are not ideal learning environments for Ray and others with similar needs.

Ray's changing of schools was not the best solution for him. However, this was Ray's unfortunate consequence after his mental illness was mishandled and he was not provided the appropriate care to help him heal. This phenomenon may be due to overly crowded classes and a lack of individualized and small group educational support. An annual statistical report on public schools released by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2014) indicated that 51% of the state's 5.1 million public school students were educated in 4% of its public schools. To put these numbers into a broader context, as of 2014 in Texas, there were 49 superintendents for 2.6 million students, and 1,178 superintendents for the other 2.5 million students. This drastic student-administrator ratio may not be the best path toward student success.

This data suggest that a high proportion of students are crowded into a small number of schools. This situation did not serve Ray very well. The alternative care centers Ray attended did not live up to Ray's expectation because they did not address his specific needs correctly. It could be argued that Ray escaped because he felt isolated and ignored. Unfortunately, students with difficulties such as Ray are continually shifting from one public school to another and might end up altogether dropping out of school. This problem should not be a burden that rests on these students' shoulders. Meeting the needs of students such as Ray is not an easy fix and requires a concerted effort by key stakeholders to rejuvenate and ignite a love of learning in these respective students. However, I did not see other leaders in education making this concerted effort, so I felt compelled to act.



Yet, the social and political environment in Texas renders the state a contentious one to launch a charter school. The media has widely documented how Texas charter schools have often been criticized for redirecting funds away from traditional public schools, while charter school leadership has insisted that the rapid expansion of charter schools in Texas has provided more student choice than ever before (Swaby, 2019). To push back against the negative public sentiment against charter expansion in Texas, the CEO of the Texas Charter School Association Starlee Coleman asserted, “Folks who normally align against vouchers, charters, other kinds of programs like that or policies like that, don’t have anything else to oppose besides charter schools. There’s nowhere else that they need to train their fire” (para. 7). As a result of this difficult educational environment, new charter schools in Texas may face heightened criticism, yet students like Ray may require alternative school designs and services to provide them with the best education possible.

I have witnessed many students who mirrored Ray’s situation. These students were taught in the same manner that was not tailored to their individual learning needs, and little changed each time they attended a different school. I saw the same strategies provided to students who were struggling and continued to struggle. I believed one potential solution was to create a specialized charter school to serve the likes of Ray, and more importantly, serve as a resource to traditional public schools where these students would often be neglected (Ausbrooks, Barron, Barrett, & Theresa, 2005). Starting a public charter school was an extremely exhausting task, without a template to adhere to and with no real roadmap to guide the cause. As a result, this study serves as that roadmap through a case study design, drawing upon experiences of stakeholders who

helped establish a specialized charter school in Texas. Ultimately, this study centers on the roles and process of establishing a public charter school, in hopes that others can learn from the work and apply it in other settings, thus improving the educational and social lives of students in Texas and beyond.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Understanding how specialized charter schools can be established to serve students with special needs, like Ray, is critical to inform how other charter programs can be established, while considering the roles of pertinent stakeholders in this process and the challenges that can be faced along the way. The study outlines the process by which a specialized charter school, Ki Charter Academy, was established, to serve as an example for others. If one wants to design an effective charter school or improve upon an existing charter school, it is critical to understand the factors that account for or explain different degrees of effectiveness in this process (Lawton, 2009). There are “very few studies” that provide this type of insight (Lawton, 2009, p. 41). As a result, this study focuses on key stakeholders and their involvement in the process of establishing a specialized public charter school in Texas. This work provides not only a scholarly text but a historical timeline, a roadmap that includes stakeholder roles, responses to the charter process, and the successes and challenges that they encountered and learned from along the way.

### **Research Questions**

This case study focuses on the process of establishing a specialized charter school, specifically Ki Charter Academy, and the roles necessary to successfully operate the charter school. Subsequently, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What was the process of establishing Ki Charter Academy, a specialized school in

Central Texas?

2. What roles did stakeholders play in the establishment of the charter school?
3. What lessons can be learned from the successes and challenges of establishing Ki Charter Academy to inform future specialized charter schools?

### **Brief Overview of the Methodology**

To answer the research questions pertinent to the establishment of the charter school, I employed a qualitative case study format. White (2005) viewed qualitative case studies as “more concerned with understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of the participant” (p. 127). As a participant within the research study, I understood that a qualitative case study design could best articulate the process of establishing the charter school, while defining the roles of fellow founders throughout the establishment process and their successes and challenges along the way. White (2005) employed a case study format due to White’s critical question building upon Yin’s (2003) work. Yin (2003) suggested that case studies are the preferred strategy to answer “how” or “why” questions, when the questions are situated within a real-life phenomenon or context. As a result, I drew on both primary and secondary sources during data collection to fully explicate this real-life context. This included reviewing secondary information from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for the standard application request that was made by Ki Charter Academy. This application was required for the establishment of a Texas open-enrollment public charter school. I also examined Ki Charter Academy’s application process by conducting interviews with specific officials, including three of the founders and two school board members to procure highly contextualized, firsthand information. This allowed me to convey a clearer picture as to whether the current operations of the

school align with the original goals outlined in the charter proposal. I also obtained data from the Ki Charter School's archives and website to document successes and challenges faced during the establishment process. I also created a historical timeline of events to detail the open enrollment charter process. These research strategies all embrace a social constructivist paradigm that will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study offers invaluable insight regarding the successes and challenges that Ki Charter Academy faced during the state of Texas open-enrollment public charter school application process. Also, this study explains whether the school's ideologies changed from the beginning of the process to the awarding of the charter. Such insight may inform similar schools and their leadership during the charter establishment process.

Undertaking this educational research helped prospective founders to understand the complexity of the charter application processes and how to address challenges not only in Texas, but across the United States (U.S.).

This study's findings will also help interested parties understand different layers of Texas open-enrollment public charter school organization, the rigorous and laborious application process, and how the leadership team initiated the entire establishment process of Ki Charter Academy. Also, as previously mentioned, the report offers a roadmap for those planning to set up charter schools to replicate the process within their vision of a school of their choice. This roadmap is valuable to future educational stakeholders and charter school founders, as Ki Charter Academy navigated the process and was successfully awarded a charter in Texas. Finally, the findings will inform prior research and charter school researchers on the roles of charter schools and the process of

establishing them.

### **Self and Relationship to Research**

My experience working at charter schools, as well as establishing a charter school, gave me an edge in realizing the objectives of this study. The purpose of this study was to understand how specialized charter schools can be established to serve the needs of students like Ray who require individualized education to succeed. This knowledge was critical to share, including how other charter programs can be established, the roles of pertinent stakeholders in this process, and the successes and challenges that can be experienced along the way. My knowledge and expertise helped to ask the appropriate questions, carry out relevant data analysis, and articulate critical findings.

As a result, I consider myself an insider researcher in the context of this study. An insider researcher can be defined as someone who shares common languages, themes, and experiences with their participants (Kim, 2012). I am not only the author of this study, but I was a participant-researcher who was directly involved with the conceptual thought process and application process of Ki Charter Academy. As Kim (2012) defined, I am an inside researcher who knew the details and spoke the universal language of the participants involved. Kim (2012) further explained that participant-researchers are less likely to cause harm, as participant-researchers share the same language and knowledge of the study's participants. In this regard, I leveraged my positionality with respect and dignity, not a sense of power.

During the process of applying for and being awarded Ki's charter, no roles were developed. I interviewed founders of the charter school who were all equal partners throughout the entire process. Additionally, Ki Charter Academy's school board

members did not participate in the writing of the charter. However, the board members participated in all meetings and timeline junctures that dealt with establishing Ki Charter Academy. This nuance was extremely important to note, as ethical considerations are always at the forefront of this study: It was critical that all stakeholder roles were accurately defined, and as an insider researcher, I could provide this insight. I facilitated both interviews and the focus group as a researcher actively contributing to the data. As a valued member of Ki Charter Academy, I had valuable and exclusive information about the Ki Charter Academy's development, leading to this study's in-depth description of the charter establishment process.

### **Key Terms**

The following terms are essential to understand within the context of my study. These terms may seem ordinary; however, they are frequently used throughout the study to describe the work accurately, especially to those without charter school experience or knowledge.

#### **Social Constructivism**

Social constructivism is the level of personal development where learning takes place. It comprises cognitive structures that are still in the process of maturing, but which can only mature under the guidance of or in collaboration with others, as social constructivism posits that individuals make sense of the world through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978).

#### **Charter School**

Public charter schools are free, public options to which families can send their student or child. There is the same academic and financial accountability as a traditional

public school. There is no cost to attend. There is no requirement or test for enrollment. Public charter schools vary in mission and model and serving a wide range of students (Texas Charter School Association, 2014).

### **Alternative Charter Education**

In Texas, alternative schools are defined as having 75% of their students at risk of dropping out. In Texas, a student meets the “at-risk” designation if they fall into one of thirteen categories. (Texas Education Agency, 2014).

### **Residential Treatment Facility**

Residential treatment programs provide intensive help for youth with severe emotional and behavior problems. While receiving residential treatment, children temporarily live outside of their homes and in a facility where they can be supervised and monitored by trained staff (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2016).

### **Generation**

The generation refers to the year in which the charter was granted. Generation 1 charters were granted in 1996, with Generation 17 charters granted in 2012 (Texas Charter Schools Association, 2016b).

### **Ki Charter Academy**

A Generation 19 charter school that was the focus of this study and was approved by the Texas State Board of Education along with the Commissioner of Education in 2014.

### **Learning Opportunity Gap**

A learning opportunity gap refers to how marginalization—such as lack of school

fees, poor mental health, racism, or belonging to a minority group—contributes to lower educational achievement or aspirations for a defined group of learners (Cohodes, 2018).

### **Stakeholders**

Stakeholders are people that invested in the cause, mission, or vision of the school.

### **Lottery System**

A lottery system involves choosing applicants for enrollment in a charter school where the number of applicants exceeds the available spaces to avoid discrimination that could be associated with the selection process (Texas Education Code [TEC], 2011).

### **Texas Education Code (TEC)**

The Texas Education Code includes all laws and rules passed by the state legislature. The TEC applies to most educational institutions that are supported in whole or part by state tax funds and includes a searchable index of all state codes and the Texas Constitution (TEC, 2015).

### **Chapter 12 (TEC)**

Chapter 12 of the TEC only addresses charters and charter schools in Texas. The application process for the Ki Charter Academy was part of Chapter 12 (TEC, 2001).

### **Structure of the Study**

The study contains four chapters after the introduction chapter. Chapter two is a comprehensive literature review presenting the research which has been documented about charter schools. The chapter discusses what is already known about public charter schools and identifies deficient areas of research for future exploration. The information gleaned from the literature review helps to affirm or dispute the information obtained



from primary data in the data analysis section through comparing the findings for the studies reviewed and the actual data collected and findings from the data.

Chapter three, the study's methodology, outlines approaches used to conduct the study, ethical considerations of the work, study design, research philosophy, and the theoretical framework. Chapter four discusses the results through a logical interpretation of the findings and comparison with the findings of the studies in the literature review section. The last chapter contains the conclusions and recommendations drawn from the data analyzed, interpreted, and discussed. Precisely, the chapter presents recommendations for research, policy, and practice to offer directions for future studies on the topic.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This section reviews prior literature on the roles of charter schools and the processes through which they are established. The chapter begins with a historical review of the establishment and development of charter systems in the U.S. The next section focuses on the purposes of creating charter schools in the state of Texas. The chapter also reviews features of charter schools and the perceptions that people have regarding charter schools. The study at hand seeks to contribute to this small, existing body of research.

### **Historical Context**

According to Knaak and Knaak (2013), “charter schools evolved following the establishment of magnet schools as concepts of choice for America’s parents (p. 45). Zhang and Yang (2008) defined a charter school as a publicly funded school that operates free from the direct control and regulation of the conventional public school. These aspects are essential in the growing field of education, as this innovative movement paved the way for school reform in the U.S. (Knaak & Knaak, 2013). Although charter schools are publicly funded, they have the freedom to create new approaches in education while needing to comply with state and federal accountability requirements (Lawton, 2009). Consequently, public charter schools have proliferated as a form of choice within the school choice movement, and their numbers have continued to rise since the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1991 (Estes, 2003).

Several historical events contributed to the establishment of charter schools as an innovative approach to schooling in the U.S. (Estes, 2003). As early as the 1970s, Ray Budde, the England educator, suggested contracts be offered to groups of teachers by

their school boards to pursue new educational approaches. The decision was reached after frequent uproars during the 1960s and 1970s about the disorder within the public education system in the U.S. This development was important, as charters are contracts with the charter holder (founder) and the state regulatory agency. Ray Budde was ahead of his time by conceptualizing educational contracts for the pursuit of different educational approaches, and he was known as an early architect for the charter movement (Flanders, 2017). Charter schools may have been a necessary turn for U.S. public schools to take, as 1983's *A Nation at Risk* reviewed the U.S. public education system and it was discovered that the system was not transformative for all of its students as required (Denning, 1983).

President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education issued *A Nation at Risk* which outlined the mediocrity in U.S. schools (Kahlenberg, 2003). This document served as a turning point in U.S. education history, as it initiated the modern-day education reform movement by outlining practical recommendations that dealt with content, standards and expectations, time, teaching and leadership, and financial support of U.S. schools (Gardner, 1983). This period was a pivotal time for U.S. education and its school system that desperately needed change. Albert Shanker, who was the former American Federation for Teachers' President from 1964-1986, stated that the education system then needed rigorous evaluation regarding *A Nation at Risk* and the same institutional practices that were occurring in public education (Kahlenberg, 2003). As a result, charter schools evolved as an avenue of choice for parents, with the opening of City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota serving as the birth of charter schools in the U.S. in 1991 (Knaak & Knaak, 2013).

Shortly after the opening of City Academy, Minnesota's Governor Rudy Peprich introduced the nation's first public school choice initiative in 1991. The program allowed any student to attend any school in the state outside their respective school public, while other states such as California followed and passed charter school legislation (Denning, 2012). Subsequently, Governor Jim Edgar of Illinois signed the General Assembly Act in 1992, which then became Illinois Charter School law in 1996 (Junge, 2014). These legislative acts allowed parents the choice to send their kids to other schools in the state, further catalyzing charter school expansion across the country.

Stillings (2005) explained, "although at the beginning charter school expansion was limited to experiment, the system proved to be working, and other states began to pass the charter law" (p. 54). Today, charter school legislation has passed in over forty states and has enjoyed bipartisan support from conservatives, liberals, and some teachers' unions and entrepreneurs. According to Cheng, Hitt, Kisida, and Mills (2017):

An essential feature of U.S. charter schools is that they are schools of choice: Unlike traditional public schools where school assignment is based upon where students live, charter school enrollment is open to all students. As schools of choice with operational autonomy, charter schools often cater to niche demand. (p. 210)

This freedom has allowed charter schools to choose demographics as well as programmatic approaches that charters deem a need for these respective students whom they serve.

### **Common Features of Charter Schools**

While charter schools can vary by their mission, vision, and organizational

structure, generally several common attributes define charter schools and issues that they face. What follows are the most common features of charter schools.

### **A Focus on Teacher Quality**

Charter schools have increased teacher quality through increased teacher autonomy. Flanders (2017) asserted that charter schools offer teachers and management essential liberty to run the school, thus boosting creativity and innovation in education for all stakeholders. Regarding educational leadership, Saiti (2012) argued that the hiring and retention of qualified and experienced teachers is essential for establishing a well-performing school. Teachers are significant stakeholders and are change agents in the field of education. Although policy and autonomy drive charter schools, teachers are at the heart of the educational programming. Teachers are also concerned with their student's personal welfare, such as mental health needs, embracing the whole child (Torres & Weiner, 2018).

In a Texas context, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) stipulates that teachers at open-enrollment charter schools only need to be certified in the fields of bilingual education, special education, and English as a Second Language (ESL). All other teachers at open-enrollment charter schools do not have to be certified in the charter system (TEA, 2017). As such, some people in Texas may perceive charter schools not to be credible, since they do not follow strict standards for certifying teachers as practiced in traditional public schools across the state.

Nevertheless, charter schools often ensure teacher quality through several strategies, as high-quality teachers can improve their relationships with students in their classes. Several questions often arise regarding teacher quality: How do charter schools

ensure teachers quality? What is teacher quality and how is quality measured? In a charter school context, the quality of a teacher can be evaluated based on experience, educational qualifications, performance, and other parameters. According to Viadero (2009), this methodology of teacher quality evaluation ties teacher qualifications and quality to actual results in the classroom. Viadero (2009) went further to explain that “according to experts, that profile of a young, energetic, well-educated teacher who is passionate about his or her work is often seen at high-performing charter schools” (p. 17). Here, charter schools may prefer teachers who are more passionate about teaching kids and achieving learning outcomes, not only with mainstream students but also those with special needs.

There are different requirements for teachers in traditional public schools and those teaching in open-enrollment charter schools. For example, a classroom teacher in a traditional public school in Texas should hold a bachelor's degree from an accredited university, have completed an approved educator preparation program, earned teacher certification, and completed fingerprinting requirements (Texas Administrative Code [TAC], 2018). On the other hand, teachers in open enrollment public charter schools do not have to be certified (TEC, 2017). Therefore, they do not need to go through a teacher preparation program, pass the certification test, or apply to be certified. However, they still must hold a bachelor's degree and complete fingerprinting requirements (TAC, 2017). A charter school's management understands that the performance of the charter school largely depends on the quality of the teachers hired. As such, charter schools adhere to a strict hiring and performance evaluation process to maintain quality.

Speaking to the quality of charter school teachers, most parents in Hardaway's

(2018) study felt that charter schools had the best quality of teachers in terms of experience and academic qualifications. However, this perception may not have been valid or generalizable to other educational contexts, considering the findings of Exstrom (2012) and Carruthers (2012). Carruthers (2012) studied the performance and credentials of charter school teachers. The researcher found that less experienced and academically qualified teachers were moving to charter schools, and more precisely, charter schools in urban contexts. Exstrom's (2012) study found less experienced teachers often work in charter schools. Their study's results demonstrated that over 30% of charter school teachers had fewer than three years of experience, while 75% had fewer than ten years of experience. On the contrary, public schools employed more experienced teachers, with only 15% of teachers have fewer than three years of experience (Exstrom, 2012).

The Massachusetts Public Charter School Association (2015) noted that charter schools often have qualified and licensed teachers. However, traditional public schools have more experienced teachers than in charter schools. Regarding salary, Harris and Plank (2003) explained that a charter school teacher earns less than their counterparts in traditional public schools. Traditional public schools also have more competition due to the job security associated with government jobs. Furthermore, Harris and Plank (2003) found that the government recruitment process was more rigorous and targeted highly qualified academically and experienced applicants, thus disadvantaging less experienced teachers. Here, research has not specifically stated that charter school teachers have been preferable over public school teachers, and future research will likely to continue to address the differences between charter and public school teachers.

## **Autonomy and Freedom**

Another key characteristic of charter schools is their increased autonomy and freedom when compared to traditional public schools, that proponents argue, lends itself to a greater degree to innovation (Lawton, 2009; Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012). According to Lawton (2009), reducing excessive rules and regulations governing charter schools and their students has resulted in more innovation and productivity. Greater freedom and autonomy allow leadership to derive innovative solutions and strategies to achieve learning outcomes (Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012). This sense of freedom and autonomy can also be valuable when dealing with the unique needs of learners in a residential treatment or learning facility. Unique learners may require different methodologies and learning approaches from conventional learning methods and approaches in traditional public schools (Preston et al., 2012).

Charter schools can create their vision of how they want their schools to look. According to the TEA (2018a), a charter school can lay out their plan of what they see fit as innovative measures to move students forward within their education. For instance, in Texas, all charters and traditional public schools must teach by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). However, charter publics can lay out innovative programs that complement the TEKS within students' education plans. In the case of Ki Charter Academy's education plan, for instance, it was imperative that a vocational program along with a Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) program was created to supplement the TEKS, illustrating the autonomy of charter schools (Epple et al., 2016; Lawton, 2009).

The freedom from regulated bureaucracy has also allowed charter schools to



decentralize power and autonomy that allows teachers to make decisions in their respective classrooms (Fox, 2002). In a study of charter schools in Ohio, Fox (2002) reasoned that, “The teachers in the community schools I studied believed that they had greater freedom than other teachers from rules, regulations, and bureaucracy. Teachers in all the participating schools had positive feelings about their newfound autonomy” (p. 526). Epple, Romano, and Zimmer (2016) held a similar perspective, asserting that substantial autonomy in charter schools fosters creativity, and thereby, improves performance, with charter school teachers having the liberty to customize programs and instruction to meet student needs. This autonomy and positivity can produce a sense of ownership and worth that charter schools—such as Ki Charter Academy—are trying to create and foster.

### **Competition**

Charter schools pose competition for public schools. Preston et al. (2012) attributed this competition to the transfer of students from traditional public schools to charter schools. Seeking better quality education, Preston et al. (2012) argued that guardians and parents have moved their children to charter schools. Although charter schools have been scrutinized in the past, public school reform has been stagnating over the past fifty years, necessitating charter schools and their innovative educational approaches (Knaak & Knaak, 2013). Since 1991, school choice policies have been promoted in the education system as a way of enhancing performances of traditional public schools, also facilitating competition (Arsen & Ni, 2011).

Arsen and Ni (2011) also asserted that students in traditional public schools have not been provided ample, innovative practices within their education. In contrast, charter

schools breed competition by ensuring that if a traditional public school does not provide quality education, a charter school can provide an alternative for parents and students. Traditional public schools have often been too large to tailor a program to meet specific needs for many students, but on the other hand, charter schools have limited the number of students in each class to ensure a small student-to-teacher ratio, although school size and student-to-teacher ratio may not always be related (Arsen & Ni, 2011).

If more students apply within the geographical boundary of the charter school, lottery systems have been used to allocate student enrollment spaces in charter schools (Austbrooks et al., 2005). Researchers have argued that lottery systems may serve as evidence for a competitive education system, as Arsen and Ni (2012) based their argument on the neoclassical market model and argued that “one could predict that competition will induce schools to shift resources toward instruction even if this fails to improve school efficacy because such a shift ought to appeal to families choosing among multiple school options” (p. 6). Therefore, the existence of charter schools has offered alternative educational services to parents who desire a different learning approach for their students or children with special learning needs.

### **Student Success**

Parents and guardians prefer schools that guarantee or are committed to student success. When considering student success with regards to charter schools, the literature focuses on role of funding and resources and student performance.

**Role of funding and resources.** The first founders of charter schools had trouble acquiring basic resources that serve as the building blocks for student success, including facilities and personnel (Barret, 2003). Given historical trends, traditional public schools

have received more resources than charter schools from state funding. According to Kweon, Mohai, Lee, and Sametshaw (2018), traditional public schools in most states such as Texas and Michigan have received higher amounts of operational funding than charter schools. Also, charter schools have been disadvantaged due to their inability to pay for necessary capital facilities compared to public schools with long-term bonds financed by local property taxes (Temkin, Hong, Davis & Laurel, 2008). According to the TEA and HB 21 (2018), charter schools were awarded facility funding at the average amount of \$200 per student.

Kweon et al. (2018) also indicated a lack of resources as one of the hindrances of starting a charter school, not only in Texas but in other states as well. Wolfe (2018) argued that some charter schools may receive financial support for facilities through federal or state start-up grants or direct state aid for facilities acquisition. However, unlike traditional public schools, most charter schools have utilized part of their current operating expenditure to pay for capital and building equipment. Nevertheless, the amount of funds each school receives has not equated to commensurate levels of student success (Temkin et al., 2008; Wolfe, 2018). Speaking to how public and charter schools spend funds, Wolfe (2018) reasoned that public schools have often been criticized for improper use of resources, yet public schools have continued to receive more funding than charter schools. The case of misappropriation of funds as highlighted by Wolfe (2018) was not unique to traditional public schools but extends to charter schools, too. However, most charter schools use a higher percentage of their resources on special needs instruction, thus making these schools recommendable for students with health challenges and needs (Kweon et al., 2018; Wolfe, 2018).

Also, most local traditional public schools have used their resources to fund administration, maintenance, and operations, while charter schools have committed most of their resources in special needs instructions and regular classroom instruction, thereby attempting to improve student success (Arsen & Ni, 2012b). According to Hicks, Ohle, and Valant (2008), some charter schools have received considerable financial support from private sources, such as parents, non-profit charter management firms, or foundations. These foundations have played a significant role in fostering student success through the purchase of learning materials and hiring resourceful teachers, educational texts, and technology.

**Student performance.** This section's overall literature demonstrates that students at charters may outperform students in traditional public schools, but in other subjects or generally, they perform about the same. Clark, Gleason, Tuttle, and Silverberg (2015) studied the impacts of charter schools on student success with a precise aim of determining whether charter schools improve the performance of students. A comparison of test results of learners in a charter school and those in traditional public school showed that charter schools that had resource disadvantages performed better than well-off charter schools (Clark et al., 2015). Further, the study revealed that there was no significant difference in performance of charter schools and public schools. This finding demonstrated that charter schools have served as alternatives to traditional public schools and have not replaced public schools, considering that there has not been much difference in student success (Clark et al., 2015). However, the study concluded that charter schools have been necessary alternatives for learners that may not receive tailored education services in traditional public schools.

Similar research conducted by Betts and Tang (2016) on charter schools meta-analyzed literature on charter schools and traditional public schools and found that charter schools perform better in technical and statistical subjects such as mathematics. However, the study noted that most of the literature on the topic concluded that there was no significant variance between the charter school and traditional public schools in most of the educational settings (Betts & Tang, 2016). Cheng et al.'s (2017) research findings also echoed those of Betts and Tang (2016). However, Cheng et al.'s (2017) study examined the impact of the “no excuse approach” used in some charters schools and found that this charter school approach improves student success in mathematics and literacy. Notably, the study showed that other charter schools using different approaches had a lower score than the sampled no excuse charter schools (Cheng et al., 2017). Here, both Betts and Tang (2016) and Cheng et al. (2017) asserted that charter schools can be successful, even if this success comes in different academic disciplines and in diverse educational settings.

Further, Betts and Tang (2016) found that there have been differences among charters school performance, meaning that some charter schools perform better than others, similar to traditional public schools. Similarly, the Department of Education (2007) has suggested that charter schools also help close the opportunity gap. A learning opportunity gap refers to how socioeconomic status—such as lack of school fees, poor mental health, racism, or belonging to a minority group—contribute to lower educational achievement or aspirations for a specific group of learners (Cohodes, 2018). Charter schools have bridged the learning opportunity gap by enrolling students with socioeconomic challenges and special education needs who might have been removed

from their traditional schools (Department of Education, 2007). For example, Ki Charter Academy hired teachers skilled in special education; thus, they attracted students with such needs from different areas.

Smarick's (2008) synthesis of charter school studies indicated that charter schools perform better than traditional public schools. In part, Smarick (2008) attributed this success to many parents of bright students choosing charter schools due to better and personalized learning services, thus leading to better performance than in traditional public schools. Charter schools have also performed better than traditional public schools in certain settings because most charter schools have a lower student-per-teacher ratio, thus ensuring close teacher conduct and improved performance (Chudowsky & Ginsburg, 2012). However, studying this same phenomenon, Clark et al. (2015) compared performance in traditional public schools and charter schools and found that there was a disparity in the two types of schools but could not clearly suggest charter schools were more successful overall than public schools.

Brehm, Imberman, and Naretta (2017) noted charter schools have been expensive for parents, suggesting that only a few parents take their students to such schools or can afford a charter school education for their child or student. Nevertheless, Ausbrooks et al. (2005) asserted that charter schools have attempted to provide students with the best quality education possible, even at an elevated cost, as stakeholders in charter schools have been willing to sacrifice and play a primary role in facilitating educational support, infrastructure, and the finances needed for student success.

Another dominant perception of charter school performance has been that charter schools perform more poorly than traditional public schools. Sahin, Willson, and Capraro

(2018) analyzed charter school and public schools in Texas comparatively. The researchers examined a group of traditional public schools and charter schools with a specific interest in the performance of learners in the reading, science, and mathematics for three years in different grades, using a multivariate analysis of covariance with a pass or fail as the only possible outcomes to examine the performance of the learners in the two divides. Sahin et al.'s (2018) results demonstrated that there was no variance in literacy performances between traditional public school and charter schools in Texas. However, their results on science and mathematics showed student success in charter school exceeded traditional public student success. Therefore, Sahin et al. (2018) resolved that charter schools can live up to their missions and visions of achieving academic excellence for learners. Similarly, Winters, Carpenter, and Clayton (2015) compared the performance of charter schools' graduates and traditional public schools' graduates and found that charter schools performed better than charter schools in math and science subjects. Similarly, Greene, Forster, and Winters' (2003) empirical study suggested that charter school students performed better in mathematics than public school students. Studies performed by Bifulco and Ladd (2006), Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, and Jansen (2004), Clark et al., (2015), and Sass (2006) demonstrated similar results, reinforcing the success that charter schools have experienced regarding student success.

Promoting student success has been key to developing lifelong learners (Ausbrooks et al., 2005). According to the Center for Research on Education Outcomes ([CREO], 2017), students enrolled in charter school have improved their literacy skills in mathematics at a rate higher than their fellow traditional public schools. The report further found that if an academic year was equivalent to a single academic day, then the

learners in charter schools have had an additional seventeen learning days when compared with their counterparts in the traditional public schools, with student improvement even more significant in math and Reading across three years. However, African-American, ESL, and special education students were outperformed by their public-school peers, possibly speaking to the limitations of charter schools (CREO, 2017).

### **Perceptions of Charter Schools**

Although this study focuses on one specialized charter school in Texas, research has demonstrated that some people do not understand the difference between public schools and charter schools, or people may hold incorrect perceptions of charter schools and their variations in comparison to traditional public schools. Single studies have found many people living in the U.S. did not comprehend the difference between charter schools, traditional public schools, and private schools (Wright, 2017). According to Wright (2017), teachers have held wrong perceptions regarding charter schools when preparing for teaching in urban charter schools. In Wright's (2017) work, the little knowledge that residents had was clouded with wrong perceptions, myths, and misinformation regarding charter schools (Wright, 2017). Therefore, it is vital to review the perceptions that parents and other educational stakeholders have held toward charter schools, and the difference between charter schools and private and traditional public schools.

The Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) and Harvard University (2017) drafted a survey to glean insight into the perceptions held toward charter schools by family members and parents of students in traditional public schools,



charter schools, and private schools. Results suggested that parents with students in the charter school reported that their charter schools managed communication with the parents better than traditional public schools, although communication was less when compared with private schools. Charter school parents explained that they were likely to experience fewer problems with the school and learners than in public school. This finding indicated that charter schools were likely to have fewer parent-teacher relationship management issues than in public schools. Additionally, charter school parents were more satisfied than parents with students in traditional schools, meaning that the aspects and running of the charter school among other features were satisfactory to the parents (PEPG & Harvard University, 2017).

Hardaway's (2018) doctoral research study on the perceptions of stakeholders in charter schools showed that parents considered collaboration, discipline, and student success when making decisions regarding enrollment of their children in charter schools. Additionally, Hardaway (2018) argued that charter schools were perceived to collaborate more with the parents on students' issues, performance, and areas of improvement than public schools. The parents of charter students also perceived charter schools to be best in improving the students' academic achievement because they serve a small number, thus the charter school provided personalized education to students. The overall perception of parents in this study was that charter schools outdo public schools when viewed from most perspectives such as performance, management, discipline, personalized education, special needs learning, teacher-parent collaboration, and other aspects (Hardaway, 2018).

Another misperception of a charter school has related to their funding. Schumm (2016) criticized such misperceptions in a commentary on the developments in charter

schools. Schumm (2016) asserted that the modern education era and the landscape has been characterized by false news, intentional manipulation of information for political gimmicks, and hyperboles orchestrated to gain political mileage. Additionally, Schumm (2016) explained that the political approach adopted in most public education discourses affected policy development, implementation, and stakeholders' buy-in. Therefore, the education stakeholders and policymakers must come out with the correct version of the narratives to avoid falling victims of the euphoria created by the above injurious perceptions, leading to an incorrect perception of charter schools. Similarly, Villanueva (2019) argued that charter schools have taken away money meant for traditional public schools, but prior studies have argued against this finding (Maloney, Batdorff, May, & Terrell, 2013).

The discourse on charter school funding was best laid out by Maloney et al. (2013). The researchers gathered data on traditional public schools and charter schools in five states to examine their financing. The results showed that both institutions are government-funded and noted that there was an increase in federal and non-federal funding channeled to traditional public and charter schools (Maloney et al., 2013). The researchers also revealed that charter schools have often scouted for resources to supplement the funds given government grants, considering that the philanthropic funding of charter schools has been drastically reduced. Here, the researchers suggested that charter schools have not been financially advantaged when compared to public schools in most contexts. An analysis of the challenges that charter schools face conducted by Schwenkenberg and VanderHoff (2015) identified insufficient funding as a significant challenge, not an advantage that charter schools have enjoyed over public

schools. Moreover, Schwenkenberg and VanderHoff, (2015) argued that charter schools have not received the same amount of federal funding as public schools in prior decades, suggesting that charter school financing has largely been misconstrued by the general public.

More positively, many charter schools have been perceived to have excellent leadership and qualified management (Gawlik, 2017). In their analysis of charter school leadership, Gawlik (2017) explained that charter schools have been strictly governed by a charter to ensure that students receive the educational services promised to them and defined by the charter mission and vision. Escalante and Slate's (2017) findings on charter schools emphasized the findings of Gawlik (2017) in their argument that charter school's leadership must be top notch to deliver the high results and performance witnessed in charter schools. Escalante and Slate (2017) also argued that management is instrumental in the overall health of an institution, and charter schools have often employed educational leaders with impeccable academic character and experience. Linick and Lubienski (2013) supported these findings in their argument that charter schools have inspired traditional public schools to excel given the government resources at their disposal, also speaking to how charter schools and their leaders have spurred educational competition, which has improved educational quality. Here, Linick and Lubienski (2013) reasoned that charter schools often feature excellent leaders who possess good management and communication skills, positioning charter schools as attractive enrollment choices for students and their families.

### **Organizational Structure of Charter Schools**

As many students, parents, and educational stakeholders may be more familiar

with public schools than charter schools (Schwenkenberg & VanderHoff, 2015), it is important to explain and review the literature regarding charter school organization. Fox (2002) argued that charter schools have often embraced an organizational structure that defines relationship management hierarchies and communication between various levels of the organizational structure. According to Fox (2002), the autonomy and freedom principle has been at the heart of most charter school discourses and has been founded on the precepts that bureaucracy must be avoided because a lack of bureaucracy has differentiated the public school from the charter school. Although Fox (2002) criticized the principle of no bureaucracy, arguing that it was nearly impossible to eliminate bureaucracy in an institution partially or fully run or regulated by the government, the presence of a hierarchical organizational structure in charter schools supports Fox's (2002) arguments, even if such a structure resembles a bureaucracy. Nonetheless, Fox (2002) agreed with the majority viewpoints that charter schools have significantly reduced the bureaucracy witnessed in traditional public schools. A common charter school organizational structure may appear as follows:

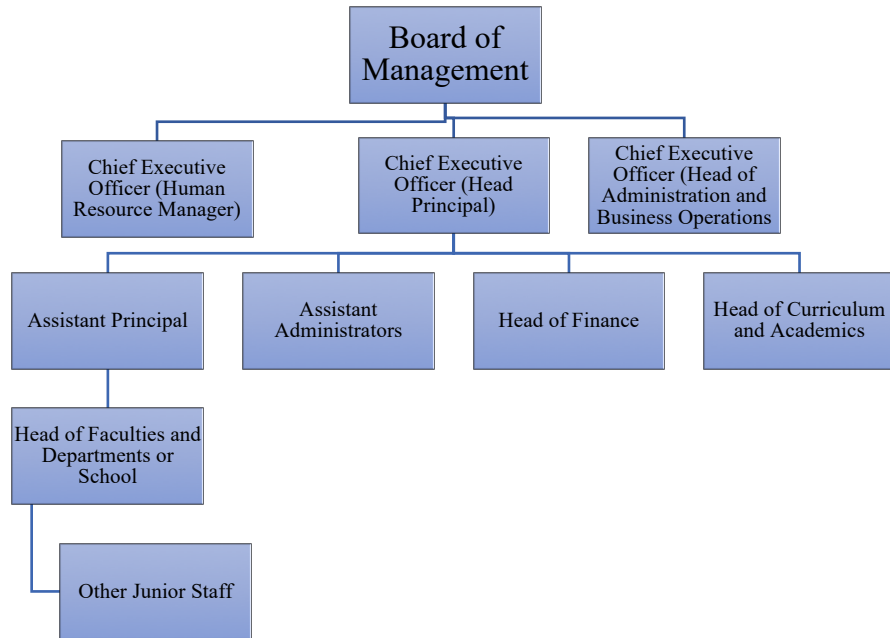


Figure 1. Organizational chart

The above typical organizational structure shows only senior management in a charter school. However, there are often other juniors, intermediate interns, support staff, and other educational stakeholders. The organizational structure of charter schools has differed from school to school in the junior's levels, but the senior management has been similar in most cases.

### **Best Practices in Establishing and Running Charter Schools**

According to Fryer (2013), the collaboration of educational stakeholders has been crucial in the success and running of charter schools. Collaboration with the community, education board, fellow founders, management members, parents, and a charter school's association have also been vital in securing the much-needed external support for charter school start-ups (Maloney et al., 2013). Further, Jones and List (2018) explained that training founders and management staff on the establishment's process of a charter school and the management best practices has fostered the success of charter schools. Similarly,

Cannata, Thomas, and Thombre (2013) studied best practices in starting and managing charter schools and obtained a list of critical success factors and best practices. They found that effective governance was key to the establishment process and running of charter schools (Cannata et al., 2013).

Moreover, founders have often required for charter school leadership to draft a governance plan and structure that clearly defines all relations, duties, and mandates in the charter school (Cannata et al., 2013). Good governance has been at the epicenter of success and charter school best practices. Good governance has supported charter schools' administration to realize the mission and objectives of the school envisaged in the charter. Cannata et al. (2013) added that leadership and organizational culture has influenced the best practices and success in charter schools. Good leadership and organizational culture have steered charter schools in the right direction towards their strategic goals and missions.

Cannata et al. (2013) also identified that charter schools have had to acquire facilities needed to run the charter school, and this acquisition has been critical for the success of charter schools, as inadequate facilities have affected the quality of charter schools. Further, Cannata et al. (2013) identified other critical success factors and best practices in the establishment and running of charter schools, such as developing high-quality curriculum, maintaining accountability, managing operations and talents, and monitoring performance. A high-quality curriculum has helped charter schools ensure that learners receive a high-quality education, while nurturing student talents (Cannata et al., 2013).

### **Challenges Facing the Establishment and Management of Charter Schools**

Starting a charter school has challenges from the application stage, to its launching and its management once it's up and running. Loveless and Jasin (1998) identified these challenges faced in the establishment and management of charter schools, separating these challenges into two broad categories: Organizational and political factors. Organizational challenges facing charter schools have been managing organizational structures, roles, responsibilities, and role relationships between founders and staff. Meanwhile political factors such as a charter school's state or local political leanings and financial initiatives have been known to mar a charter school's financing, expenditures, and appointment of a board of management (Loveless & Jasin, 1998). However, there has been limited literature on the specific challenges facing the establishment process of a charter school, not merely its operation and outcomes. Uludag (2014) examined challenges faced by charter schools and argued that politics and organizational management challenges have been inevitable challenges in the establishment and management of charter schools. These challenges have emerged as charter schools have operated in a public education framework, usually where charter schools have been approved and have served students, sometimes producing tension between a charter school and the general public (Uludag, 2014).

According to Down (2019), charter schools have faced the challenge of maintaining consistency and conformance with the provisions of the charter. The charter has been the key document that guides the operation of a charter school. Therefore, charter schools have been mandated by the charter document to operate within their frameworks, yet if social or financial circumstances change, some charters have struggled to adapt (Down, 2019). There are many challenges when charter schools have started, and

the conformance to charter provisions has been occasionally compromised because of challenges before the schools have opened their doors.

Managing special learners' populations has also been challenging for charter schools (Sundbom, 2018). The special needs of charter school students have remained a challenge because managing the transportation and boarding of special students has been a demanding task due of the special needs and nature of the learners. For instance, managing learners with mental health conditions have required one to be careful and monitor the actions and movement of the learner, producing an additional financial cost incurred to the charter school, rendering it necessary to redirect funds toward special needs students and away from other possible charter school expenses (Sundbom, 2018).

As all schools need a physical setting to operate, Sullins and Miron (2005) discussed the challenges of establishing and running a charter school and found that procuring necessary facilities for a charter school has been challenging. The initial costs for erecting structures, buying, leasing, or subcontracting new structures have been very high, considering that most charter schools have not been guaranteed funds from the government. Sullins and Miron (2005) also found that all the charter schools in their study's sample had experienced difficulties in securing infrastructure for the school and had to share, lease out a facility, or spend a considerable amount of money upgrading their infrastructure. Their results demonstrated that in some cases, the problem was so dire that one school was forced to relocate to new facilities three times in one academic year (Sullins & Miron, 2005). Likewise, Buerger and Bifulco (2019) found that meeting the costs of acquiring and managing facilities at charter schools in New York has been a principal challenge and has deterred other charter schools from opening, while charter



schools have faced similar challenges in Texas (Swaby, 2019).

Further, Sullins and Miron (2005) identified that creating proper governance and management has been a challenge in establishing charter schools. As charter schools have traditionally operated with autonomy and freedom, such as senior management members being appointed rather than elected. Sullins and Miron (2005) argued that freedom and autonomy have been subject to misuses in charter school contexts, thus freedom has produced more challenges for charter schools. This phenomenon is present in Texas, as charter schools have been criticized at times for fiscal mismanagement (Swaby, 2019). Therefore, the founders of the charters school must exercise due diligence in the appointment of the board of management to avoid corruption-related allegations and conflict such as nepotism, selection of unqualified members because of friendship and monopolized power. Management power has been a principal challenge in most charter schools because power and authority struggles have led to conflicts that have threatened the existence of charter schools in their infancy stages (Sullins & Miron, 2005).

Charter schools have also experienced challenges related to growth. There are several reasons potentially explaining these growth challenges. Buerger and Bifulco (2019) explained that, “One reason [that charters face difficulties in growing in size] is that fixed costs could be reduced in the long run. Additionally, it may take some time to adopt changes in operations in response to charter competition and those changes could take some time to realize efficiency gains” (p. 69). Moreover, Buerger and Bifulco (2019) suggested that as the share of charter school enrollment increases over time, efficiency is also likely to increase. Sullins and Miron (2005) argued that some charter schools struggled with financial difficulties and lack of infrastructure when starting. In some

cases, the charter school decided to grow at a fast pace by establishing credit accounts to procure the necessary infrastructure and hire necessary human resources. Some charter schools have chosen to grow gradually, thus running the risk of affecting the quality of services delivered to learners in the school due to inadequate facilities, teachers, and other support activities (Sullins & Miron, 2005). While growing at a fast rate may procure student funding and other growth-related school improvements, growing too quickly may exhaust resources, while growing too slowly has meant that some charter schools have had to increase recruitment efforts to avoid underutilization of facilities, which came at an expense to the charter school (Sullins & Miron, 2005). Ultimately, Sullins and Miron (2005) recommended that a balance between the facilities and enrollment was needed to avoid extreme underutilization or to strain the available resources.

Approaching stakeholders and establishing partnerships has also been a challenge for charter schools. Many potential partners have been found to be skeptical to partner with a new charter school, and therefore, selling the charter school idea and vision to potential stakeholders has been challenging (Sullins & Miron, 2005). These partnerships have often included ones with community members, state education agencies, and other educational stakeholders, which has produced an overwhelming challenge of listening to and taking recommendations from a large and diverse group of individuals and groups, possibly affecting the operation and organization of the charter school (Sullins & Miron, 2005).

Lastly, Sullins and Miron (2005) cited accountability as a significant challenge and a dilemma that many charter schools have faced. Sullins and Miron (2005)

categorized accountability in charter schools into three broad categories: Performance, regulatory, and market accountability. The charter school must be accountable to financiers by ensuring that procurement, among other expenditure aspects, is done within the charter provisions. The charter school must also produce qualified graduates to the employment market. Further, a charter school must be accountable to parents by ensuring that services promised to learners and parents are delivered through maintaining quality and conformance to provisions of quality as envisioned in the charter.

Moreover, Sullins and Miron (2005) argued that politics and management feuds have been principal challenges in establishing and running charter schools, affecting the accountability of charter schools and their ability to support student success. Ladd and Singleton (2018) suggested that if a charter closes for various reasons, such as financial mismanagement or academic failure, it creates uncertainty for the families in the community and the district as a whole. This uncertainty makes it difficult for the district to be able to plan and make efficient use of their current resources as well as plan accordingly within their respective budget, to guarantee that all will be served should the charter shut down.

### **State of Texas Context**

Texas played a pivotal role in the charter movement by welcoming the establishment of charter schools in 1995. In 1995, the 74th Texas Legislature authorized establishment of open-enrollment charter schools in the state (TCSA, 2019). According to the TEA (2018), in the 2017-18 school year, there were 707 open-enrollment charter school campuses that served 296,323 students. Students enrolled in open-enrollment charter schools accounted for 5.5% of the total Texas public school population and across

the five largest racial and ethnic groups in 2017-18, with Hispanic students accounting for the largest percentage of total enrollment in open-enrollment charter schools (59.7%). Hispanic students were followed by African American (17.8%), White (15.8%), Asian (4.5%), and multiracial (1.9%) students. In 2013, the 83rd Texas Legislature amended the statute to: (a) transfer authority to grant charters from the State Board of Education (SBOE) to the commissioner of education; (b) give the SBOE authority to veto charters the commissioner proposes to grant; and (c) provide for a graduated increase in the cap on the number of open-enrollment charters available for award, from 225 beginning September 1, 2014, to 305 beginning September 1, 2019 (TEC, 2013).

There are currently four types of Texas charter schools, with three in practice as of 2019: Home rule school district charter schools (not in practice), campus or campus program charter schools, open-enrollment charter schools, and college or university charter schools (Gronberg et al., 2012). According to TEC (2001), home rule school district charters in Texas' charter school law includes provisions that permit an entire school district to convert to charter school status and create a home-rule school district charter. Home-rule proposals may be adopted if approved by a majority vote in an election in which at least 25% of a school district's registered voters participate (TEC, 1995). There are none in practice, current as of 2019. According to TEC (1995), campus or campus program charter schools allow Texas traditional districts to operate individual charter schools through a process of conversion, or by creating entirely new schools. In order for a traditional district school to convert to campus charter school status, a majority of the school's teachers and the parents of a majority of students attending the school must sign a petition requesting conversion (TEC, 1995).

The most abundant type of charter school operated in Texas is that of open-enrollment charter schools, in which TEC (1995) described as entirely new public schools created by eligible entities, such as nonprofit organizations, universities or local government groups. Because open-enrollment charter schools have no taxable base, they do not receive local property tax revenues and are more reliant on state funding sources. The charter school's governing board retains legal responsibility for the management, operation and accountability of the school. The last type of charter is that of college or university charter schools in which, according to TEC (2009), are largely subject to the regulatory provisions as open-enrollment charters but must be supervised by a faculty with expertise in educational matters. The school's financial operations must be facilitated by the college or university business office. According to TEA (2015), "A charter operator is the entity that has been awarded a contract (called a charter holder) with the state to organize and run a charter. Legally, this charter functions very much like a school district. A charter operator is either a non-profit corporation, a higher education institution or a governmental entity" (para. 1). This means that in order to apply for a charter through TEA, an entity must "gain 501(c)(3) status through the IRS. Under the nonprofit 501(c)(3), and then the charter is eligible for tax exemption" (TEA, 2015, para. 1).

To promote the growth of charter schools in Texas, Penning and Slate (2011) explained, "...in 1997, the Texas Legislature provided for an additional 100 open-enrollment charter schools as well as an unlimited number of 75 percent rule charter schools, which serve students 'at risk' of failure or dropping out of school" (p. 2). This meant 75% of the total enrollment had to be 75% or higher at risk for dropping out. As a direct result of this percentage—and the provision that the state placed on the unlimited

number of specialized charters allowed—the number of charters in Texas grew immensely (Penning & Slate, 2011). This created a growing concern in the effectiveness and quality of charter schools, especially in a politically charged state as Texas (Swaby, 2019). Cowen, Fleming, and Gofen (2008) stated, “In 2001, an amendment was passed eliminating the 75% rule hence enabling 75% rule schools’ addition to, the number of open-enrollment charter schools, hence raising the total cap to 215 for charters approved by the state” (p. 133). This cap placed a more stringent process in place to establish a charter school in Texas. This amendment eased some of the claims that there were zero standards or regulations in place to start a charter school in Texas (Cowen et al., 2008).

Over time, Texas charter school enrollment has grown to over 310,000 students enrolled in 1,740 schools, owed to the fact that these schools have more freedom from regulations and are more open to innovative approaches (National Alliance for Public Schools, 2018). The beginning of charter schools in Texas gave way to a controversial period in the development and structure of the charter system in Texas. The National Alliance for Public Charter School Movement started in 1991, and the management of charter schools has remained consistent in many contexts since 1991 (Estes, 2003), yet charter schools’ management in Texas occurs in different manners. Some schools have been freestanding, while others have been managed under the charter management organizations. According to Gulosino and Miron (2017), some charter schools have operated under education management organizations (EMOs).

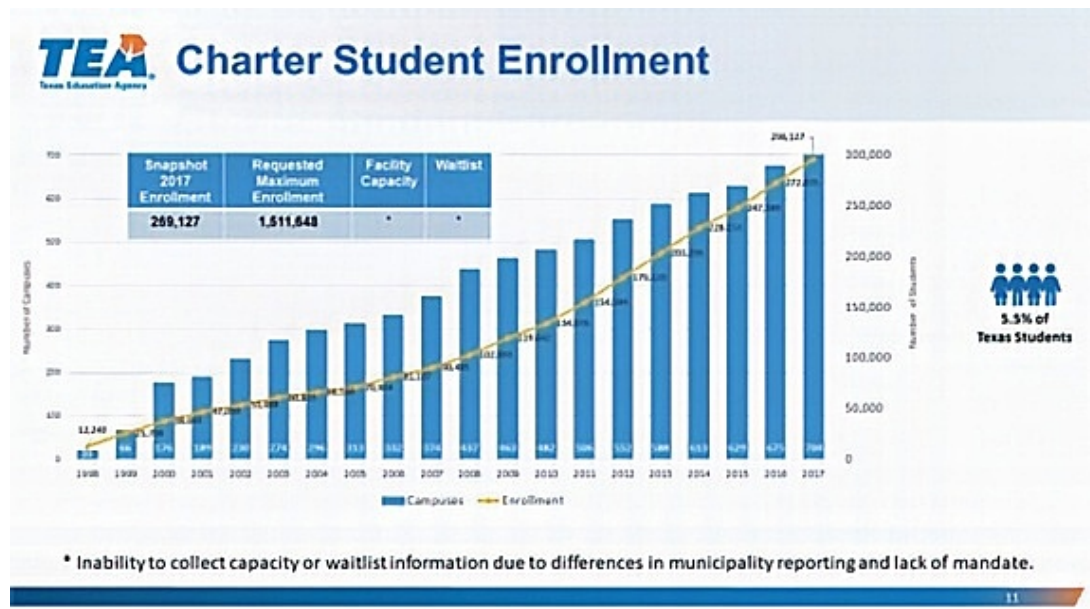


Figure 2. Historical charter student enrollment in Texas

EMOs are firms to which operations and management of public schools are contracted. The main idea of privatizing the schools is to enhance the competitive spirit and entrepreneurialism in public education. Charter management for charter schools also contracts some services for charter schools, such as buses for transport, janitorial services, school lunches, and support services for students with special needs to ensure quality and efficiency (Gulosino & Miron, 2017). TEC (2017c) provided five purposes for the creation of public charter schools:

1. Student learning improvement,
2. Innovation to increase student learning opportunities within the public system,
3. Creation of professionalism to attract professional new teachers within the system,
4. Establishment of a new form of accountability for public schools, and
5. Encourage different and innovative learning methods (Section 12.001).

According to the TEA (2017), traditional Texas public schools and public charter

schools have been accountable for their finances as well as educational performance in various ways. For example, the TEA has required schools to offer information on students' performance annually, while other information contained in TEA's report includes information on programs, staff, as well as demographics for each public and school. These reports have held the schools responsible by ensuring that they meet standards in these areas. Regarding financial accountability, the TEA requires schools to publish an annual report: *The School Report Card*. The report contains extensive financial information to show how the school utilizes the resources (TEA, 2017).

Charter schools in Texas are funded based on student daily attendance figures akin to traditional public schools. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools do not get funds from local tax revenue. Although some charter schools in the U.S.—including those in Texas—receive funds from state facilities funding. Figure 3 below displays the funding of charter schools and traditional public schools (ISD) from 2015 to 2016.

## Charter/ISD Comparison Total FSP Funding

2015-2016 TEA Final Summary of Finance Data

Students	Charters			ISDs			Difference
	Charters <sup>1</sup>	Total ADA	Avg. FSP Revenue per ADA <sup>2</sup>	ISDs	Total ADA	Avg. FSP Revenue per ADA <sup>2</sup>	Avg. Total Revenue per ADA
0-500	79	21,914	9,008	349	89,185	19,878	-10,870
500-1,000	40	28,849	8,945	193	140,225	13,459	-4,514
1,000-2,000	28	39,787	8,812	165	233,085	11,126	-2,314
2,000-6,000	10	33,865	8,977	167	572,383	10,369	-1,392
6,000-10,000	1	9,126	9,031	49	376,961	10,988	-1,956
10,000-15,000	2	24,338	9,113	30	373,421	9,818	-705
15,000-20,000	1	17,125	8,360	9	154,198	9,469	-1,109
20,000-30,000	2	51,748	8,852	21	490,368	9,723	-871
30,000+	-	-	-	41	2,265,697	9,822	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>226,752</b>	<b>8,889</b>	<b>1,024</b>	<b>4,695,524</b>	<b>10,325</b>	<b>-1,436</b>

1. Total number of charters represent the number of unique charter holders. There are 183 total charters in Texas.

2. Avg. FSP = Both local and state components of I&S revenue and M&O.

Acronyms:

ADA = Average Daily Attendance, FSP = Foundation School Program, ISD = Independent School District, I&S = Interest & Sinking, M&O = Maintenance & Operations

Figure 3. Comparison of funding between Texas charter and independent school



publics, 2015-2016 (TCSA, 2016a)

Figure 4 below displays the total ranges of charter school funding versus public independent school district funding:

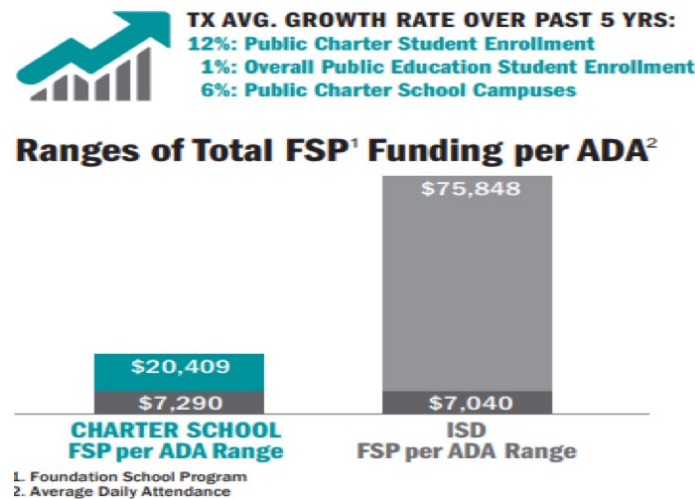


Figure 4. Ranges of Texas charter school funding compared to ISD funding (TCSA, 2018)

According to TCSA (2018), state funding followed students to whichever public school they attended. Districts received a sum of money from the state for each student enrolled, and if a student left a school district for any reason, including enrolling in a public charter school, the original school district no longer incurred the costs of educating that student, and state funding was reduced for the cost of that student. TCSA (2018) also explained that districts received the bulk of their funding from local property tax revenue, roughly 60%, and that local tax money did not follow students but remained with the local district regardless of where the student was enrolled. As of 2019, charter schools do not receive any local tax money.

Speaking to the potentially problematic nature of charter school funding Texas,

Strauss (2017) argued that California has hosted less than 17% of the total charter schools in the U.S, and the low number of charter schools in California may be attributed to low education funding. However, proponents of charter schools have claimed that charter schools provide guardians and parents an alternative to the poorly performing traditional public schools, while opposition to charter schools have argued that some charter schools are poorly run and take crucial financial resources away from traditional public schools, perpetuating the argument of charter school funding issues (Cremata & Raymond, 2014).

### **Student Enrollment in Texas Charter Schools**

Given the focus on Texas charter schools in this study, it is necessary to articulate how Texas charter schools have enrolled students in prior years compared to public schools. Table 1 compares three student populations in the 2014-2015 school year in Texas, namely a full set and a subset of Texas traditional public schools and charter schools as described in the CREO (2017) report above. It also displays the student profiles for the 659 charter schools, which took a reading and math assessment. Notably, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 724 charter schools opened in 2014-15. The difference stems from the fact that 65 charter schools did not have tested grades in 2014-2015 (CREO, 2017). The demographics data of traditional public school, feeders and charter schools was crucial in comprehending the composition of charter schools in comparison with traditional public schools.

Table 1

*Demographic assessment of students in feeders, charters, and TPS, (SY 2014-15) from (CREO, 2017)*

	<u>TPS</u>	<u>Feeders</u>	<u>Charters</u>
Number of Schools	8,089	4,967	659
Average Enrollment per School	607	783	364
Total Number of Students Enrolled	4,908,744	3,888,204	240,191
Students in Poverty	60%	60%	72%
English Language Learners	17%	18%	20%
Special Education Students	9%	9%	7%
White Students	30%	27%	17%
African-American Students	12%	13%	21%
Hispanic Students	51%	53%	60%
Native American Students	0%	0%	1%
Asian/Pacific Islander Students	4%	4%	6%
Multi-Racial Students	2%	2%	3%

Charter schools have served students with special needs. Charter schools can choose their location, essentially choosing their demographics. Further, charter schools offer different academic programs and alternate school models. As a result, Ki Charter Academy was classified as an alternative school model to serve the unique needs of students and compete with public schools to increase student success. According to the *Charter School Performance in Texas* report (TEA, 2015):

During the 1995-1996 school year, Texas implemented a set of alternative performance measures for campuses serving at-risk students. Alternative Education Campuses (AEC) have the option of being evaluated under Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) provisions in Texas. As of the 2014-2015 school year, 394 schools were registered for evaluation under the 2015 AEA provisions. There are two ways in which a school can be identified as a pre-registered AEA campus. Within the criteria listed below, a campus can either meet criteria one and two or meet criteria three. (p. 58)

Below are the criteria outlined in the report:

1. 75% of the on-campus population meets at least one of the “at-risk of dropping out of school” criteria; and
2. 50% of the student population was enrolled in grades 6-12; or
3. A Dropout Recovery School (DRS) was an AEC if at least 50 percent of the student population was 17 years of age or older. (TEA, 2015, p. 75-77)

Although prior studies have suggested charter schools have excelled in bolstering students’ math and reading ability compared to public schools (CREO, 2017), less than 1% (1,000 students) in the CREO (2017) report was represented by alternative education campus students. This was exceptionally disproportional, as in recent years, there have been few charter schools similar to Ki Charter Academy’s service of high-risk and special needs students.

### **Residential Facility Charter Schools in Texas**

Texas allows for the establishment of charters that serve residential facilities. According to the definition given by TEA (2019), a residential facility is a facility that is entrusted with 24-hour duty of care and oversight of students not older than 22 years of age who reside at institutional, residential facilities. According to TEA (2019), residential facilities in Texas target exceptional learners who require treatment for various needs, incarceration, or foster custody and care, among other educational reasons. However, TEA clarified that residential facilities under the TEA do not include the fosters care homes registered by the family and protective Services department (TEA, 2019). The difference between the two is that a residential facility charter school can offer educational-oriented services, but a residential home can offer custodian family and

protective services.

According to the TCSA (2013), during the 83rd legislature, the Senate passed House Bill 306, which focused on charter schools that serve residential treatment facilities. The bill was drafted by Senator Joan Huffman and Representative Ralph Sheffield to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of residential treatment facilities in achieving the rising needs of special learning populace. The bill was a milestone in the evolution of charters that serve residential facilities in Texas. Huffman and Sheffield were motivated by the challenge of teaching learners with extreme emotions and behavior, disabilities, and substance abuse challenges, thus making it hard to evaluate the contributions of the residential facilities in the education sector. Residential treatment facilities offer highly personalized educational services and emotional support to learners who require unique learning approaches (TCSA, 2013).

Students with intellectual disabilities and psychological disorders, such as social anxiety disorders, mood disorders, autism, and depression, among others, have challenging educational needs. A TCSA report narrated the journey and evolution of charter schools in Texas and examined residential treatment centers in Texas. According to TCSA (2016), parents often chose a charter school based on the specific need of their child/children. For instance, a student with science and mathematics-oriented needs would consider a school that has a record in science and mathematics proficiency. A student with a disability would also fit in residential facilities offer learning services customized to that specific need. TCSA (2016) discussed that charter schools operating at residential treatment facilities are the most unique institutions for the different categories of students.

The TCSA (2016) report on charter school journeys referenced Ki Charter Academy, the focus of this study, as an exceptional case for diversified models of innovation in charter schools where students with various special needs are given need-based customized education services (TCSA, 2016). The report hailed Ki Charter Academy as having served the largest residential facility in Texas, while offering student-centered education. TCSA (2016) also reasoned that Ki Charter Academy was the first to provide residential facility learners with science, technology, engineering, and math program. The report revealed that Ki Charter Academy sought the services of retired and veteran personnel to instruct learners, considering that this category of workers has experience in working with diverse people and populations (TCSA, 2016).

In a commentary on Ki Charter Academy, the report recommended that it is important that TEA promote the notion of choice in education programs, primarily for students who require residential treatment facilities (TCSA, 2016). In a manual guide on monitoring residential facility charter schools, TEA (2012) asserted that residential treatment facilities have become more popular, as parents in traditional charter schools have realized that the special needs of their students or children can be attended to better in residential treatment charter schools. Ausbrooks et al. (2005) noted that charters serving residential treatment facilities have been necessary for providing holistic education services to all types of students in Texas, echoing what the TCSA remarked about Ki Charter Academy.

Similarly, the Supreme Court of Texas Children's Commission (2018) noted that schools that serve residential facilities in Texas have provided much-needed learning to students who do not get the optimal utility from public schools. Findings from Parris et

al. (2014) and Day et al. (2015) focused on residential treatment facility interventional strategies for at-risk youth and traumatized girls emphasized the need for schools to serve residential treatment facilities in Texas. Exemplifying the need and demand for residential treatment facilities, Lee and Barth (2009) sampled 67 residential facilities in Texas to examine the rising interest in residential treatment facilities trend and found that the awaiting applications doubled the number of students already enrolled in residential treatment facilities, rendering residential treatment facilities more important than ever.

### **Senate Bill 1882 (SB 1882)**

As collaboration is vital to the education system, the Texas state government has noted a divide and lack of collaboration between Texas public schools and charter schools in prior legislation. As a result, Senate Bill 1882 was introduced in 2017 during the Texas legislative session 85(R) as a solution to the much-needed collaboration problem between public schools and charter schools in Texas (TCSA, 2018).

SB 1882 details that a poorly performing school rated by the TEA can redeem itself and avoid unnecessary closures or sanctions through partnerships with an excelling charter school. SB 1882 encourages partnerships and financial accountability between public and charter schools. The bill streamlined the charter approval process to encourage more charter schools to partner with public schools, simultaneously increasing student choice (TCSA, 2018). The partnerships include resource sharing, such as facilities. The partnership envisioned by SB 1882 is a symbiotic relationship where a charter school and public give up something in return for another (TEA, 2018b). For instance, public schools can share facilities or campuses, and as a result, the performance of public schools has been improved through a collaborative effort with charter schools. However, the

prerequisites for this partnership demand that the charter school must have excellent accountability and performance rating for more than three consecutive years (TEA, 2018b).

SB 1882 provides that charter schools should receive the marginal funding per student enrolled in the charter school from the public school. Notably, the bill allows the said partnership to be implemented between open-enrollment charter schools and public schools. Such partnerships are beneficial in improving the performance of public schools. In many ways, SB 1882 was a milestone in creating uniformity and cooperation in the Texas education system by ensuring that every Texas student receives quality educational services, whether at a public school, a charter school, or a public-charter cooperative institution.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review has outlined the research focused on charter schools and charter schools in Texas, thus serving as a foundation to guide my study. Through much research and review, charter schools can be more malleable in their vision and mission, compared to traditional public schools. This malleability may allow charter schools to be innovative in practice, potentially increasing student success. However, the study at hand will detail how Ki Charter Academy exemplified some of the reviewed literature, while also detailing how Ki Charter Academy earned its charter and how important institutional stakeholders contributed to the charter establishment process.



### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **Qualitative Research Design**

A qualitative method is an orderly, subjective strategy utilized to depict situations and life experiences to make them meaningful in research (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). According to Glaser and Strauss (2017), qualitative research focuses on people as a social inquiry into how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences. Qualitative researchers often employ a person-centered, humanistic, and holistic perspective to comprehend human lived experiences. The rationale for adopting a qualitative strategy in this study was to understand the perspectives of the founders and the board members of Ki Charter Academy through humanistic and holistic methods. Moreover, I wanted to understand the process of establishing the charter school and the people's roles within the school, as well as the role of such schools in promoting quality education for students with special needs. As such, this study used a qualitative method to investigate and answer the following research questions:

1. What was the process of establishing Ki Charter Academy, a specialized charter school in Central Texas?
2. What roles did stakeholders play in the establishment of the charter school?
3. What lessons can be learned from the successes and challenges of establishing Ki Charter Academy to inform future specialized charter schools?

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The study employed Vygotsky's social constructivism framework developed in 1896 (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory emerged as an attempt to make sense of the social world of learning and to connect people to their experiences with one another. The theory

underscores the importance of the socio-cultural context and the collaborative nature of learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), cognitive functions originate from social interaction, thereby emphasizing the critical need to address students with mental, education, and physical disabilities, enabling them to achieve their educational goals.

Constructivism advocates for sharing people's, experiences, challenges and successes through interactions and gaining a common-sense knowledge that permeates understanding of current relations (O'Connor, 2017). Within constructivism, as the researcher, I identified voices and perspectives that have collaborated in establishing Ki Charter Academy. I did not construct and experience this endeavor alone. Therefore, I interacted with Ki Charter Academy founders and school board members to understand how they planned to learn about the process they completed to establish the charter school, embracing constructivism in both practice and research.

This study's insight and critical findings leaned upon my participants' views, as their thoughts and experiences were negotiated socially and through interpersonal encounters that fostered the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. According to Creswell (2003), our meaning was formed through collaboration with others and not individuals, also emphasizing the social constructivist paradigm (Vygotsky, 1978) I have adopted for this study. The social dialogue and collaboration of founders and board members were crucial when Ki Charter Academy was conceptualized, as well as the application process. In this regard, Brophy (2002) urged that learning involves shared negotiations of understanding between two or more participants who share the same goals: This endeavor was reflective in practice and shared experiences were utilized throughout the Ki Charter Academy establishment process.

Constructivism theory in pedagogy recommends that teachers ought to engage their students in practicing the theory (Zydney, Hai-Jew, Renninger & List, 2012). The theory propagated that students should utilize their knowledge as a foundational base to learn new concepts and explore new subjects. The tenets of this theory extend beyond collaboration in classroom pedagogy to incorporate the sharing of experiences that improve learning for students with special mental, physical, and educational needs: This is another reason why constructivism was appropriate for the study at hand, as one of the primary goals of Ki Charter Academy is to serve these students better than other schools have in the past. Therefore, teacher and stakeholders' collaboration in supporting these students was essential. The teaching perspectives of this theory support that teachers should allow their students to engage with theory-learning abilities in processing, interpreting, and assimilation knowledge in class (Zydney et al., 2012). Therefore, the theory advocates for a flexible, collaborative model of teaching and learning that guided Ki Charter Academy, and subsequently, this study.

### **Descriptive Case Study Design**

This study utilized a descriptive case study design to explore the establishment of one charter school, specifically Ki Charter Academy in San Marcos, Texas. Although few studies employ a single case design, Yin (1994) noted rarer or more critical cases have often been articulated through a single case design. The charter school in this study, Ki Charter Academy, completed the state of Texas application process and was awarded their respective charter. The application of an already-awarded charter school was crucial in this study, since I had acquired prior knowledge of outcomes, with the multiple-case inquiry focusing on how and why the exemplary outcomes might have occurred the way

they did (Yin, 2003). The reason I chose the case study design was that it enabled me to acquire authentic information from the management on the unique features that Ki Charter Academy had enabling it to qualify for approval, while also satisfying Yin's (2003) criteria that single case studies focus on rarer or more critical cases.

The case study design also allowed me to explore a real-life, bounded system over time, utilizing multiple sources of information and in-depth data collection procedures which included observations and in-depth interviews. These strategies assisted me in acquiring a detailed description of the broad landscape of the charter climate, again speaking to Yin's (2003) notion of a rare or critical case that may require a single case study research design. These procedures enabled me to provide a thorough description of the case being studied, also supported by prior literature (Creswell, 2013).

Additionally, this case study method helped me to thoroughly describe the complex phenomena of establishing a specialized charter school, as such recent events, important issues, or programs related to the process. These strategies helped unearth a new and deeper understanding of the Ki Charter Academy application process from which others can learn and support diverse students. I know that the school was awarded the charter, but the process, barriers, and landscape was what I researched and can impact the charter school community and its students. These domains are bounded within the case, as stated in the research questions. Furthermore, it was important to note that I was the main instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2003, 2013). This approach allowed greater latitude in answering the research questions, as I was always critically involved in the establishment of the case of this study: Ki Charter Academy.

### **Study Site**

The research examined Ki Charter Academy, located at Bert Brown Road in San Marcos, Texas. I, Jerry Lager, and Jeffreys (pseudonyms; will be addressed in a later section of the study) initiated the talks to establish the charter in 2013. We were later joined by Baker and Larry (also pseudonyms), leading to the eventual establishment of Ki Charter Academy in 2014. The board members that were involved from the start that participated in the study are Karen and Gregory (also pseudonyms). Ki Charter Academy has a maximum enrollment of 220 students, and Ki Charter's staff is comprised of 23 teachers, 14 instructional assistants, one superintendent, one principal, two associate principals, one special education director, two licensed specialists in school psychologists (LSSP), one annual review and dismissal (ARD) facilitator, one special education case manager, two registrars, one business director, one director of operations, and one accounts payable clerk. As of 2019, Ki Charter Academy has a student-to-teacher ratio of 5:1. Ki Charter Academy has a special education population of 60% and prides itself on every teacher being content- and special education-certified.

### **Data Sources**

I gathered data from different sources. A primary source for this research was the participants, including founders of the school and two board members. I chose the founders and board members because they were participants that were likely to have the necessary information about Ki Charter Academy's establishment, including the application process for its charter and many details regarding that process. Obtaining data from respondents with different experiences prevented information bias, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the information and subsequent analysis. As aforementioned, regarding positionality, I am the author of this study and an inside

researcher. All the founders shared equal roles in the process from conceptualization of the idea of Ki Charter Academy through awarding of the charter. I knew three of the four founders personally, while the other founder was recruited by a fellow founder. I worked with one founder as we conceptualized the idea of establishing a charter school.

I had a strong professional relationship with all participants and drew upon our shared experiences to tell the story of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. I firmly believed that the relationship and process enhanced trust in our relationships and this study. However, given our trust and history, they were reluctant to share their stories at times, given the personal nature of some of the information and our shared experiences.

The study employed two primary tools for data collection. The data collection procedure entailed both individual and focus group interviews at Ki Charter Academy with the four founders and two board members. The respondents were chosen through a purposive sampling strategy since the target population was small and I had access to critical leaders of the Ki Charter Academy establishment process (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). I also utilized secondary sources such as Ki Charter Academy's archived documents from files on campus or on the institution's website.

## **Interviews**

Seidman (2015) discussed the nature of interviews in research work and argued that the methodological design of the entire research study determines the design of a research instrument to be employed. Notably, the research design was a qualitative case study. Therefore, the research instruments adopted for this study used qualitative approaches in design and nature of questions posed to the participants. More specifically, face-to-face individual interview and focus group discussions were adopted in this study.

and were semi-structured in nature with open ended questions. Permani (2014) explained that semi-structured interviews use a series of structured and unstructured questions. While Adams (2015) viewed semi-structured qualitative instruments as conversational tools with open and closed questions, Blandford (2013) looked at semi-structured from the methodological and structural perspective and asserted that they have a noticeable structure in the questions.

I adopted a semi-structured instrument design because the research needed to access and probe for in-depth information on the phenomenon under scrutiny, a research strategy supported by prior studies (Keeffe, Buytaert, Mijic, Brozović, & Sinha, 2016). Moreover, Nguyen (2015) and McIntosh and Morse (2015) suggested that semi-structured interviews also allow for diversity and multiplicity in the data gathered on the phenomenon under study: This helped strengthen my study, as I knew that multiple participants may have similar feelings or thoughts toward Ki Charter Academy, but these participants also brought diverse thoughts and perspectives to the study that may contribute to the overall understanding of the charter application process.

As a result, I performed semi-structured individual interviews with six participants. The interviewees were three founding members and two board members of Ki Charter Academy, plus me, a founder. This allowed me to gather current and historical information about the establishment process of Ki Charter Academy. The main reason for choosing the founders is that they vividly went through the process, and I knew they could provide rich insight into the process. I coordinated with the administration to contact the founders and board members to plan for the interviews. I allowed the participants to dictate interview times, demonstrating that I was available at their

convenience, as suggested by Barret (2003) and Creswell (2003). I conducted interviews in closed rooms in the school to avoid interference. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour and were audio-recorded with permission from the participants. The audio recording allowed me to capture all the essential data, and I explained to participants the purpose of the study and alerted them that they could stop the interview at any time. Participants were not guided to answer questions and were free to ask for clarification to ensure flexibility and data credibility, as promoted by Lewis (2015). The questions used to guide the interview are attached in the Appendix Section of this study.

### **Focus Group Discussion**

I also formed a focus group consisting of all participants, as longitudinal research has suggested that facilitating focus groups is a strong qualitative practice to elicit collaborative, in-depth responses from participants (Doody, Slevin, & Taggart, 2013; Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018; Whitehead & Baldry, 2017). The basis for employing a focus group was to allow me to seek clarifications on unclear responses, yield diverse and detailed data, and enable all participants to discuss the phenomenon from various perspectives in a collaborative setting.

I held the focus group discussion after the individual interviews were completed, so that the participants could share ideas and collaborate regarding the roles, procedures, and challenges faced during the charter school's application and establishment processes. A focus group was ideal because it gathered data from respondents with everyday experiences or characteristics to elicit thoughts, ideas, and perceptions regarding a topic or issue connected to the area of study (Boddy, 2016). I asked the founders and school board members to provide their views on the complexity of establishing a charter school



in Texas. During the focus group, participants were encouraged to ask questions, thus producing more in-depth information compared to individual interviews. The focus group protocol is included in the Appendix Section of this study.

### **Secondary Data**

Johnston (2017) suggested using secondary data in any study to reinforce the primary data and avoid biased analysis. I obtained secondary data for this study from key application documents from the school, the school's website, and the TEA. Specifically, I reviewed Ki Charter Academy documents displaying the organizational structure over the last three years, the roles of the school, the school's corporate social responsibility leading statements, the school's core values, and operational standards.

### **Researcher's Journal**

I used a researcher's journal to take notes throughout the interview process, as well as the focus group. This allowed me not to rely on memory but on notes in my researcher's journal, increasing the accuracy and reliability of the data gathered. Keeping a researcher's journal also allowed me to self-reflect after each interview and communicate with participants throughout the process. I cross-referenced the data by analyzing the journal to explore whether anything from the interview or focus group was missing. My notes, memos, and sketches helped me work toward a general analytical strategy of my data collection conversations, which were later coded to clarify and articulate my findings (Yin, 2018).

### **The Study Participants**

As previously mentioned, there were six study participants, and I ensured that the participants had experience and considerable knowledge of education, specifically on

charter schools, to align my study participants with my primary research questions. All six participants spoke English, and five were men while one was a woman. The study participants previously worked in human resources and operations in the education sector, charter schools, the Texas Education Agency, and a board of management for a charter school. Although charter school professionals, all six participants had graduated from public institutions of higher learning. All participants had excellent educational qualifications and considerable years of experience in the teaching and education profession. Participants had also amassed a wealth of knowledge in running, managing, and teaching in charter schools and traditional public schools. Therefore, participants provided information from a professional and experienced perspective, considering that they had trained and worked in the education field. The demographics of the participants are summarized in the table below:

Table 2

*Demographics of the participants*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Ethnicity / Race</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Years of education experience</u>	<u>Education</u>
Jerry	White	Male	14	Masters
Baker	White	Male	8	Masters
Jeffreys	White	Male	6	Masters
Karen	White	Female	41	Doctorate
Larry	White	Male	13	Masters
Gregory	Hispanic	Male	42	Doctorate

The median years of experience for the participant was 13.5 years, while the mean was 20.6 years. Notably, all participants were involved in the initial establishment process of Ki Charter Academy from application through the launch of the school, rendering these participants excellent sources of data and insight to answer this study's

primary research questions.

### **Data Analysis**

Case studies are used to gain an understanding of the study topic by using an example to provide context for the research (Merriam, 1998). To organize and analyze the data, I employed an Excel spreadsheet to perform data analysis. Data included in the spreadsheet were participant pseudonyms, interview dates, the focus group date, and secondary documents, including archival data. I analyzed data and stored the data in the form of a spreadsheet for easy retrieval, as recommended by Yin (2018). The interview and focus group data were transcribed and scanned for back up purposes, while archival files were already in text format. I engaged with multiple sources with the rationale that provided more in-depth and contextual data (Yin, 2018). Using multiple sources, coupled with triangulation of data, increased the validity of the data and the strength of this study's findings (Yin, 2018).

I utilized open and axial source coding to code the data contained in the Excel spreadsheet, which involved categorizing, identifying, condensing, sorting, summarizing and grouping of data in the interviews and focus group discussion recordings and transcriptions (Creswell, 2003, 2013). The open and axial coding was informed by the grounded theory of qualitative social science research, and the grounded theory coding was descriptive in nature (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). I identified categories with identical attributes and grouped the data into subcategories that were later examined as themes and subthemes of the data analysis. Moreover, grounded theory was vital in identifying theoretical underpinnings from the data to foster a deeper comprehension of the process and dynamics of establishing a charter school in Texas.

The study examined numerous aspects of the establishment process of a charter school in Texas. Thus, there were many questions. Therefore, a grouping of the data in line with the grounded theory perspectives was essential in achieving an orderly and navigable data analysis, supported by research (Creswell, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Moreover, Gibbs (2007) reinforced this strategy by explaining that, “You need to try and formulate theoretical or analytical codes. The actual text was always an example of a more general phenomenon, and the code should indicate this more general idea” (p. 50). Gibbs (2007) also described the different types of coding in depth and employed open coding and “axial coding, where categories were refined, developed, and related or interconnected” (p. 50). After the first-cycle coding, I used second-cycle coding to condense and find the relationships between and among the codes (Creswell, 2013). This helped me to identify patterns in the data. Figure 5 below provides an illustrative example of the coding process using an Excel spreadsheet.

<p>: I was at my house one afternoon. Mr. [unintelligible] 00:00:19] and Mr. In the spring of 2013, Jerry Lager and I got together, we were working with a charter school that specialized with residential up and asked if they could come by and facilities and we really thought talk to me and ask that we could bring some great me if I wanted to help programming and create a charter ourselves. It was at the co-founder level.</p>		<p>another charter school and he asked if he could send my name on to some fellow educators who were working on a charter and I said sure. He told me a little bit what it was about before I said sure. Then I got a call from one of the guys and he came down to meet me in San Antonio through St. Marcus and kind of missed that first call, but then, then after that, I came up here for some of the initial meetings and I met everybody. I could see that there was a definite need, having worked with the agency for many years in school improvement and just general education all the way across. I continued, met with them, they asked me to represent them, talk to the state board. I did that and also I would check prior to that I would check different stages of the charter</p>	<p>Okay, once it was established I served on the board and was a regular board member and then I think my last year or some point in there, some people had left the board and I was voted in as vice president by the remaining members. Prior to that, I don't know if you want to know something I was part of the advisory board of the military and in many different places, but [crosstalk] committee that was top line and so we were approached by you, but I'll talk about myself individually that you were looking into this opportunity and you've met with us and gave the HR; promotions and counseling, or low down and I agreed to serve on your advisory committee because I remember, you had different groups of other friends that were educators and me has been the legal part of it. The non-educators doing the work that the application called for.</p>	<p>My experiences with Key Charter are going to be a little different than, I guess, a typical employee because I was brought on board a little bit early in the formation of the Charter school. I look at it from-- I work in operations in HR, so that, I don't know if you want to know something operations for me is easy. I did it in the military and in many different places, but I've ever truly worked in all phases of HR; recruiting and retention, have always been pretty easy, but the challenge for aspects of the laws and employee regulations and relations and things like that.</p>
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Figure 5. Excel data analysis image

I also delved deeper and used what Gibbs (2007) described as “Selective coding, where the ‘core category,’ or central category that ties all other categories in theory together into a story, was identified and related to other categories” (p. 50). This allowed me to develop a better analysis of the existing data and cross-reference my triangulation

of data sources by reflecting and identifying themes from the data. Since I used a timeline of events in my study to outline the events that proceeded the establishment of Ki Charter Academy, I analyzed the timeline of the case study and asked several questions in this regard (Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003), this time-series analysis can help generate a deeper and more insightful analysis compared to general time-series approaches. The images below as show sections of the transcriptions mentioned above. Ultimately, through various coding strategies and triangulation, I was able to analyze the data in this study to answer the primary research questions.

### **Triangulation of the Data**

According to Mertens and Hesse-Biber (2012), proponents of triangulation in social science research argued that triangulation enhances the authenticity of the results obtained through the study. In a coinciding perspective, Turner and Turner (2008) justified the significance of triangulation in research, suggesting that triangulation offers an alternative viewpoint of challenging, validating, and enriching the findings. In a comprehensive discourse on triangulation, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) defined triangulation as an endeavor that attempts to study a topic or issue of research interest from two or more stances, justifying the triangulation. According to Patton (1999) and Denzin (1978), triangulation in social sciences includes four categories: researchers, data, methodology, and theory. As a result, the subsections below explain the various methods of triangulation practiced in this study.

### **Method and Data Source**

Olsen (2004) described methodological triangulation as the application of more than one method of data gathering in a single study. This study used interviews, a focus

group discussions, secondary archival data, and a researcher's journal as sources of data. I triangulated the approaches of data collection using three methods. First, I interviewed the participants on a range of open-ended and closed questions. Later, I held a group discussion with the participants where I was the lead moderator in the discussion. In addition to the similar questions in the interviews done earlier on the participants, I asked more probing questions on other aspects of the establishment process of Ki Charter Academy. Finally, I analyzed documents focused on the establishment process of the charter school to align the interview and focus group data with other institutional information, enriching the data collection and analysis of this study.

Moreover, employing interviews and a focus group discussion helped evaluate the reliability and consistency of the data collected. Fielding (2012) advocated the use of methodological triangulation in qualitative research, arguing that combining questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussion among other methods increased the verifiability of the data collected. Notably, I managed to verify the responses obtained through the interviews by comparing them with the responses of the same participants in the group discussions. For instance, I compared the responses to challenges encountered during the application and founding of Ki Charter Academy. Comparing the responses helped in identifying valid responses, invalid responses, as well as unreliable responses, allowing me to develop themes from triangulated data while maintain accuracy and validity.

A wealth of prior research suggests that Angen (2000) that a single source of data is insufficient in social science research, especially those of a qualitative nature, arguing that combining several sources fosters a deeper comprehension of the topic under study

(Angen, 2000; Breitmayer, Ayres, & Knafl, 1993; Heale & Forbes, 2013). Moon (2019) justified the use of data triangulation in research in their coinciding argument that triangulating data helps in reducing data bias, noting errors and enhancing verifiability of the data collected.

I also collected secondary data from published sources, such as journal articles and books and primary data from participants to compare the findings reviewed in the literature section with the data collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Comparing the findings of the sources reviewed in the literature helped me to identify contradictions, confirm findings, and build upon prior findings from previous studies, suggested by prior research (Fielding, 2012).

### **Credibility, Validity, Reliability, and Transferability of Data**

I employed several strategies to enhance credibility, reliability, validity, and transferability of the data collected in this study. First, since I was a participant-researcher in the study, I was keen on verifying the descriptions given by the other founders and board member to ascertain whether their account of the events and arguments reflected what I believe to have happened in the process. I had extensive knowledge regarding charter schools and the application process, and therefore, I managed to analyze the reliability of the data given by the participants through vetting its truth value and general honesty in the responses. Also, the study was undertaken from the perspective of the founders of the school. Therefore, the data I obtained reflected the ideal experience, thereby leading to valid and reliable information about the research objectives.

Moreover, I also employed peer debriefing to enhance the credibility of the study.

I used peer debriefing to increase credibility and reliability of data because it helped me identify vague and erroneous explanations, over emphasized and underemphasized areas, and prejudiced assumptions of the participants regarding the process of establishing a charter school in Texas. Further, I focused on rich description to convey respective participants and what I learned about the study. I utilized member checking frequently and summarized what was stated, normally asking if there were any additions or clarifications to be addressed. I confirmed that my notes accurately represented the participants' views. Besides, the adoption of semi-structured questions fostered the quality of the data gathered. Regarding this, I ensured that the data gathered met the content, face, convergent, and criterion validity threshold through strict adherence to the study inclusion and exclusion criteria scope. Through this attention to detail and protocol, I met all the requirements for the study and thoroughly reviewed literature.

From Belgrave and Seide's (2018) suggestion, I performed reflexivity throughout the research process, which is a continuous procedure where I reflected on my preconceived values as well as those of the participants. For example, I reflected on how the data gathered was affected by the perceptions of the participants on me. I adopted a self-critical stance where I was attentive to the respondents and whether there was an issue that could negatively impact the reliability, credibility, and validity of the study. Practicing reflexivity helped me comprehend potentially problematic issues and the appropriate steps to remedy the issue. Also, in the context of the proposed study, I noted my preconceptions and assumptions about the study in my researcher's journal. Such information helped me increase objectivity and prevent researcher bias, improving the clarity and strength of this study's findings.



## **Ethical Considerations**

I obtained permission to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) after the university approval of the study to begin data collection. I produced informed consent documents for my participants to sign, and prior to interviewing, I informed them that data and any documents analyzed were intended to be used in this study alone (see Appendix Section for informed consent documents). I used pseudonyms for all participants to protect their identity. I strictly observed the principle of beneficence to assess the potential risks and their mitigation strategies. I ensured that all the participants were not exposed to any form of risk. The study excluded any physical harm. I avoided any question that could produce emotional harm or discomfort when probing as recommended by Walby and Luscombe (2017). Additionally, I informed the participants that they were at liberty to withdraw from the study or choose not to answer questions.

Further, I assured the participants that any information divulged during the study would not be used against them. Therefore, I utilized the audio recordings of interviews and meetings strictly for the educational purposes of this study. I explained to the participants that the recording would be destroyed following the study approval. Moreover, I maintained the principle of human dignity by ensuring my participants had the right to self-determination and full disclosure. Regarding the right to self-determination, no participant was forced to participate in the study. In other words, prospective respondents had the right to choose whether to engage in the research without any penalty, as recommended by Walton (2016).

Furthermore, I offered no material prior to encourage participation. The purpose of the research was clearly explained, and I obtained written and verbal consent. Full

disclosure implied that participants were informed about the nature of the study and were given the right to decline participation. I shared the purpose of the study, the form of the interviews, and the data collection processes with the participants, and the participants voluntarily accepted through a signed form of consent for volunteer participation. In line with the above ethical provision, I explained my intention to publicize the study for educational purposes and ensured that the participants consented to the proposed publication.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

#### **Geographical Delimitations**

The study was limited to Texas only. A research study report conducted and published by National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2018) showed that the growth rate of charter schools was increasing exponentially across the U.S., with Texas being ranked second in the number of charter schools opened in 2017 and 2018 and fourth in the highest number of charter school closures. While this prior study's findings were useful in guiding potential leadership teams seeking a start a charter school in Texas, other applicants from other schools could also examine the findings of those studies to gain insight into state-specific details regarding starting a charter school in another state. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2018) reasoned that New York, California, Florida, Ohio, and Arizona had also witnessed a high number of newly opened charter schools in recent years, suggesting that this study could contribute to the multi-state extant body of literature, even though this study is specific to Texas.

However, prospective charter school applicants and leaders cannot solely rely on this study's findings as guidance in the charter application process, considering the

education guidelines and provision for charter schools in Texas may vary in other states, and potentially, other countries. Therefore, although concentrating on Texas provides the much-needed objectivity and focus in the study, the geographical scope of Texas limited the findings, especially as the study was conducted in San Marcos, Texas (Central Texas), and the state of Texas is vast and diverse. Although the geographical scope reduces the generalizability of this study's findings, this study does represent one of the only in-depth analyses of the charter school application and establishment process, making a unique contribution to the literature.

### **Instrument and Design Related Limitations**

The use of interview and focus group discussion for this study included its fair share of limitations. The use of face-to-face interviews for this study limited the sample size, as it was unfeasible to conduct such in-depth interviews with large numbers of people. In this case, I managed to interview only five participants for this study. However, these participants were critical stakeholders in the application and establishment process of Ki Charter Academy, rendering my decision to conduct face-to-face interviews relatively minor in terms of limitations.

### **Participant Related Limitations**

Undertaking this educational research will lead to important advantages in solving the complex and comprehensive charter application processes not only in Texas but the entire United States. However, like any other study, this research was limited in several ways. Regarding Hawthorne effects, Walby and Larson (2012) explained there was a possibility that interviews may trigger changing the behaviors of a researchers' participants, meaning that people often alter their behaviors because of their awareness

that they are being watched. Since my participants held the assumption that I would measure their outcomes, they may have exerted more or less effort in the conversation than is their usual. This was not wrong; however, some of the information provided was unnecessary or redundant for my research purposes. As a result, I had to be very observant during the data analysis process to disregard any information that was irrelevant to this study's primary research questions and purpose.

Participants also provided some inconsistent, and thus unreliable, answers to the questions they were posed. Some answers were invalid because the participants gave explanations with no close relation to the questioned asked: Perhaps this phenomenon was owed to my close professional relationships with the participants, and they felt they could speak freely about whatever topic they chose. By their nature, qualitative interviews provide room for participants to express themselves, and this can lead to unnecessary information and unreliable responses.

Moreover, the responses given by the participants may be inconsistent when compared to other corroborating data. For instance, when asked about the timeline, one participant claimed that the application process was from February to January, a period of eleven months. However, other participants responded in ranges from eighteen months to three years. Additionally, when asked about the timeline of the application process, one participant provided self-contradictory responses. In this case, contradictory and ambiguous responses were clarified through triangulation. In all, these limitations of the study are largely owed to the human nature of qualitative research, as human beings are imperfect, and thus, may disclose information in contradictory, ambiguous, and imperfect ways.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the research methodology under various subsections. The research design was established to ensure accurate answers to research questions. I collected data using a descriptive case study approach through interviews and focus groups, as well as from secondary data sources. I followed moral standards by observing human dignity and principles of beneficence, confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity. By completing this dissertation, I strongly believe this work will not only guide Texas educational leaders but educational leaders when serving high-needs students. This study will also serve as a blueprint for future charter school leaders to follow when applying for a charter and establishing the charter school itself. I am passionate about our education system and the need for high quality, affordable, charter school education, and I believe this study makes a unique and timely contribution to the literature.

## **IV. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reports on the findings based on the analysis of the fieldwork data obtained through the focus group discussion and interviews, as well as additional documents related to the Ki Charter School application and establishment processes. The section also provides this study's primary research questions to contextualize the findings appropriately. I attempted to link the current findings in the discussions with the findings of the reviewed literature, informing the future research of and practice in charter schools. The systematic analysis and discussion ensured that confusion and redundancy were avoided in data presentation, and this study's research questions probed into the challenges, experiences, and recommendations for future charter school leaders to apply in their own practice.

The open-ended nature of the questions ensured that participants addressed the questions sufficiently. What follows in this findings section includes a brief overview of charter school establishment process in Texas, idea incubation and garnering support for the process, details of the process, the impact of the process on participants and lessons learned, and challenges encountered in the process. Moreover, this section contains the main findings from the data analyzed, ideally informing future research and practice. A summary section concludes this chapter. The following are the main ideas that this research articulated after analysis of the interviews and focus group discussion:

1. The details of the establishment process of a charter school in Texas
2. Preparing the charter application
3. Duties and roles of stakeholders in the application process.

4. Challenges encountered in the process
5. Impact of the process on participants and lessons learned

### **Brief Overview of the Charter School Application Process**

Applying for a charter school in Texas was a long process including several critical stages of development. First, the process started with idea generation and identification of an existing educational or learning opportunity gap to justify the need for a charter school. Identifying this gap required the participants to perform preliminary research to gain deeper insight regarding the nature of the gap and possible solutions.

To begin the process, the other founders and I (the team) held a meeting to identify like-minded persons that matched the criteria for a fellow founder to assist in the process of applying for Ki Charter Academy's charter. The team then researched the process and gained a deeper comprehension of the required documents and the timeline for submitting the application for Ki Charter Academy. Understanding that the process would not be easy, as this was our collective first attempt at establishing a charter school, the team decided to solicit assistance from the Texas Charter Schools Association at a predetermined fee. The team reasoned that the fee was affordable, and thus, we began drafting the required documents to apply for the charter.

Once the team completed the application documents, the team submitted the documents to the Texas Education Agency for the first round of external evaluations to determine if the application surpassed the minimum cut score. The application passed the first stage of evaluation, and the Ki Charter Academy team was invited for face-to-face interviews with the Texas state board of education (SBOE). This stage entailed a further examination of the application and the founders in person, which allowed us to respond

to issues that needed further clarification regarding the proposed charter school. The process also required a proposal of the charter award by the Commissioner of Education, subject to scrutiny and appeal by the state board of education. The last stage allowed for an appeal period for the SBOE to approve or contest the charter award; however, Ki Charter Academy was awarded the charter after the lapse of the appeal period by the SBOE.

When considering why the charter was approved, the team believed the SBOE and Commissioner of Education approved the charter because the documents were in order and complete. Successfully applying for a charter, in this case, required that the mandatory application include a governance plan, education plan, operational plan, financial management plan, human resource, and capacity plan. Within the document and shared during the face-to-face meeting with the SBOE, the team also detailed its strategies for securing facilities and resources needed to launch and run Ki Charter Academy. The following sections delve into greater detail regarding each stage of the application process.

### **The Charter School Vision**

A clear vision is essential to the founding of any type of educational organization. To understand the foundational ideas that guided the charter school application process, I inquired about the influences of the Ki Charter Academy vision. Jeffreys explained that the experience working in other residential facilities guided the drafting of the charter school because Ki Charter Academy was envisioned to be unique and better than all charter schools in Texas. Larry also explained that the academy needed to be exceptional and serve the kids: That was the primary value guiding the vision. However, the



application for the charter was multifaceted, including selecting programs, installing board members, and adhering to best practices

### **Selection of Educational Programs**

The educational programming offered by an educational organization may dictate the types of students the school can recruit and the type of teachers the school needs to hire. Consequently, I asked participants to elaborate on how they chose the education programs to mirror the Ki Charter Academy vision. Jeffreys explained that two things were critical in selecting the educational program that would meet the expectations of the vision. First was numeracy and literacy in the Read180-learning environment, which is a program to enhance reading fluency through a blended learning intervention. Second, Karen further explained that most at-risk students—the students served by Ki Charter Academy—require interactive learning models:

You just talk to the majority of high at-risk students, just goes in one ear out the other over their head because they are not listening, but if you put it in front of them and they can touch it, or if they are busy, the brain is engaged.

As a result, Ki Charter Academy prioritized the service of students with special needs and reflected that service in the chosen educational programming. Prior work focused on special education and serving at-risk students has suggested that inclusivity is critical in a learning environment that has regular and exceptional needs students (Ainscow, 2004; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Kryszewska, 2017; Robinson, 2017). Additionally, Lewis and Norwich (2004) added that teaching learners with special needs requires innovative pedagogy approaches, approaches that Ki Charter Academy

desired to adopt for their students. One of the participants reasoned that other types of schools were limited in their educational offerings, and that Ki Charter Academy needed to stand out. Baker explained that the main reason the students were in the residential facility was that public schools had limitations, and parents felt that their students needed a change. Therefore, Baker argued that the school had to differentiate themselves from traditional public schools. The special needs of the students inspired the educational programs and curriculum development, elaborated upon by Baker:

If these kids were successful at a regular school; then they would not be here. We could not be like the average school. We could not teach like the average school, and we could not provide the kinds of programs that the average school did. We are looking at, to piggyback what you were saying, the data, the assessment tools that we chose and with that euphoria that look at that data and see where our teachers are successful with the kids.

The participants felt that the services available to the students in the traditional public schools were deficient, and the founders of Ki Charter Academy proposed to find solutions. As a result, the Ki Charter Academy aligned their curriculum and educational programming with their vision, primarily that the charter school needed to embrace versatile, innovative, and enthusiastic teachers with a high passion for kids and special needs education.

### **Selection of Board Members**

As board members are critical stakeholders for any educational institution, I asked the participants about the criteria used to select the board of management of Ki Charter

Academy. Gregory responded that there were no definitive criteria used to select the board members. In Larry's view, the ideal board member had a list of qualities to meet. For Larry, an outspoken, brave person with an impeccable character and significant level of experience in teaching or education management was qualified to be a Ki Charter Academy board member. According to Larry, the potential board member had to meet the character and professionalism threshold:

I think we all had several people in mind, and I think it came down to who would be the best board member who was experienced, who was a person of character and values, and who would not be afraid to speak their mind and set parameters.

Alternatively, Jeffreys explained that there were no definitive externally guided criteria for selecting the board members and elaborated that the best practices in the industry guided the selection. The determination of the founders to succeed and be the best charter school in Texas empowered the founders to seek the most qualified people in terms of education, experience, and professionalism. Baker shared in Jeffrey's viewpoint but emphasized the freedom of choice to install the board of management, arguing that there was no external guideline on how to select board members and their qualifications. Baker argued, "Charters are allotted and touted as having bad reputation for picking whomever they want to, and we got to pick whomever we wanted to," speaking to the freedom and autonomy enjoyed by the founders of the Ki Charter Academy.

Moreover, Gregory supported Baker's argument and added that the criteria used by the Ki Charter Academy leadership team was generally the standard criteria for installing board members laid out for traditional public schools. According to Gregory,

the critical element was setting parameters as soon as the board is formed to guide the board in their conduct, professionalism, and interaction. Notably, Karen agreed with Gregory's argument. In her justifications for supporting Gregory's argument, Karen reasoned that the selection process would be marred with politics, sideshows, and conflicts if the selection process could have an external influence. Speaking from her experience with the TEA, Karen spoke about the initial plans to install board members and disagreed with a lack of direction: "I would say no, not the way it is set right now because politics would enter in, and then it would become difficult to make those decisions."

Further, avoiding external influence allowed for ethical and best practices in the establishment and management of the charter school. No family member to any of the founding team was to be allowed to serve as a board member, avoiding cronyism and favoritism. The discussions of the participants on the selection process and criteria feature that the board of management in a charter school suggested that a qualified board member:

1. Must be formed within the prescribed location
2. Must have diverse experience
3. Must be capable and willing to observe best practices
4. A bold, opinionated, and professional ethics in the discharge of duties

Ultimately, this collaborative list of board member qualifications guided the selection and installation of the Ki Charter Academy board.

### **Best Charter School Practices and Implementation**

Given the diversity of charter schools around the country, there is no simple

textbook or list of best practices when advising charter school founders. As a result, I asked the participants to elaborate on what they regarded as best practices in the establishment of a charter school, as the matter was brought up by Baker in response to a previous question. Jeffreys explained that the traditional public school set the bar, and that the standards in public schools act as the minimum standards. As a result, Ki Charter Academy had to exceed the standards set the traditional public schools. Baker supported Jeffreys' argument of having a baseline for setting the standards. However, Baker differed on the baseline that should be used to develop specific standards, arguing that industry standards should be the base for formulating best practices for charter schools. In a digressing viewpoint, Gregory argued that the best practices for charter schools are determined by operating on a manageable scale, explaining charter schools must concentrate on their core competencies and grow the current campus before expanding to other satellite campuses.

The concept pinpointed by Gregory covered the need to manage enrollment of students to make sure that the charter school admitted a number that was within its capacity. Moreover, Baker asserted that charter schools should be data-driven and student-centered, and Karen added that a student-centered charter school should have a solid foundation, mission, vision, and objectives to achieve the learning outcomes for the unique populace of students. In the minds of the participants, these represented best practices for charter schools. However, implementation of best practices was a different story.

I asked the participants about how the best practices were implemented during the establishment process of Ki Charter Academy. The Ki Charter Academy proposal had to

be above standards, and the school set up had to incorporate best practices. The founding team ensured that the human resources recruitment team for the charter school were highly qualified in their various capacities of work. The performance of Ki Charter Academy was dependent on the quality of teachers hired, echoing prior research (Saiti, 2012). Moreover, the team collaborated and cooperated into developing the application packet of Ki Charter Academy. Jeffreys emphasized:

Getting the application packet and starting the conversation was the core reasons why charter schools are created, then the whole collaboration part process, getting all involved, Baker, everybody. That was my role, was to start the conversation and try and put best practices down on paper or under the application.

Likewise, Larry explained:

Initially, when we did start that collaboration and sitting in a classroom, we were working on the application together. We were bouncing thoughts back and forth and thinking about what we envisioned and then how that changed over time. It was an interesting process.

Here, these sentiments emphasize that the team went the extra mile to procure consultancy services from experts in charter school establishment and management such as the TCSA to assist in the application process. Such experts gave professional as well as opinionated advice on how to maintain quality by outlined best practices in charter schools. The founders also established partnerships with other stakeholders through lobbying for support of the school, also ensuring that the charter school could adopt best practices in the best interests of their students.

## **Gaining Support, Learning, and First Encounters with Charter Schools**

All participants had experience in charter schools, yet the leadership team encompassed a wide range of educational experiences and leadership tenures. However, I also wanted to find out how the participants learned about charter schools and about their first encounter with charter schools. Karen reported that her former agency, the TEA, introduced her to charter schools. She received a call one afternoon from the TEA seeking her help to close a charter school but declined considering that she believed that the school deserved another chance to salvage its educational programming. Later, the same offer came after her retirement, and she decided to try it and found herself deep into charter school affairs.

Gregory also reported having worked for the TEA from the onset of charter schools in Texas, where he was involved in piloting endeavors of charter schools in the state. Alongside his colleagues, Gregory would administer and monitor tests in charter schools and determine the learning outcomes:

I was working at the TEA back in the early 90s when our legislators were already thinking about establishing charter schools. So, I was in a division that kept close because they would have an impact. I was in accountability, and so we would be monitoring when they had students take tests and so on. They would become part of the regular public-school accountability system.

Jeffreys reported that his knowledge of charter schools was initially limited to his experiences in the residential facilities he had worked. Jeffreys revealed that the experience had curbed misguided perceptions about charter schools. Interestingly, Larry

had valuable information about charter schools before the formation of Ki Charter Academy because he had worked in two charters schools before Jeffreys and I approached him with the idea of establishing Ki Charter Academy. Larry explained that “I had previously worked for about five years with two other charter schools as a teacher. I had a little bit of knowledge of charters but not a tremendous amount.” Therefore, the summarized points below are the sources of information about charter schools reported by the participants.

1. Experience in another charter school
2. Experience in other related facilities
3. Work experience in an education regulatory authority

The above findings allude to the possibility that the participants had amassed a wealth of information on charter schools before working for Ki Charter Academy, considering that they had worked in charter schools, educational facilities related to charter schools, and organizations that regulate charter schools’ operations.

During the focus group discussions, I asked the participants to rate the amount of knowledge they had regarding charters schools before the Ki Charter School application process and their justification for the chosen rating. The participants agreed that they did not possess intimate knowledge of charter schools, as they had to attend meetings, training, coaching, and mock interviews with the TCSA during the application process. As prior research suggested that founding members of charter schools should understand their application subject before applying (Terhanian & Bremer, 2012), the successful founding of the Ki Charter Academy came as a slight aberration.

Additionally, I queried the participants about the general knowledge they had



regarding charter schools before they joined the founding process of Ki Charter Academy. These queries included questions about the leadership team's perceptions of charter schools in general, both inside and outside of Texas. Several of the participants believed that charter schools gave their teachers a higher salary than traditional public schools, yet a *Washington Post* (2013) survey on teachers' pay in public schools showed that on average, charter schools teachers earn less than their colleagues in the traditional public' schools, a finding echoed by other studies (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2010; Concordia University-Portland, 2013; Murphy, 2014; Niederberger & Hacke, 2017). Further, a national research project posited that there was a disparity in remuneration of charter school teachers and traditional public schools also asserted that charter school teachers earn less than their peers from traditional public schools (Niederberger & Hacke, 2017). As a result, it became clear that participants in this study, and founding members of Ki Charter Academy, may have held erroneous perceptions of charter schools upon entering work within the charter school.

Other general knowledge that participants held was that charter schools operate differently than traditional public schools. This finding coincides with the findings of prior studies, as charter schools have had freedom of autonomy to run according to the awarded charter, allowing charter school leaders room for creativity and innovation in the education model, curriculum, and other related educational activities (Cremata & Raymond, 2014; Strauss, 2017). However, Karen admitted to having little information regarding the management of charter schools before she started working with charter schools. Karen thought that management schools are not as open as they perceived by the public. Karen argued in the interview that:

Well, first, it took me a while to understand that being a public charter meant that you followed some of the same open enrollment that students will not be declined. Because there were all kinds of stories going around and still, but I figured that one out. Then I realized that the charter is the document that drives the system itself, and they are hard to get a hold of in some of the charters. That transparency is not there, which would probably make them a lot more open, true to the idea of being an open school if they had those charters. I would ask about board meetings if there were not any and it was just different, but still they were operating. But, still, they were having trouble on it. I think the leniency of some of the implementation of guidelines that are within the law, but to the interpretation and identify needs to the kids, the learners, I think that is a plus. Sometimes that gets lost, not only in public school, but in charters.

Karen's revelation on the leniency and transparency in charter schools and the implications of the charter on the administration yielded valuable insights regarding her perceptions. Karen perceived charter schools as autonomies operated under the statutory guidelines of the charter awarded by the Commissioner of Education, which illustrated that she held a significant level of knowledge regarding charter schools. Karen's perception coincided with Flanders' (2017) assertion regarding the nature of charter schools.

Baker reported that he had misguided perceptions about charter schools before working with them. Some participants also thought that charter schools take away money meant for a traditional public school. This aspect related to funding, was an aspect I

asked participants to expand upon. As previously explained in the review of the literature, most of the participants had misguided perceptions regarding the operations and nature of charter schools. Baker also thought that monetary avarice fuels the establishment and growth of charters schools. Bakers asserted that he thought of charter schools as “a money gig” initially. Baker explained that, “Honestly, at first, I thought it was just a money gig. It was something not traditional. Old people, especially, are resistant to change and this was something new, so I met it with much skepticism.” According to Baker, charter schools were eccentric because they deviated from the standards and procedures of conventional public educational systems.

In line with the arguments of Preston et al. (2012), Baker thought of charter schools as a way of increasing the competitiveness in the education system by giving parents an alternative to traditional public schools. However, Baker’s perceptions changed after working for two charters schools in Texas, as discussed in the subsequent sections. Furthermore, Gregory took the middle ground on the perceptions of charter schools. According to Gregory, charter schools had a blend of positive and negative implications in the education systems in Texas. Gregory revealed that he and his colleagues at the TEA during the early 1990s started by benchmarking the process in other states, giving Gregory additional insight as to how charter schools may compare across states and other contexts.

Likewise, the perceptions Gregory gained from the process was that charter schools have a fair share of merits and demerits in the education system. However, Gregory found charter schools unfavorable when they were starting the process of establishing, monitoring, testing, and evaluating the first charter schools in Texas.

Gregory's feelings concurred with the assertion of Stillings (2005), primarily that the charter school system can make both positive and negative impacts on the broader educational system. Jeffreys' perceptions coincided with the perceptions of Baker with the exception that his interpretations were more extreme. Jeffreys thought that charter schools were not only a "money gig," but that charter schools were also taking the lion's share of the money meant for the traditional public schools. Jeffreys elaborated that "My thoughts, just like a lot of people out there: Charter schools are stealing money from public schools and they are a bad thing and stay away from it. That is my thoughts initially."

However, a unique challenge of charter schools is to procure the necessary funding for high quality education, as charter schools compete for funding from the state government: This may explain why some participants thought that charter schools' disadvantage public schools in funding. Vickers (2014) compared traditional public schools and charter schools and realized that both get funding from the government in certain situations, a finding echoed by Silvernail and Johnson (2014). Here, these researchers articulated that charter schools were perceived to have an undesirable fiscal implication on traditional public schools, a perception that concurred with the Jeffreys' and Baker's perceptions. For instance, Silvernail and Johnson (2014) asserted that charter schools have an undesirable financial influence on the funding of traditional public but noted that the impact was not detrimental as perceived, speaking to how members of the Ki Charter Academy leadership team may have held erroneous or unrealistic perceptions of charter schools prior to becoming involved with Ki Charter Academy.

Moreover, Larry also revealed that although he was hopeful in serving in the

previous charter school, its performance did not exceed his expectations. Larry believed that charters schools could perform better, a position supported by prior research (Aldridge, 2015; Koedel, Ni, Podgursky, & Xiang, 2014). However, Schwenkenberg and VanderHoff (2015) had articulated a different mindset, arguing that although charter schools may negatively affect traditional public schools, the impact has not been detrimental to the public and instead has supported the much-needed cooperation and competitiveness in public education sector. Regardless of prior research, I noted that all the participants had a negative perception about charter schools before they worked in them. Consequently, the perceptions discussed above aroused my interest in finding out whether the said perceptions changed after working with charters schools and the establishment process of Ki Charter Academy.

### **Charter Application Submission Processes**

The process of submitting an application for a new charter school is a lengthy and detailed one, no matter the state or education climate. The idea of starting a charter school began with me and was shared with other like-minded persons who were potential founders. These people included Jeffreys, Larry, Gregory, Karen, and Baker. Once I approached the others and everyone came on-board, the founders started to prepare application documents as outlined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Other organizations and unions such as the Texas Charter School Association (TCSA) were at our disposal for guidance. However, such bodies as TCSA may charge a fee for their consultancy services. This fee for Ki Charter Academy to partner with TCSA was ten thousand dollars. This fee was due up front and no refund would be assessed if the charter was not awarded. The application documents were submitted to the education

board for external evaluation, including an overview of the proposed Ki Charter Academy leadership team. The chart below represents the current organizational structure of Ki Charter Academy for the purposes of clarity and providing the reader with information on the structure of Ki Charter Academy:

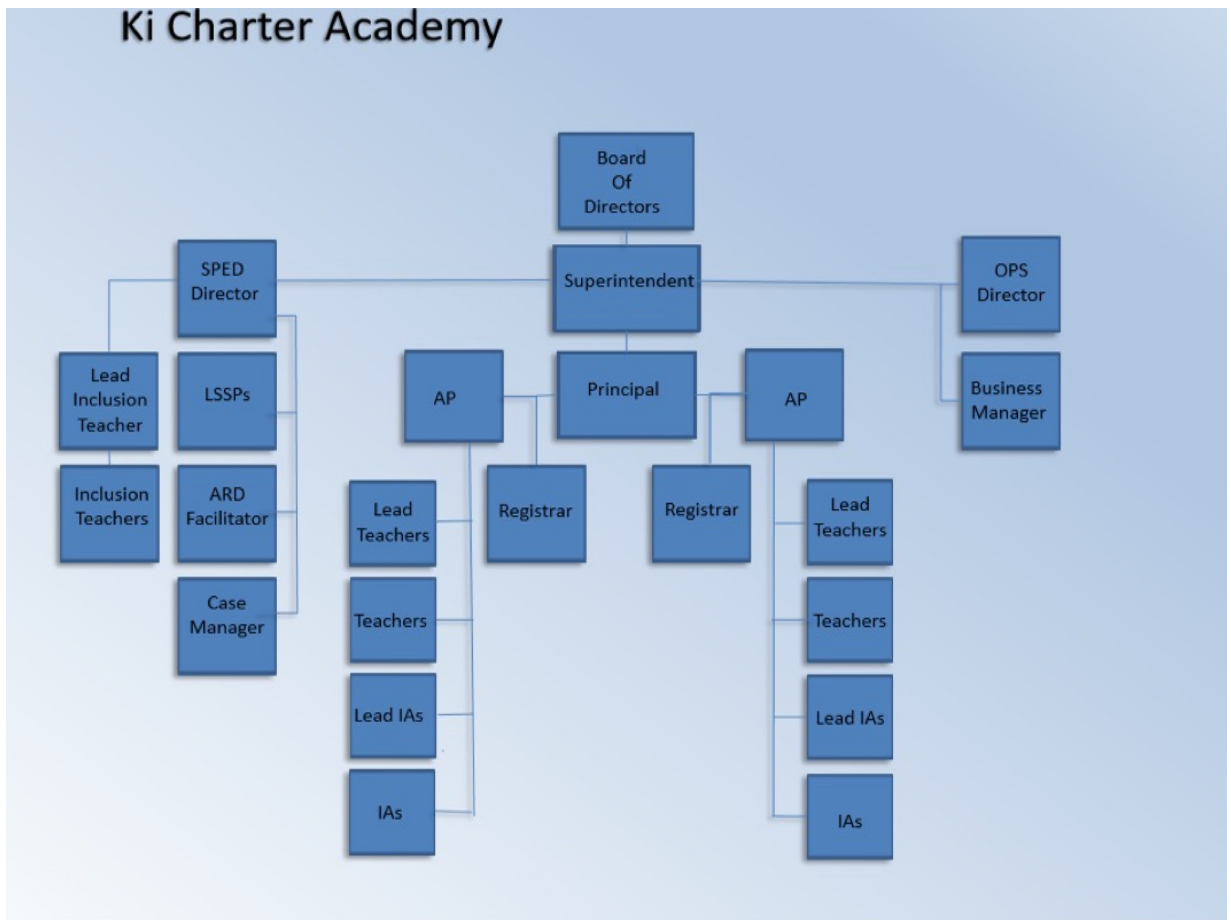


Figure 6. Ki Charter Academy organizational chart

Members of the TEA reviewed and assessed the application. Applicants who submitted a charter application that surpasses the minimum cut score were invited for interviews with the SBOE, which has representatives from various education stakeholders. Upon submitting the application, the Ki Charter Academy was selected of interviews with the SBOE.

## **Texas Commissioner of Education’s Generation 19 Charter Proposals**

The SBOE is a critical regulatory authority in the application process of charter schools in Texas. The Commissioner of Education in the state of Texas changed the charter application in generation 19 to a brand-new application, meaning that Ki Charter Academy had no template to work off and had to start with a brand-new application with no frame of reference, complicating the application process. In prior years, applications for charter schools were guided by a set of legislative provisions that evolved and are now referred to as generations. Each time significant changes to the requirements or provisions are enacted, the application graduates to the next generation.

The initial application for Ki Charter Academy was based on generation 19 charter school guidelines. The change of the generational application of the charter presented a challenge to Ki Charter Academy founders. Per the guidance of the Commissioner of Education, new charter school applicants had to exceed the minimum 298 cut scores to qualify for interviews with the SBOE. At the time of Ki Charter Academy’s application, there were 27 applicants, and only 11 received the interview invitations. Applicants were required to fill out the application forms and submit for interview considerations with the SBOE, with the interview serving as a rigorous process with multiple stakeholders from various Texas educational entities. The TEA interviewed applicants alongside sponsors for the envisioned charter schools. Ultimately, one applicant withdrew from the process, while five others were awarded their charter. Table 3 below shows the stage and the respective check point contingent for advancement to the next stage forwarded by the TEA (bolding indicates Ki Charter Academy’s respective Generation 19 grouping).

Table 3

*TEA charter award rate, by generation, 2013-2018*

<u>Gen.</u>	<u>Date of Com. Approval</u>	<u>Applications Received</u>	<u>Sent to External Readers</u>	<u>Interviewed</u>	<u>Proposed</u>	<u>Awarded</u>
18	9/20/2013	31	17, 55%	12, 39%	4, 13%	3, 10%
<b>19</b>	<b>8/20/2014</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>16, 59%</b>	<b>11, 41%</b>	<b>5, 19%</b>	<b>5, 19%</b>
20	6/2/2015	38	27, 71%	19, 50%	6, 16%	5, 13%
21	5/31/2016	30	22, 73%	3, 10%	3, 10%	2, 7%
22	5/24/2017	34	27, 79%	9, 26%	5, 15%	5, 15%
23	5/31/2018	21	14, 67%	4, 19%	4, 19%	4, 19%

The Commissioner of Education recognized that the growing number of open enrolment charter schools in Texas has had a financial impact on the fiscal policy in government education funding in Texas. Charter schools have reduced funding available to public schools in Texas contexts, although they provide the much-needed flexibility, freedom of choice, innovation, and structuring of the education in Texas. The Commissioner of Education prioritized the capability of the applicant to provide high-quality education and running a charter school when evaluating applications for charter schools. The SBOE under TEA has the mandate of evaluating the application for charter schools, granting charters to the qualified applicants. Therefore, an interview with the board was a critical process in the application process of the Ki Charter Academy.

The Commissioner of Education awarded Ki Charter Academy its charter to operate for five years until 2020. However, the commissioner made the following recommendations on the Ki Charter Academy application proposal before the school was set up and open for enrollment.

- Some sections of the application process required further refinement.



- The curriculum instructional design for classroom and non-classroom delivery needed clarification.
- Staff hierarchy needed clarification.

The commissioner also asked the Ki Charter Academy founders to clarify the 180 series learning environment plan for Ki Charter Academy. The commissioner also pinpointed that coexistence of staff who report to the charter superintendent and residential management facility needed clarification. The Commissioner of Education also asked the applicants to elaborate on the curriculum design. Precisely, the commissioner asked the founders to explain the safety procedures rules and caution observed in the use of information and communication gadgets, such as iPads in curriculum delivery. Furthermore, the application included incomplete sections focused on cross training, learning gaps, modified curriculum, and testing periods for enrolled students. Therefore, the Commissioner of Education advised the Ki Charter Academy founders to revisit these sections to incorporate the crucial information.

The founders also had to explain how the students would receive an endorsement as part of the mandatory Texas Foundation high school program, and how the functional academic curriculum for exceptional students with special needs fit into the school's instructional setting. The last item on the education plan to be clarified was the learning environment of the unique and at-risk students, where the founders had to confirm that the environment chosen conforms to the TEA generation 19 guidelines (The Texas Education Agency, 2019). The Commissioner of Education proposed a few changes on the education plan, as the application had a contradicting number of proposed staff and their qualifications. Therefore, the commissioner proposed that the founders specify the

number of staff and their requisite qualifications to be working under the charter before the charter application could be finalized and the charter approved.

### External Agency Roles in the Application Process

A number of external agencies were critical during the Ki Charter Academy application process. The Commissioner of Education, who was the chair of the SBOE, then proposed to award the charter to the applicant(s). The charter was awarded if the commissioner's proposal was not rejected by the members of the SBOE, and the SBOE's decision cannot be appealed. The diagram below outlines the application process:

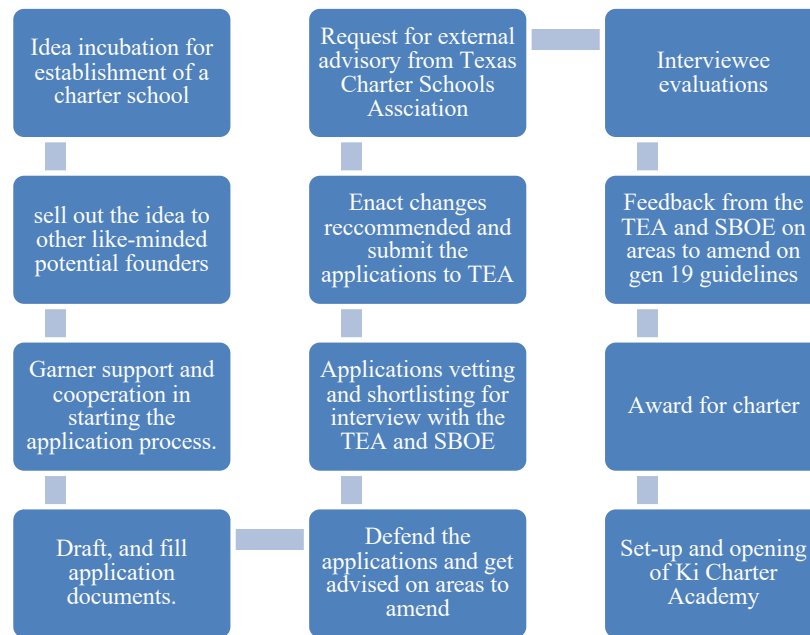


Figure 7. TEA general application process for a charter school in Texas

This application process of a charter school in Texas has been regulated by the TEA, which provides a fixed schedule for interested applicants. However, the figure above would likely represent common milestones during the charter application process for many charter schools in different geographical locations in Texas.

### Preparing the Application for Ki Charter Academy

Before a charter school application can be submitted, the application should be rigorously checked for accuracy and completion. As a result, I asked the participants about the preparations they made before the application process of Ki Charter Academy. Surprisingly, three members of the leadership team disclosed that they prepared very little or not at all: Larry reported he did not prepare, Karen and Gregory responded that they prepared very little, and Baker, Jeffreys and I reported having enough preparation.

Karen asserted that her prior experience had prepared her for the application process and the setup of Ki Charter Academy. Baker asserted that he had prepared and noted that the partnership with the Texas Charter Schools Association was a crucial milestone in the application process. Baker revealed that stakeholders in the process met during weekday, evening, and holidays to discuss the process and draft the required documents in the application. Cohodes (2018) explained such importance of preparation and planning for a charter school establishment process. The participants had to prepare the mission, vision, and objective of the school and other crucial elements such as enrollment strategies, community outreach, educational goals, and financial overviews, among other crucial requirements in the application process. Overall, Baker recalled that the curriculum preparation was thorough.

Gregory said that I helped in preparation for the application process. I had guided Gregory in comprehending the information and documents required for the application process. Nonetheless, Gregory explained that he had not prepared thoroughly for the process like Jeffreys and me. Despite some lack of preparation, Jeffreys said:

I really, truly think that we did it the right way. We had co-founders that collaborated; we did the best practices by getting the mayor involved on

the board of directors, stakeholders from the university. I think to get the master's program information, the best practices that we learned from there; I do not think we would change our preparation.

Larry explained that involving the major stakeholders and those from the university was a significant impact on preparation, as these stakeholders were knowledgeable on the requirements and the process of establishing charter schools.

### **Timeline**

The Ki Charter Academy leadership team also followed a timeline during the application process. Table 4 below guided us during the application and establishment process of Ki Charter Academy.

Table 4

#### *Timeline of applying for charter through Texas Education Agency*

<u>Task</u>	<u>Timeline</u>
Submission deadlines <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applications forms should be completed and submitted through the online portal</li> </ul>	March 27, 2014, 5:00 p.m. (CST)
Eligibility and Completeness Reviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TEA staff shall evaluate the completeness of the applications submitted before forwarding them for review by external agents</li> </ul>	April 2-4, 2014
Eligibility and Completeness Determinations Distributed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determinations of eligibility and completeness shall be disseminated by TEA through email. Applicants should address any contradictions or complaints</li> </ul>	April 14, 2014

Table 4 Continued

<p>against the TEA determinations within five days, and no new applications shall be acknowledged.</p>	
<p>Deadline for Applicant Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responses and complaints to determinations received within the stipulated schedule acknowledged and reviewed and posted in the TEA website following the deliberation.</li> </ul>	<p>April 21, 2014</p>
<p>External Application Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TEA staff read, analyze, and evaluate each application form. The staff shall sub, it a written assessment form for each application form.</li> </ul>	<p>May - June 2014</p>
<p>Internal Application Review.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TEA staff shall evaluate all the eligible applications.</li> </ul>	<p>June - July 2014</p>
<p>Interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TEA staff shall interview applicants. Tea staff shall interview all the parties in the applications within the stipulated timeframe.</li> </ul>	<p>July 21-23, 2014</p>
<p>Proposal of the 19<sup>th</sup> Generation Charter Award by the Commissioner</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The commissioner gives announcements on applications, proposes and shortlist charter awardees.</li> </ul>	<p>August 2014</p>
<p>SBOE Actions on Proposed 19<sup>th</sup> Generation Charters</p>	<p>September 2014</p>

Table 4 Continued

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The SBOE takes up to 90 days to challenge commissioners proposal for possible rejections on various explained and merited grounds. A rejection decision was deemed final. Equally, failure to take any action within the stipulated time leads to charter award.</li> </ul>	
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However, the leadership team of the Ki Charter Academy completed the bulk of the work before the submission of the application documents to the TEA for evaluation. We prepared several documents for the submission requiring extensive drafting plans, revision, and editing to ensure that the documents explained the proposed Ki Charter Academy clearly to enhance the success rate of getting the charter award. We held several meetings with the TCSA to ensure that every detail of the application was complete and comprehensible, and the TCSA gave crucial insights regarding how the applications should be made, the risks of the process, the challenges to anticipate, and the strengths of the application that we could build upon.

### **Evaluation of the Charter Application**

Several external agencies and the charter school leadership team needed to evaluate the charter application before it was approved. The TEA and the Commissioner of Education evaluated the application document for the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. As the application contained several documents that explained various proposed aspects of Ki Charter Academy, the TEA mandated that different evaluators read the application documents five times and average the results. Ultimately, the establishment of Ki Charter Academy submitted a single application that sailed through

the various stages of evaluation and was awarded a charter document. The results of Ki Charter Academy applications based on the five evaluations were as follows:

Table 5

*Section one evaluation results*

<u>Section One Components</u>	<u>Read 1</u>	<u>Read 2</u>	<u>Read 3</u>	<u>Read 4</u>	<u>Read 5</u>
Curriculum and Instructional Design	48	31	45	45	41
Student Performance Standards	18	9	20	17	14
Student Performance Assessment	15	14	20	19	11
Supplemental Programming	9	8	9	8	10
Special Populations and At-Risk Students	24	20	23	23	22
Educational Staff Capacity	30	17	30	28	18
Section One Total	144	99	147	140	116

Table 6

*Section two evaluation results*

<u>Section Two</u>	<u>Read 1</u>	<u>Read 2</u>	<u>Read 3</u>	<u>Read 4</u>	<u>Read 5</u>
School Calendar and Schedule	4	4	4	5	5
School Culture	4	4	4	5	5
Student Admissions and Enrollment	8	8	9	9	9
Student Discipline	9	8	9	8	8
School Leadership Pipeline	4	4	4	5	5
Organization-Wide Staffing	8	6	9	8	8
Staffing Plans, Hiring, Management, and Evaluation	8	6	9	9	6
Professional Development	8	6	9	9	8
School Performance Management	8	8	9	9	8
Parent and Community Involvement	11	12	12	12	13
Start-Up and Ongoing Operations	20	20	24	22	13
Operations Capacity	16	16	17	18	16
Section Two Total	108	102	119	119	104

Table 7

*Section three evaluation results*

<u>Section Three</u>	<u>Read 1</u>	<u>Read 2</u>	<u>Read 3</u>	<u>Read 4</u>	<u>Read 5</u>
Legal Status and Governing Documents	9	8	9	9	7
Organization Charts	9	8	9	8	10
Governing Board	22	20	23	17	22
Advisory Bodies	3	0	5	0	0
Grievance Process	4	4	4	3	5
Section Three Total	47	40	50	37	44

Table 8

*Section four evaluation results*

<u>Section Four</u>	<u>Read 1</u>	<u>Read 2</u>	<u>Read 3</u>	<u>Read 4</u>	<u>Read 5</u>
Facilities	14	11	11	14	15
Financial Plan	25	23	25	25	20
Business Management Capacity	18	23	23	25	22
Section Four Total	57	57	59	64	57

Table 9

*Section subtotals*

<u>Section subtotals</u>	<u>Read 1</u>	<u>Read 2</u>	<u>Read 3</u>	<u>Read 4</u>	<u>Read 5</u>
Section 1	144	99	147	140	116
Section 2	108	102	119	119	104
Section 3	47	40	50	37	44
Section 4	57	57	59	64	57
Application Totals	356	298	375	360	321

Table 10

*Summary of section scores*

<u>Section</u>	<u>Final Points Awarded</u>	<u>Points Available</u>
Section One-Educational Plan	90	160
Section Two-Operations Plan	98	135
Section Three-Governance Plan	40	55
Section Four-Financial and Business Plan	57	75



Total points awarded for Sections 1-4 (cut score=298)	314	425
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Evidenced by results summarized in Tables 5 through 10, the applications of the Ki Charter Academy had exceeded the application threshold for the award for charter. TEA awarded the marks depending on the compliance of the application to the standard requirements and best practices in a charter school in Texas. Figure 8 below displays the historical trend of charter awards and closures in Texas:

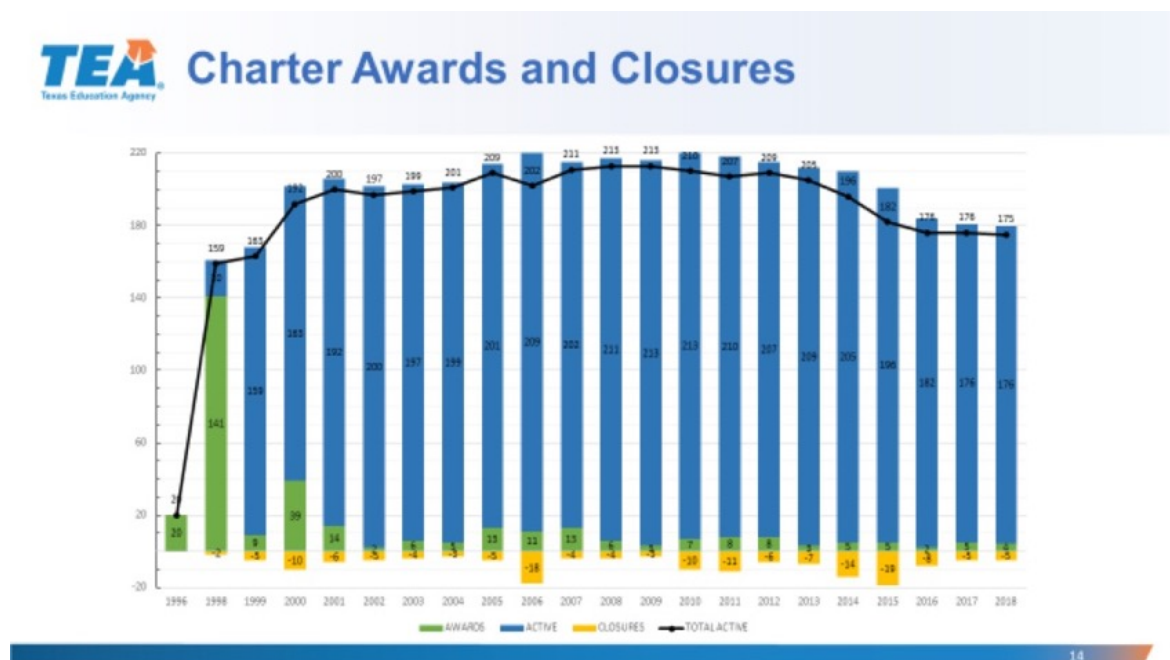


Figure 8. Historical TEA charter awards and closures

Evidenced by the statistics above, there has been a recent shift toward the TEA awarding slightly fewer charter awards than in 2005 and 2006, and the leadership team of Ki Charter Academy believed that the attention to detail and following of the timeline during the charter application process helped the charter application pass through TEA and SBOE approval stages.

However, participants in this study indicated that the TEA and SBOE approval

process was complex and the application could have been improved upon. In the transcription of the interview with Gregory, I asserted that the TEA has external evaluators who review the application process and then subject it to SBOE scrutiny. Subsequently, the Commissioner of Education approves the application. However, there were areas for improvement reviewed by the evaluation scores, as highlighted in the preceding sections.

Gregory explained to me that the process required more time as they had to work within the timeline. Gregory argued that although he did not directly get involved in the preparation of initial drafts, he recalled hearing, “Okay, we need to move a little bit faster because we are not going to make this timeline.” Moreover, Gregory noted that the process had a tight timeline, but the TCSA kept them on toes to ensure that they delivered within the timeline. In essence, timeline was demanding for such an involved and labor-intensive process. Ulmer (2017) studied timelines and implications of a tight timeline on service delivery and found that tight timelines have a high risk of detrimentally affecting quality, supporting Gregory’s assertion that the timeline was demanding, but ultimately, did not hinder the charter application process. Additionally, Larry asserted that the process would have been further complicated without the support of TCSA, and that the TCSA enabled the team to expedite the application process.

However, not all participants agreed that the timeline was an initial hindrance to the charter application process. Contrary to Gregory’s viewpoint, Baker differed in his assertion by saying, “The timeline was fine.” Relatedly, Baker revealed that he joined the process in August because he was reluctant to come on board in the process, possibly speaking to his easy-going nature or even-headedness. However, Baker revealed that he

felt the process had been condensed and predicted that it could be tighter for new applicants. Inversely, Jeffreys argued that the process was long and revealed that he would have preferred it to be faster, although the Ki Charter Academy leadership team had little or no control over the mandated timeline. Lastly, Larry explained that the process was comfortable by explaining that, “I do not think I felt like we were pushed to the edge of some deadline.” Nonetheless, Larry said that the team spent much time away from their families in the preparation of the application documents, attending meetings, and conducting interviews, among other undertakings of the project.

### **Reflections on the Application Process**

Although the charter application was successful, I believed it was critical for the leadership team to reflect on the process to guide future charter applications. I requested the participants describe how the process of applying for a charter could be improved upon in the future for aspiring charter school founders. Karen agreed with me that the application process for charter schools in Texas was complex and lengthy. The application was a two-year process from idea incubation to awarding of the charter. Participants and stakeholders were not paid throughout the two-year process and all held primary jobs. The complexity also required time away from family, friends, and extracurricular events that normally were attended for fun by participants in the process. This was a sacrifice that each participant committed to in order to submit a well-reasoned and complete charter application.

Gregory described the process as thorough, detailing every aspect of the envisioned Ki Charter Academy. In a similar standpoint, Baker described the process as rigorous. In an interview with Larry, I requested that Larry adopt a different adjective to

describe the process other than rigorous, as Karen, Gregory, and Baker had used that term. Larry explained that the process had more roadblocks to overcome than checkpoints to monitor the envisioned quality of Ki Charter Academy, speaking less to rigor and more to the application process involving hurdles without a clear roadmap to avoid the hurdles.

Speaking to Larry's assertion, several stages of the charter application process had barriers that the participants had to overcome to proceed to the next stage. Although the participants enjoyed the success in overcoming the challenges, the victory would be short-lived as other roadblocks would emerge in the subsequent stages. In addition to rigorous, Jeffreys described the process as organized, perhaps making the process less rigorous than it could have been.

Further, I asked the participants about the general application of founding a charter school in Texas. The participants explained the process in our discussion, as illustrated in the process flow chart below.

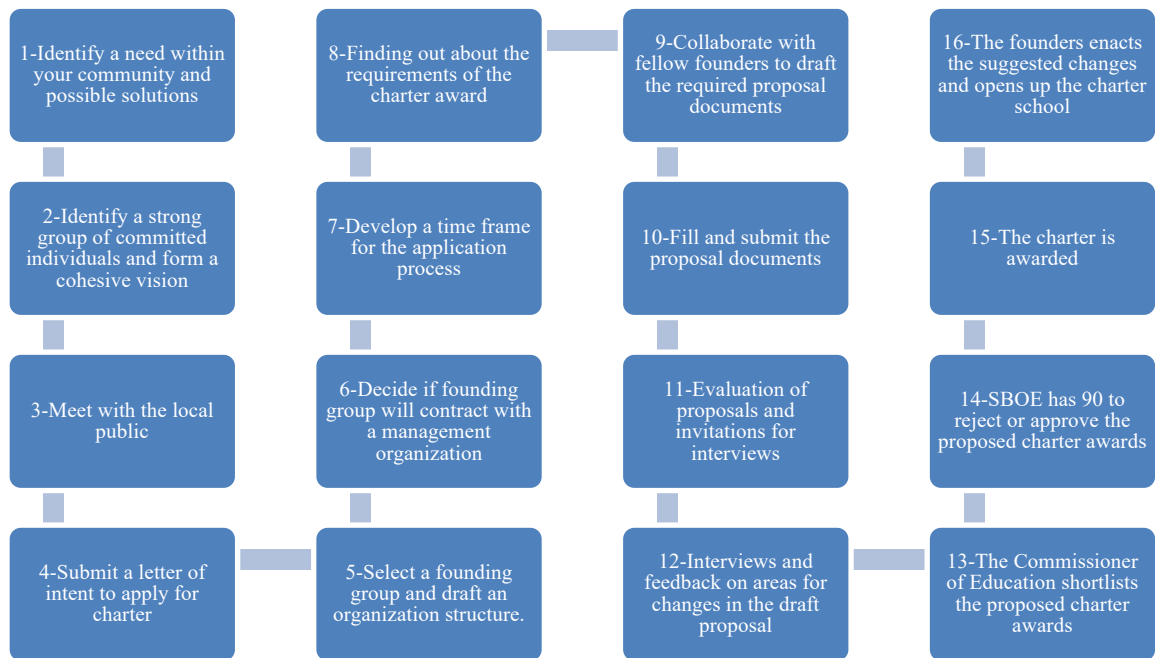


Figure 9. General application process

The process of establishing a charter school starts with need identification. Barge (2019) explained that identifying an educational need in the community entails evaluating the community for any educational deficiency. As a result, founders must ask themselves, “Is there a unique populace of learners not serviced in the existing public schools? Are the needs of the learners met in the existing schools? Is the current performance satisfactory?” The above line of questioning had helped the founders to brainstorm the educational need that warranted the establishment of a charter school. Further, Barge (2019) explained that a need for establishing a charter school has often resulted from unsatisfactory performance of other schools, echoed by prior research (Arsen & Ni (2012a, 2012b; Barret, 2003; Kweon et al., 2018; Smarick, 2008). Participants also indicated that they witnessed unsatisfactory performance at other schools, catalyzing their

willingness to understand and successfully complete the charter school application.

Barge (2019) also explained that charter school founders must explain the need for a charter clearly to the SBOE for the intended application to be allowed to proceed to the application stage. As participants in the study, I along with Jeffreys, and Larry explained that as founders of Ki Charter Academy, they had to clarify the need for an open enrollment residential treatment charter school in the San Marcos community. The second stage in the process involved the identification of a group of founding members who shared a similar justification for beginning a charter school in the community: This is a critical stage in the application process. Barge (2019) explained that the founders of a charter school should have community representatives and the skills needed to apply for the school's charter and manage the charter school once opened.

Moreover, Barge (2019) added that founders must also recruit representatives to serve on the envisioned charter school committee and board. The founder must also derive the vision and mission of the charter school. Barge (2019) asserted that the founder was also required to draft a timeline, business, and strategic plan for the charter school. Collectively, the founders must formulate an organizational structure with clear roles and responsibilities for all the management personnel of the envisioned charter school (Barge, 2019). Third, the founders must schedule a meeting with the public school to explain the current need for a charter school in the area, and in this case, Texas, as acceptance and understanding from the general public is critical when applying to open a charter school in any area (Barge, 2019).

Fourth, in a Texas context, the founders must submit a letter of intent to establish a charter school at least eighteen months before the projected date of opening. According

to TEA (2019), the letter of intent should include the proposed name of the charter school, opening date, location, grade system, vision, mission, and the maximum capacity of the proposed enrollment. The letter of intent should give a brief overview of the proposed charter school to the SBOE. Fifth, the founders should research the application requirements and team up to draft the required documents (TEA, 2019). Jeffreys, Larry and I consulted a few experienced people in the charter school application process from the Texas Charter Schools Association and the TEA during Ki Charter Academy's application process. These partnerships were crucial in successfully applying for the charter.

The next stage involved developing a schedule to guide the application process through various stages. The participants said that the critical step before the application of a charter school was setting a schedule for guiding the application process and the setup of the charter school. Bose, Singh Rana, Kumar, Prakash, and Tiwari (2017) discussed the significance of a schedule, also referred to as a timetable or a timeframe in the establishment of an educational institution. The argument was that a timeframe provides a clear guideline on the delivery expectations and milestones in the process. A timeframe was critical to the founders of Ki Charter Academy because it kept the founders organized regarding the pending tasks.

After drafting a comprehensive timeframe, the founders decided on whether to contract with an education management organization or a charter management organization, and whether this organization should be involved in the early management of the charter school. These management organizations provide support to charter schools, but the schools must outsource them on a contractual basis. However, the

founders of Ki Charter Academy decided not to contract with any outsourced management organization but instead adopted members from the founding group to manage the charter school. For instance, Larry had the responsibility of leading the administration of the charter school, while Baker became the head of human resources and operations. Karen became the board president of the school. Adopting the founder members in the senior management of the charter school was beneficial because the founders comprehended the mission, vision, and goals of the school better than anyone else would have. Moreover, these members would be able to evaluate the course the charter was on towards achievement of the projected deliverables. The above finding was crucial, as it illustrates the benefit of founder-dominated management of a charter school in its infant stages.

The eighth step was to draft an organizational structure with an elaborate job description for each role in the organization structure. Barge (2019) and the Texas Education Agency (2019) asserted that one of the requirements in establishing a charter was an elaborate organizational structure detailing the interactions of job roles in various cadres of the organizational hierarchy. Therefore, Jeffreys, Jerry, Larry, and other members of the Ki Charter Academy leadership team had to fulfill this requirement. The next step involved drafting other documents required for the application process, such as an education and operational plan. Jeffreys and Baker recalled attending many meetings to deliberate on these documents, especially after feedback would be given suggesting changes in various parts. Karen also asserted that drafting the required application documents was a highly-involved stage in the application process, and we had to consult with several experts in the TCSA and TEA. Ultimately, the founders submitted the



completed application documents to the SBOE for evaluation and charter consideration.

The eleventh step involved evaluation of the charter application forms and invitations of the interviews by the SBOE with representatives from various governing and regulatory agencies such as the TEA, TCSA, and the Commissioner of Education. If the application exceeded the cut score set at 298, then the application was invited for further questioning by the SBOE. The participants recalled much preparation for the interviews and coaching by the consultant from the TCSA on what to expect and how to defend their applications: Baker, Jeffreys, and Larry all shared this sentiment.

The next stage involved the SBOE providing feedback on the interview and the applications, providing suggestions on areas to amend. The Commissioner of Education proposed a charter award to the successful applicants, which the SBOE had a 90-day debate period to object. Upon the lapse of the stipulated 90 days, the commissioner awarded the proposed charter to the applicant, and the charter school was set to open as soon as the founders procured the resources to launch the charter school.

During the application process, sharing roles was crucial because the application documents needed to be prepared promptly. The participants also revealed that the members held meetings to deliberate upon various tasks and documents before they could proceed to the next stage. Part of the application process included a mock interview with TCSA. Gregory explained that the interview was a significant milestone in the process, as the experience of the mock interview determined the success of the application. Gregory asserted that, “If we have not had that mock interview with TCSA, if we do submit our application the way it was without having that feedback from them, we would not be here.” As a result, this finding suggests that successful charter school teams may need to

partner with larger charter school organizations to prepare the application for the charter.

The mock interview made the participants realize that there were outliers they had not addressed, and such areas were potentially detrimental, as they could lead to rejection of the application. Baker also suggested that the mock interview was a milestone and critical for the success of the charter school application:

What was a significant event for me is when we went in there and the initial draft of 18 to 19 crammed in there, and then we sit in front of the mock interview, which was a mock board [of directors]. We got hammered, absolutely hammered. What was on paper, when they started asking us about it, was not how we intended it to be. How we answered them was not how we needed to answer the board when we went up there that day. I think that shifted our focus.

The suggestions and weak points noted through the mock interview were amended, and the application was submitted for external evaluation and interview considerations. Once all the documents were ready and checked by TCSA support staff, the application was submitted to the TEA for evaluation. Passing the external evaluation and getting the minimum score for interview consideration was a key milestone in the application process. Further, Larry explained that the “gut check” by the TCSA was a remarkable milestone in the preparation stage of the process. Larry elaborated:

My biggest takeaway besides, you mentioned the mock interview. You have not talked about that before, that was a gut check, for sure. They are just ambiguity of the whole process. Without TCSA, there would not have been-- I am not sure that we would have made it in expertise.

The actual interviews with the SBOE was another milestone in the process. The founding team was sufficiently prepared for the interviews following the guidance, training, and mock interview with TCSA support staff. The consideration for charter award was dependent on the performance during the interview with SBOE. The charter award was another milestone in the application process and served as the culmination of all the efforts, meetings, and sacrifices of the founding team. The last milestone was the setup and opening of Ki Charter Academy, with the review and acceptance of the first batch of student applicants.

Wanting to further explore the process of applying for the charter with general TEA application perspectives, I asked the participants whether the general application process needed any change from TEA's perspective. Thoughtfully, Baker responded:

To truly answer that question, it would take time to see that the schools that are being awarded charters now, are they going to be here in five or six years? If they are, well, you probably do not need to change much, and if they are succeeding, you do not need to change everything- anything at all. However, if they are failing, you might need to look at why and how they slipped through the cracks.

Baker argued that the TEA-guided application process did not require changes because the school's awarded charters using the process have proved successful: There has been little reason to change the process. Baker added that changes to the process could take effect only if the charter schools established were showing weakness, unsuccessful, or not meeting their deliverables because it would mean that the process of vetting the charter award was faulty. According to Baker, the TEA application process

did not require changes at the time, but he recommended monitoring and evaluation of the process. Periodical auditing of the charter award process is beneficial because it helps to uncover faults and vulnerabilities in the process, supported by prior research (Bani-Ahmed & Al-Sharairi, 2014; Birkmire, Lay, & McMahon, 2007). As a result, findings of this study suggest the TEA could reevaluate its processes for evaluating and awarding charters, even though charter schools in operation have performed well enough to maintain their charter.

### **Defining Stakeholder Motivation**

Although all leadership team members were critical in the charter application and award process, I felt it important to delve into the motivation of each stakeholder for joining the team and successfully completing the application. Data from the interviews and focus group also revealed that the study's participants were well connected and had prior education experience and industry experience which helped establish Ki Charter Academy. Previously, Baker had worked in a charter school in San Antonio. Baker relocated to San Marcos, Texas after contacting his friend Jeffreys and securing a job at a treatment facility center with Jeffreys' help. Continuing the chain of communication, Jeffreys then contacted me, and at the time, I was working in the San Marcos Treatment Center. This close physical proximity allowed Baker, Jeffreys, and me the opportunity closely collaborate and communicate, which may be critical for future or aspiring charter school leadership teams.

After conversation, Jeffreys and I realized that there was a niche in the education offered to the individuals in the treatment facility in San Marcos, and we shared a vision to provide better services to the individuals. Jeffreys and I brainstormed that residential

treatment facility charter school could be established for the at-risk populace of individuals in Texas, and we approached Baker with the idea. Regarding the experience, Jeffreys in the personal interview asserted that:

It was the experience with the previous charter school, but what I did was I teamed up with Jerry who was an administrator, and he had a lot of wealth and information with the residential facility side also. We felt that we could move forward and get a charter approved for that population, for a special needs population.

At first, Baker was skeptical about the idea but came on board six months later after reading the proposal Jeffreys and I had drafted, proposing the charter school. In the interview, Baker asserted that:

You [Jerry] and Jeffreys decided that they could do a better job, they could offer more to the kids than just four cores and an elective sitting behind computers. They were the brainchild of this, and it was their idea to start the school. Jeffreys talked to me about it generally and asked me if I wanted to come on. They are in the formative stages. It took him six months to convince me to do it. Finally, after him bugging me, I looked at the model and was thoroughly impressed with what Jerry and Jeffreys wanted to do with the school. So, I agreed, and the rest is history.

Baker reported that he was convinced to join the Ki Charter Academy leadership team because he was impressed by the vision that Jeffreys and I had. Baker gave two reasons when asked the reasons that made him take so long to make up his mind about joining the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. The first reason was that Baker was

comfortable in his current job as the assistant principal in a charter school in San Antonio: Initially, he saw no reason to leave. Secondly, Baker feared to venture into an endeavor whose success was not guaranteed. Prior, Baker had no experience in the establishment of charter schools before but was impressed by Jeffreys and my vision of creating a unique school to service special-needs students.

Somewhat similar to Baker's experiences, Karen said that her initial involvement in Ki Charter Academy establishment process was triggered by the founders, Jeffrey and I, who invited her into the process, as she had established her name within the charter school management sector in Texas. Moreover, Jeffreys asserted that his involvement in the establishment process of Ki Charter Academy sprouted from an idea he derived from his experience with the previous charter school. Here, these findings suggest that Baker, Karen, and Jeffreys all joined the charter school leadership team given their background in education, but their education backgrounds were slightly different. This diversity of thought and experience helped Ki Charter Academy earn its charter and open its doors.

I teamed up with Jeffreys to start the process of giving the students a more specialized and personalized education to address their specific needs, which were often overlooked in traditional public schools. My involvement was catalyzed by a conversation with Jeffreys regarding the extra services we could provide to the special populations during their service at the treatment center in San Marcos. I then asked Larry about how he was involved in the process. According to Larry, two colleagues contacted him and requested to visit him for a conversation. They asked Larry to join them in starting a charter school in Texas, which he agreed. Larry said they would meet in the evenings and weekends to discuss and start the application process. Generally, the

founders knew each other and only needed to convince the new parties into buying the idea of Ki Charter Academy. Here, the leadership team was further connected by close communication and a word-of-mouth approach that led to the formation of the final version of the Ki Charter Academy leadership team.

I also inquired of the participants about the factors that influenced their participation in the application and establishment process of Ki Charter Academy. This question aimed at finding out motivating factors for the founders to start a charter school in San Marcos. The factors enumerated by the participants are summarized below:

1. The need to help students with special needs motivated some participants
2. Be part of my plans, both personal and professional
3. Make a positive contribution
4. Learn more about residential facilities
5. Need to impact students' lives to live a better life despite their conditions
6. Give students better services compared to what they can get in a traditional public school
7. Students hold untapped potential
8. There was a need to do things differently from the conventional model in traditional public schools
9. Surpass the expectations of the community regarding students with exceptional learning needs.

Of the motivating factors for becoming involved with the Ki Charter School, Larry said he was largely motivated by wanting to help a former student:

The main thing is I wanted to help a former student of mine. That was the

core thing that drew me into this. I wanted to be a part of your plans. I believe in you, and I felt like you would be making a good contribution.

Larry explained that he chose to be part of the process because he had a student who could have greatly benefitted from the services of a residential treatment facility like Ki Charter Academy. Besides, Larry had reviewed the charter school plans and was convinced that Ki Charter Academy would make positive contributions to the student population inside and outside the San Marcos community. In essence, Larry wanted to be part of the plan to impact students in a positive way.

Karen explained that although she had worked in several charter schools in San Antonio, she did not have much experience in residential facility (RF) charter schools. Karen revealed that “I had not done much with RF, and I wanted to learn more about it.” According to Karen, engaging in such a process was not only a learning experience to diversify her knowledge portfolio but also provide an opportunity to improve the learning experienced learners. This blend of experience and curiosity to learn more was a huge boon for the Ki Charter Academy leadership team. Further, Karen was convinced that Ki Charter Academy would improve the learning for exceptional kids with special needs in the community who would otherwise not receive the best quality education in traditional public schools.

Gregory explained that his participation in the process was encouraged by the need to positively impact the lives of the students in the San Marcos community:

For me, it was just a true need and seeing how the kids are being serviced and how they were leaving this place [San Marcos]. Were they leaving as a better student or a better person? Then someone came to me and said, “I



think we can do this better.”

Gregory echoed Karen’s sentiments on the need to prioritize the kids and ensure that the students receive the most creative, innovative, and sustainable education solutions. Gregory explained that he was convinced that Jeffreys, Larry and I had a good plan, vision, and mission for the school: This truly spoke to how well planned the charter school was, and how much preparation had gone into the planning before recruiting other members of the Ki Charter Academy leadership team.

Importantly, Gregory’s main concern was ensuring that students left Ki Charter Academy as better and responsible citizens, ensuring that the school unleashed the full potential of students to prepare them for lifelong learning and community engagement. Likewise, Larry explained that the need for a residential facility charter school in San Marcos motivated him to join the team to start Ki Charter Academy. Larry elaborated by saying that he visited me during supervision and had his first experience in the school, which convinced him that a residential facility charter school was needed to serve students who often experience poor quality education or neglect in the traditional public schools.

Likewise, my service as a principal informed how Ki Charter Academy was established. I felt that, “We wanted to create something that was going to be as worthy as a traditional school, if not better, because these kids deserved it.” I compared my passion to what I was witnessing in the school, and I had noticed that the kids may not be educated as they should be or deserve to be. In the interview, I asserted, “There was no passion that I saw. Because there was a lack of passion, I feel like the kids were not being serviced or provided the services that maybe they should have. That started the

conversation.” Further, Gregory shared my vision of creating an innovative, creative and quality-oriented education model and curriculum that would maximize the potential of the students in line prior research (Flanders, 2017) Gregory supported my line of thought in his assertion that:

I knew what the kids were facing here and what you guys were talking about what I had always envisioned: The potential for these kiddos. It was 100% about what we can do for the kids and how we can do it differently, and how we could do it better. I just had no idea in the beginning what that was going to look like, what form that was going to take, but I knew that it was going to be better than what they had.

According to Gregory, his motivation was all about the kids, as elucidated in his assertion that, “I wanted us just to reach and keep reaching as far as we could to make whatever we were going to create, surpass anything that they could expect.” I envisioned a semi-autonomous, creative, innovative school employing best practices at the core of its total quality management paradigm in recruiting teachers, supported by best practices (Saiti, 2012). This vision alignment between multiple stakeholders was critical in the early stages of the charter school establishment process.

Lastly, Baker explained that he was hesitant to join the process because he was satisfied in his previous job, considering that he due for promotion in the subsequent year: “I was comfortable. I was going into an AP position the next year. I was satisfied with what I was doing because I was affecting kids where I was at.” However, Jeffreys’ perspective forced Baker to review the mission and vision of the proposed Ki Charter Academy, and he was impressed. Interestingly, Baker described in the discussion that he

came on board because of Jeffreys persistence as stated in the following quote:

The more he bugged me about it, the more I thought about it, and finally, I sat down and read the mission and vision. I did not know you guys, and I met you guys, and I saw that passion there, I started thinking about, “Man, how often to do you get a chance to create something that can impact as many kids as we are going to have a chance to impact?” After six months, I was all in.

While Larry noted that he felt charter schools took funding from more deserving traditional public schools, Jeffreys and Baker thought that charter schools were a conduit through which educational entrepreneurs make money. However, the establishment of Ki Charter Academy worked to change those perspectives and provide the participants with new insight into how charter schools are established, including their financial structure. The establishment process elucidated the nature and operation of charter schools and allowed the participants better comprehend the value of charter schools in the educational system. Initially, Jeffreys thought that charter schools should be avoided, but after working with the Ki Charter Academy leadership team and being involved in the establishment process, his perception changed. Jeffreys said:

Being involved with this charter, I fully understand that charter schools do have a place. I cannot speak for all charter schools, but with residential facilities, there is a need. I believe that charter schools can be amazing institutions and they can operate independently of traditional schools in some applications, but I also think that they can work in conjunction with public schools to increase student achievement. Charter schools, there is a

place, and done with efficacy, they can help out the achievement gap.

Jeffreys admitted that charter schools are necessary in the contemporary education sector, specifically the residential treatment facilities sector. Jeffreys said that the process made him realize that charter schools supplement the efforts of traditional schools in achieving educational goals, especially in achieving the education goals of at-risk students and students with special needs.

Likewise, Larry's perception of charter schools was limited to the two charter schools he had previously worked with, both of which were not performing at his expectations. However, his perceptions changed positively after working with his colleagues in founding and establishing Ki Charter Academy. Larry found that charter schools can assist special populations of students in achieving their education goals faster than in traditional public schools through personalized and specialized teacher attention and different curricular and pedagogical approaches. Additionally, Gregory perceived charter schools as unfavorable compared to public schools, but he later realized that they are necessary for Texas' education system. Gregory said that the experience he had during the application and set up the process of Ki Charter Academy was a learning process for him, particularly the case of residential facility charter schools. He found charter schools to be useful in supplementing the traditional public schools by addressing the needs of exceptional students who cannot assess customized assistance to achieve their educational goals.

Moreover, Karen thought that charter schools gave less attention to the core business of the school, which was the students. She perceived the students' welfare and education performance as the focal business on which charter schools should focus.

Karen thought that akin to traditional public schools, charter schools did not sufficiently address student welfare and education performance. However, Karen's perception changed positively after working with the leadership team in establishing and managing Ki Charter Academy. Karen admitted that the above perception had changed and realized that residential facility charter schools can give students with special needs the utmost attention, a finding echoed in prior research of residential facility charter schools (Saiti, 2012; Torres & Weiner, 2018; Viadero, 2009).

Contrary to the prior responses, Baker said that his perceptions about charter schools had not changed. In the interview conversation, Baker elaborated that:

I do not think so. I still, kind of, am skeptical, I guess, of the education system. I think it has become a monster driven by tests and data and results at the macro level. When you get down to the micro level, the kids are missing out on their education that perhaps they weren't 20 or 30 years ago because of this bureaucracy-driven animal at TEA. Again, I am the anti-education guy out of the four. Do not get me wrong; education is essential. You need to be educated to have an opportunity to get ahead in life at whatever entry level of socioeconomic status you come into, but I think charters have a little bit easier path negotiating through that bureaucracy.

Baker believed that the public education system has too much bureaucracy that can hinder a student's education, especially the exceptional population of students. However, Baker noted that education was critical for all people, and charter schools have a more straightforward way of maneuvering the bureaucracy at the TEA while

maintaining true to the mission and vision of the school, a phenomenon articulated by prior work (Epple et al., 2016; Fox, 2000; Lawton, 2009). According to Baker, “Charters can go in a direction that traditional public schools cannot go because of bureaucracy or whatever, but a charter school can have a vision and a specific mission and execute it that way.”

When asked about whether their perceptions changed after their initial involvement in the Ki Charter Academy establishment process, one person said their perception did change, while four said theirs did not. Here, primary findings indicated that the preparation of the team was critical in its success in applying for and being awarded the charter, while team members’ perceptions changed throughout the charter school application process.

### **Defining Stakeholder Roles**

To further understand how aspiring charter school leaders can establish their own charter schools within a Texas context and beyond, I wanted to comprehend the role of the participants in the founding process of Ki Charter Academy.

Jeffreys revealed that Baker was responsible with the operation perspective of the Ki Charter Academy, as Jeffreys, Larry, and I started the conversation on the establishment of Ki Charter Academy beyond an operational perspective. Gregory asserted that Larry, Jeffreys, and I started the process with much of the planning in the incubation stage. As previously stated, Gregory, Baker, and Karen later came on board as the process progressed. Notably, Jeffreys explained that the team members cooperated and collaborated to see the application process through.

Karen revealed that she did most of the training and advising of the team

members on how to approach and execute certain tasks, given her experiences with the TEA. Karen explained that, “I think my role was very much like that, training.” Jeffreys said that he was involved in every stage of the process, from idea generation to the founding of Ki Charter Academy, and he acknowledged having attended meetings and interviews to discuss and defend the application. He was also involved in drafting the application documents of the school. Larry explained that Jeffreys and I did most of the conceptualization of the school and preliminary work, but he followed our lead and contributed where necessary. However, as an expert in English linguistics, he did most of the editing and revising of the documents. Larry said that, “As an English major, I did pretty much all of the reading over of the application that we had and editing, revising, and maybe rethinking some of the portions of the application.” Here, the diversity of experience and willingness to collaborate rendered all participants valuable members of the leadership team.

Moreover, Gregory played a valuable role in refining the application documents and attended all the meetings during the application process. Likewise, Baker contributed to the application process by giving the process a human resources and operations angle to ensure that the process made sense from a functional perspective. Karen mentored the other participants and gave her professional opinion on the process as it progressed through various stages, again commenting on her experience with the TEA. Karen offered consultancy services to the founders and made sure that the application had its best chance of earning a charter award.

I was also instrumental in the application process. I was involved in drafting the preliminary application documents, with the help of Jeffreys, to ensure that Ki Charter

Academy application process began smoothly. As witnessed by these collaborative efforts, the charter application process was a culmination of joint efforts of the participants as the major stakeholders, echoing best practices regarding teamwork and leadership in educational contexts (Brume & Biel, 2015).

Further, I wanted to comprehend how the target population affected the decision-making role of the participants in the entire process. I asked the participants how the target population (special needs students) affected the decision made throughout the application process. The participants' explanations concurred that everything accomplished during the process was tailored to meet the specific needs of the students in the residential facilities. Jeffreys explained that the team went to great lengths to get the best solutions to the needs of the students in the proposed residential facility:

Just teaching in this environment and seeing the lack of specific programming for students with these specific types of issues, so really impacted how we became innovative. Doing the research, whether it was a different country or a different state, whether it was a residential facility or detention facility or traditional school, we were looking for ways to help these kids.

Baker concurred with Jeffreys' sentiments in his revelation that the reason the original board members were reshuffled was the failure to do what was best for the kids. Baker explained that the initial model of digital learning was a good idea but was impracticable for the target population. Baker explained:

They wanted to put them on computers, and that does not work. I mean, it does not work for most kids in a normal population to sit there behind the



computer all day, let alone for these kids. I mean, I could have easily been one these kids, and you put me behind a computer, 13-years-old, forget about it.

All of the decisions made during the proposal preparation were student-conscious. Students with special needs require unique and innovative approaches to learning, and the members of the Ki Charter Academy leadership acknowledged this and acted upon it.

Gregory revealed that although the process started with a lot of financial hurdles, the process became easier as more facilities and instructional aids arrived. Gregory and Baker explained that the purchasing decisions had to consider the need of the students. For instance, the furniture ordered had to be special and meet the needs of the students, explained by Baker: “The room setup was going to be different, and it was to meet their needs, not because you thought, ‘Oh, it looked beautiful and innovative.’ It was aligned to what kids needed.” Baker and Gregory both argued that special needs student require a different approach to maximize the achievement of learning outcomes, coinciding with best practices (Hoover & Patton, 2005).

Lastly, I wanted to learn more about the changes in stakeholder roles during the application process. My analysis of the responses indicated that most of the participants were not sure of their role in the application process, particularly those that were brought on board as the process progressed. Karen admitted that she was unsure of her specific role in the process at the start and guessed that her role was in regard to mentorship and advisory. Karen explained that her role involved, “...opinion-based guidance, I guess. Support and mentoring at the beginning.” However, later, Karen revealed that she became a consultant for the group members. Likewise, Baker asserted that he was

uncertain of his specific role and guessed he was brought in to give the process a different perspective. However, Baker would later evolve into a stakeholder who gave the process an operations perspective. Moreover, Larry was involved in drafting the preliminary application document and later became the chief editor of the applications, catering to his strengths. Karen changed her role from an advisor to a board member and later became the board president. Eventually, Baker was head of human resources and operations for Ki Charter Academy. These findings indicate that the application process of a charter school can be a complicated endeavor that may involve duty switching. The process may also involve role changing because stakeholders may seek to contribute their expertise to the establishment of an excellent charter school, supporting best practices (Bitz, 2017; Miron, 2017).

### **Challenges During the Charter Application and Submission**

Establishing a public service institution that requires approvals from external regulatory bodies was a challenging process with a fair share of roadblocks and exceptional challenges, especially in a contentious education environment such as Texas (Swaby, 2019). The Ki Charter Academy founders encountered challenges in the process of founding the charter school, and I was interested in comprehending these specific challenges. Over the course of the interviews and focus group discussions, the participants articulated the challenges that they had to overcome in the application process of a charter school in Texas:

1. Lack of enough resources to maintain the quality of services envisioned in the charter
2. Securing funding form the state government

3. Completion check
4. Wrong perceptions about charter schools
5. The support promised to the charter school during the establishment process was not what comes forth after establishment thus necessitating the search for contingency sources of funding
6. Inconsistent support from the TEA and TCSA
7. Lack of legislative comprehension of the requirements of the process and the legal implication of various activities in the process
8. Lack of a curriculum
9. Political interference in the process
10. Bureaucracy
11. Feedback
12. The state board of education suggested several aspects for the charter to be reviewed, clarified and updated
13. Change of generation 18 charter to generation 19 charter.

The challenges listed above were mined from the interview responses and focus group discussions. Jeffreys pointed out that the establishment process for a charter school goes beyond preparing application documents and filing the application forms to looking for funding of the charter schools. This concept of problematic and stressful charter school funding has been a central theme in charter school debates the across the U.S. DeAngelis, Wolf, Maloney, and May (2018) asserted that funding in charter schools dominates national and state debates on public education policies. The researchers' analysis of charter school and findings showed that the discrepancy in financing between

the charter schools and traditional public school across the country was partly responsible for these debates, leading to some misperceptions about charter schools (DeAngelis et al., 2018). The leadership team of the Ki Charter Academy wanted to avoid these misperceptions and maintain good relations with the public.

To finance the charter school, Jeffreys explained that the leadership team had to procure funding for Ki Charter Academy in an environment riddled with uncertainty on the success of getting funding. Jeffreys asserted:

Not knowing if you have funds for the types of programming that you are trying to secure. I am trying to buy champagne on a Budweiser budget. You try and make the application with a perfect world scenario, all the money in the world, but that may not be a reality. If you are approved with the charter and you may have to cut back on some of these programs that you were hoping for, and if you do that, then you compromise the integrity of your charter.

The participants also asserted that high competition for available funds made the endeavor more challenging, as the leadership team had to ensure that they presented a convincing proposal to the state government for funding considerations.

Moreover, participants revealed that the charter school establishment process includes a significant decision regarding the infrastructure for setting up the school. Once a proposal is awarded the charter, the founders must secure infrastructures, such as buildings, learning materials, vehicles, and recreational facilities for students, as prior research has suggested procuring these resources is difficult for new charter schools (Stonecipher, Ashwell, & Wilcox, 2018). Charter schools in Texas receive little funding

and do not receive facility grants from the state government. Therefore, founders often have to scout for other sources of funding, such as non-profit foundations and the local community. However, this was not the case for Ki Charter Academy, as we did not have any infrastructure costs due to serving students that reside in a residential facility. The building structures were already present for Ki Charter to begin operation. Ki Charter leased the buildings for a significantly reduced price compared to that of purchasing new or used infrastructures. Throughout the tenure of the Ki Charter application process, an existing charter was located at the residential facility, serving residential students in the same buildings. This made it easier for Ki Charter Academy, as there was an existing school already present. Once the charter was awarded to Ki Charter Academy, the existing school was notified that the changeover that would occur. The idea of creating Ki Charter stemmed from the notion that Ki Charter could have a better impact on students. The previous charter did not have certain educational programs that Ki Charter was offering, and this is why the founders thought Ki Charter Academy would best serve students.

Karen also noted that, occasionally, the support promised by the Texas Education Agency did not reflect the support given later on. Therefore, the participants had to mitigate this challenge by coming up with contingencies for securing funding and other resources. This type financial arrangement and support was not ideal, as Barge (2019) explained the components sound financial plan for charter school funding as follows:



Figure 10. Sound charter school financial plan (Barge, 2019)

Lobbying for support from multiple sources is a common challenge that most founders of a charter school face. The underfunding of the Texas charter schools exposed the participants to the above challenge. However, the team managed to overcome and secured a foundation to sponsor Ki Charter Academy.

Related to fundraising and community connections, Gregory explained that changing the perception of community members in San Marcos regarding the need for a residential treatment charter school was a big challenge for the founders. I noted that the school was established to serve the San Marcos community and the entire state at large, however, communicating that message to the community was difficult at times. Karen revealed that the founders had to bring the community on board, and that process entailed creating community awareness of the vision and mission of Ki Charter Academy and why it was necessary, supporting prior research (Shen & Berger, 2011).

Baker revealed a crucial aspect concerning the challenges of establishing a charter school. According to Baker, there was much uncertainty regarding the challenges establishing a charter school was an entirely new endeavor, and challenges crop up unexpectedly during the charter application process. Baker's viewpoint was that unless a

founder has experience in the starting charter schools, most of the challenges are unknown to the founders and could differ from context to context. Baker bluntly asserted, “The challenges are unknown until you start rolling up your sleeves and get into it.”

Baker also noted that the process involved a stifling bureaucracy during the interviews and evaluation stages. Therefore, Jeffreys, Baker, Larry and I asserted that they had to follow all the processes to ensure that they got the charter approval and award, even if that meant sacrificing efficiency. Baker also noted in the focus group discussion that political interference was also challenging. The mayor, the Commissioner of Education, and other political players involved in the process threatened the progress of the establishment process. In support of Baker’s point, Jeffreys elaborated:

For me, two things. On the surface, I was surprised how political the process was. It did not disturb me, from the State Board of Education and that little feud going on with the Commissioner of Education and who has the final say and veto power. Then, going to the Texas Charter School Association and they spent days prepping us on who likes charters, who does not like charters. That was just sideways, and I did not like any of it. It should not have been part of the process.

However, the founders had to overcome the challenge by ensuring the process followed all the requirements. All the participants said that the change of the generation charter from 18 to 19 during the SBOE evaluation was challenging because the founders had prepared for the application process using generation 18 instead of the new generation 19. Therefore, the founders had to alter the application to conform to the requirements and guidelines of generation 19 charter schools. Larry also noted that

completion check was challenging because the founders had to plan and prepare thoroughly, considering the generation 19 process was entirely new. Larry expounded:

The first challenge is the completion check. To me, is a real gatekeeping part of the process because it is a go or no go. It is a pass or fails kind of thing. It should be a two-part, “Hey, your application is not complete, we will give you a second chance to— Here are the part areas that you need to work on.” Getting the feedback from the panel and then be able to resubmit. Being that it is a one-time kind of thing, I think it contributes to many charters not making it and even charters that might be, have an outstanding program in mind. They never can get off the ground.

The application only had one evaluation score, meaning that the application had to reach the cut score or be rejected. Lastly, the application lacked a curriculum plan and instructional design. The SBOE also requested that the application should clarify the graduation requirements, organizational staffing, and the approach to be used on distinct population and at-risk students. The changes requested by the SBOE were a challenge because the team had to draft the said documents before the school was set to open, even though there were no guidelines provided by the TEA or the generation 19 application instructions. These seemingly last-minute changes were a roadblock which the participants had to remove to allow the application process to proceed to the setup stage.

To better articulate how the challenges of the application process has affected the participants’ perceptions of the application process in general, I investigated how each participant viewed the challenges, after they had been conquered, as well as how each participant perceived the application process as a result of those challenges. Participants



responded by explaining that the challenges allowed the team to better understand how to build relations with stakeholders such as TCSA, the community, and other regulatory agencies in the education sector. For instance, Baker realized that a successful applicant should have a positive relationship and support of stakeholders as an essential ingredient.

The second challenge that changed participants' perception was the significant level of creativity and innovation required in the planning of the charter school. Jeffreys also realized that the application could have everything correct but fail to target the high-needs students or lack creativity and innovation in providing solutions for those needs. According to Jeffreys, he reasoned that, "I remembered going to the process at the very end, there was that one school which did everything right, but because they did not focus on high needs, it was deemed not successful. Then the Commissioner of Education simply said, 'No, you cannot do just high-needs.'"

The challenge changed Jeffreys perception that it was not about getting the completion packet correct but identifying a need among the students in the community and proposing practical solutions. As a result, the team had to toil to ensure that the proposal precisely identified the need and proposed creative solutions for the needs in the proposed residential facility charter school in the San Marcos community: This specificity for crucial for the success of the charter, even though it was an initial challenge.

However, many challenges of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy were mitigated by innovative approaches to problems. Prior research from the OECD (2016) argued that innovation and creativity enhance the quality of learning through achieving learning outcomes faster and easier using interesting approaches for students, supported

by other work (Glassman & Opengart, 2016; Sharples et al., 2016; Sinay, 2018; Tarman, 2016; Zechariah, 2017). Further, in support of innovation in education, Serdyukov (2017) argued that innovation is indispensable in the contemporary highly competitive world, also arguing that the rapid and unpredictable evolution in the education sector has necessitated that instructors and other stakeholders innovate the theory and practice of learning and teaching. Of innovation, Jeffreys emphasized that, “We did lots and lots of research, and we became innovative enough. Just sitting on that for a while, how can we prove that we are needed and are we innovative enough?” Similarly, OECD (2016) explained that although innovation and creativity in the education sector was a contentious subject, it was critical in spurring growth and competitiveness in the global educational market: The Ki Charter Academy leadership team experienced this contentious subject firsthand.

However, participants often perceived challenges as learning experiences about new and unique types of educational institutions. Gregory said that the challenge of applying for an open enrollment residential charter school was beneficial because I ensured that the application was tailored to bring out the concept of a residential treatment facility. According to Gregory, mitigating the challenge elevated the success of the application because the commissioner and the SBOE were satisfied by aspect of the residential facility. However, other participants suggested that these challenges rendered the process unnecessarily sophisticated. Larry recalled that the process was long and required refocusing on areas that were deemed unacceptable by the Texas Charter Schools Association after the mock interview. The primary TCSA feedback was that some areas of the application process needed revision, as they lacked precision. Larry

explained in the interview that revising a document that was over 400 pages was demanding and occasionally exhausting, yet this process was necessary as there were no other guiding structures to lead the team. The challenge of the revisions was that the founders had to perform more unexpected work, and the process became longer, more engaging, and more complicated.

Likewise, I was interested in finding out which part of the application process that caused doubts about moving forward in the process because of the challenges above. The discourse in the previous sections have demonstrated that the application process was a complicated one often marred by challenges. According to Baker, appearing before the board was the biggest challenge. Although Baker did not attend the interviews with the board, he gauged the intensity of the undertaking based on the discussions and cautionary advice given by various support personnel, such as the TCSA during the preparations. Baker asserted:

This person hates charters, and this one does not support charters, and you are going to have a hard time convincing, whatever, just hearing all that potential resistance to, I suggest, as a charter in general, gave me some pause. I am glad I did not.

Baker revealed that the above discussions scared him, and he confessed to being lucky for not being a part of the team who appeared before the board for more questioning and evaluation. Karen shared Baker's sentiment, arguing that defending the proposal was a challenge because the founding team had to convince the board and other regulatory stakeholders beyond a reasonable doubt that San Marcos community needed a residential facility charter school. Karen also revealed that there was growing anxiety or

fear of misunderstanding during the interviews, especially after the mock interview, which Baker asserted that they “got hammered.” The team had to do much to ensure that they passed the interview stage. Further, Karen said:

It was almost like, if you were coming from an independent school public and you were going to support a charter, it was like, you are betraying education. Moreover, if not, if you were coming from charter to go into where you could run a system, that is like, “Oh, what do you know?”

Karen argued that justifying a charter school in the community was challenging because the community, regulatory authorities, and other stakeholders negatively judged the ability of the founding team to run a charter school. Gregory revealed that getting the support of the community was a challenge, and he recalled Jeffreys and me getting the approval of San Marcos Schools superintendent.

However, Baker revealed that although the team was required to explain their plans in full to the community, the team went the extra mile to meet the persons of interest to explain their proposal and garner their support. Baker explained in the interview that, “We developed that relationship with our partners here in San Marcos and met with them. We went one step further in trying to garner that relationship. Most folks do not do that because they do not have to do that.”

In this regard, relationships were key to the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. According to Gross (2015), relationships are critical to the sustainability of public schools, with Chrzanowski, Rans, and Thompson (2005) having argued, “Ensuring a high-quality public education in a globally competitive environment requires effective use of local capacities, assets, and networks” (p. 7). Therefore, the founders understood

that the future success and sustainability of Ki Charter Academy would be impacted by the nature of the relationship the school has with San Marcos community.

As earlier discussed, perceptions of the community were also a significant factor to consider because of their influence on the success of Ki Charter Academy. In this context, Karen argued that most community members and other stakeholders thought that charter schools were hostile competition to public schools in resource allocation, and that the many community members pondered why parents preferred charter schools. Further, Jeffreys explained that creating a sufficiently innovative and creative proposal may cause doubt. Jeffreys asserted:

It is almost like, well, to get a charter school, is there a problem with the current education in your area? If there is not a problem, oh, you better have one heck of a reason to open up your charter school.

According to Jeffreys, the success of the application was highly reliant on the ability of the founders to explain the existence of a need for a charter school through identifying a niche in the education sector in that precise community. Notably, Jeffrey revealed that failure to identify an actual critical need might lead to disqualification. The finding from these responses was that the founders needed to succinctly define and elaborate on the educational problem need, and then the founders needed to propose specific solutions for the charter application to be approved.

Lastly, I was interested in understanding how the participants adapted to the challenges encountered. I enquired about the challenges, implications to the application process, and the adaptation to the challenges. Larry asserted that the team had requested the TCSA for guidance on the process, explaining that, “Without TCSA, there would not

have been—I am not sure that we would have made it in expertise. I think that the guidance that they provided was phenomenal.” According to Larry, the process would not have been faster and successful without the help of the TCSA. Likewise, Baker explained that the TCSA coached the participants on various things to expect during the application process and how to respond to such developments. Baker gave an example of how TCSA coached the team on what to expect during the interview with the SBOE. The association cautioned the participants on the people to appease for during the interview and the areas to get thoroughly acquainted with during the interviews. Baker termed TCSA support in the application process as instrumental in the success of the charter application, particularly during external evaluation.

### **Feedback from External Agencies**

Because external agencies were involved throughout the application process, I questioned the respondents on whether the feedback they got from the TEA and TCSA was sufficient. I wanted to comprehend how information was relayed to the applicants during the process and the traffic of the information flow during various stages of the process, as prior research has suggested that feedback is critical in external evaluations (Bayerlein, 2014; Benjamin, 2012).

Gregory explained that the information flow between the contracted support staff of the Texas Charter Schools Association and the founding team was interactive. The information traffic was higher in some stages than others. For instance, there was more information flow to the team members from the TCSA support staff contracted to help the team in drafting high quality and complete applications during the preparation of the initial application documents. Secondly, there was minimal information flow from the

SBOE and other regulatory agencies during the last stages of the process. In the interview conversation, Karen asserted:

It was a little late. As usual. They tend to run late and ask forgiveness.

Anybody else runs late, and you are damned. It is not there to help and all that stuff. What is fair for one is fair for another. No, that is not the case. I was like, “Oh, well, it is us, we are building this plan, so we are going to be two weeks late. Oh, make sure you get your report, and it is due tomorrow.” It is not timely, and I think that is the lack of inexperience. I think when I was a curriculum coordinator in the late eighties, I had that mindset. Look at all those years since then. I do not like to tolerate late items, but I would rather have something done well that I can function and work with and slap together and say, “Here it is.” I see that a little bit, and I cannot understand why they cannot see it. The agency is not functioning out of a garage.

Karen explained that the dissemination of feedback was delayed in several instances. According to Karen, the lateness in giving feedback by the TEA was unpleasant. Karen explained that TEA gave feedback late, yet the applicants were not allowed to apply late, as the TEA did not consider late applications. Karen explained that the tardiness affected the process because the team was forced to rush in the next sections when feedback came in late.

According to Larry, most of the feedback came from the TEA compared to TCSA. Larry revealed that it felt impersonal, while Baker also noted that the information occasionally came late. Baker also explained that the information dissemination from the

TEA determined the graduation of the process from the current stage to the next. Lastly, Jeffreys asserted that the process did not have much feedback because the process was two-way affair: Either it pushed through or was rejected. Here, the participants urged that although partnerships with external agencies were necessary for the charter application process, these partnerships were often strained, and communication lagged.

### **Impact on Participants and Lessons Learned**

#### **Experiences of the Participants in Ki Charter Academy**

The process of establishing an educational facility was full of experiences in different forms. The interactions with other founders and stakeholders in the establishment process exposed the founders and other involved people to a variety of activities that enriched their educational experiences. The participants chosen for this study played various roles in the charter application process. Therefore, the participants had crucial information regarding the process. Consequently, I was interested in comprehending the impact of the process on the respondents and the experiences during the process.

Jeffreys and I completed most of the charter application forms during the initial stages of the process. However, Baker, Karen, Gregory, and Larry contributed to various stages of the process. Gregory and I approached Baker and Larry with the idea of establishing Ki Charter Academy. Jeffreys and I had to overcome the skepticism that may have erupted during the initial stages of idea generation and sparked the conversation among his friends who later became co-founders and board members of Ki Charter Academy. However, some participants were skeptical about the success of the ideas and were uncertain about leaving the stable job opportunities in their current positions,



considering that they were venturing into an endeavor filled with uncertainties. The respondents had little comprehension regarding the idea that I was selling to them because the Ki Charter Academy idea was in its infant stages.

Some of the participants had no previous experience in establishing charter schools and perceived that such an endeavor as one that was marred with a high risk of uncertainty. Nonetheless, I convinced the respondents to come on board and started drafting the Ki Charter Academy application forms. The process had many revisions emanating from a joint effort of examining the drafts and insights from the external support of TCSA. Additionally, I felt that the diversity of the charter application team members was a valuable learning process because each member had a unique contribution to the process. The public school teaching experiences of some of the participants provided a comparative basis for participants who had no prior experience in public school teaching and mode of operations.

One participant pointed out that one member gave the process a scientific look, and another made technical contributions. Furthermore, the participants asserted that attending the charter application meetings with the commissioners, SBOE, and TCSA and attending the interview yielded valuable experience for the four founders and the two board members. These joint efforts enabled the participants to gain different viewpoints on the vision and mission of Ki Charter Academy. Moreover, the participants referred to the experiences as a lengthy process “full of revisions, editions, and learning.”

### **Lessons Learned from the Application Process**

The application process presented an opportunity for participants to learn new things about the founding of charter schools in Texas. Therefore, I intended to learn about

what participants did not know before the application process but learned during the process. I also wanted to find out about the most important lesson the participant learned during the process. Given her experiences with the TEA, Karen admitted that she knew the application process of a charter school was long and complicated but did not comprehend the degree of complexity and duration of the process until she was involved in one. Karen suggested she had a clue, but her involvement in the process made her realize that the process was very long and complicated with many requirements to be satisfied:

I knew it was very complex, and I knew it was long, but I did not realize how long. It was good that you all have a bunch of writers and everything because it would be difficult to be able to I think, and I've written many documents, but I think it'd be difficult if just one person tried to write it to really do it well and to have it sustainable.

Likewise, Baker asserted that he knew little about the process. However, working with Gregory, Jeffreys, Larry, Karen, and myself made Baker realize that an application process for charter schools was marred by bureaucracy, especially when educational and regulatory authorities are involved. Baker admitted that although he did not know much about the application process of a charter, the bureaucracy involved in the process caught his attention. Baker also revealed that getting the charter for the Ki Charter Academy was a long process of revisions and lobbying for support from TCSA and advisory from TEA. In some instances, a specific stakeholder in the agency must give the green light for the application process to graduate to the next stage. For instance, the SBOE must approve the Commissioner of Education proposals for the charter award. The charter applicant

would be rejected if the SBOE does not award the charter, as there was no appeal for the decision of the SBOE. While these stringent procedural requirements are enacted to ensure that only high quality and thorough charter schools can operate, they have an undesirable effect in the process through the increased bureaucracy. Moreover, in response to the question regarding the application process, Larry said:

I did not know how rigorous it was. I did not know how meticulous it was.

I did not know how time-consuming it was going to be. It was just such a huge undertaking. I felt that it was more work than I had done in many of my grad classes.

Larry said that he did not comprehend that the process would be meticulous, lengthy, and time-consuming. The above findings concur with Karen's new experience and revelation regarding the application process. Larry admitted that his perceptions on the process were misleading, as never knew that the process of establishing a charter school was a massive undertaking for the stakeholders. Furthermore, Jeffreys learned that application process for charter schools was intense, highly involving, and time-consuming, echoing prior research on the complexity of establishing charter schools (Lawson, 2009). Some of the adjectives that participants used to describe the application process include:

1. Highly involved
2. Detailed
3. Bureaucratic
4. Intensive
5. Long

## 6. Complex

However, the participants shared positive aspects of the application process as well. Larry learned that when a person embarked on a project that benefits others, it has a higher chance of being a success. According to Larry, the application was successful, and TEA gave positive feedback, because they liked what the team envisioned for the students in the San Marcos community, especially the special-needs students. Larry also learned that suitable persons with the appropriate skills, knowledge, and experience are necessary for the process. TEA was convinced that the envisioned Ki Charter Academy had a good proposal which would benefit the students, even though Gregory explained that the leadership team had little knowledge of charter schools and residential facilities.

Gregory's involvement in the process provided an excellent opportunity for Gregory to learn more about residential facilities and the joint operation in partnership with an open enrollment charter school for regular learners. Karen explained that the interview with the SBOE and the mock interview with TCSA was a learning process for her. Karen learned that the errors deemed as minor could be equally demanding, although they were not worth the panic, as the team should rectify the errors and be confident about their applications. Baker also explained that working with the other participants was a valuable learning experience, although he asserted that he did not learn anything because the application succeeded. According to Baker, there would have been more lessons learned if the application process failed. Baker's response to this question was vague and invalid because he defined the process as one full of learning experiences, yet he asserted that he did not learn any crucial lesson. Lastly, Jeffreys explained:

That collaborating with educational professionals that are collaborating

with public school teachers. Collaborating with the institution of higher education, Texas State. Organizational state stakeholders, community, it is imperative. Because if you want to produce an educational model that's going to make a difference, you have to collaborate because through discussion, some wonderful things happen.

Jeffreys' principal argument in the above statement was that collaboration was critical in the charter application process and education in general. Jeffreys learned that a successful educational institution requires collaboration and partnerships with other stakeholders, such as the regulatory authorities, community members, and relevant institutions.

Moreover, the participants were asked to elaborate about their most important takeaway from the process of establishing Ki Charter Academy. According to Larry, the most significant takeaway was that the process was demanding in researching, planning and joining all the information together to create a strong application that could earn the charter award. Larry revealed that the charter award was the culmination of shrewdness, teamwork, hard work, and sacrifice of the team members: "The takeaway for me was just how much we actually sat down together and planned and how well we planned together to make our packet strong." Likewise, Baker believed that the most significant takeaway was the TCSA mock interview, which was responsible for the success of the process and charter award. Baker explained that although the team had done a lot of research, planning, and preparation for the interviews, they had not thought out of the box because they "got hammered, absolutely hammered" in the mock interview process.

Further, Baker explained that the team had memorized the generation 18 packet

and tried to put it in generation 19 context. Therefore, things fell apart during the mock interviews because what they had on the paper was not what they explained when questions were asked. Baker explained in the discussion:

What was on paper, when they started asking us about it was not how we intended it to be. How we answered them was not how we needed to answer the board when we went up there that day. I think that shifted our focus. Number one, we're not used to failure, we're not going to fail, this isn't going to happen, so we went back, not to the drawing board because the philosophies and what we're going to put into classrooms and everything that we were going to do just was what was fit better into the 19 packet.

According to Baker, the team had to recollect and refine the version of the application by addressing the faults and informational loopholes. Baker's opinion was that the mock interview was the reason Ki Charter Academy earned the charter award: "The mock board, the TCSA I had, that was what did it for us in my opinion." Further, Gregory asserted that, "It took someone that had good organizational skills and management skills to divvy up the work. It seemed like certain people were assigned certain things and then brought them back."

Moreover, Jeffreys explained that he had two most important takeaways from the process. The first takeaway was that the process had political interference, although the application eventually succeeded. Jeffreys argued that although in some cases, politics may be unavoidable but unnecessary, and he recommended avoidance of political sideshows. Secondly, Jeffreys explained that relationships and resources are valuable in

the success of the process. Jeffreys supported Baker's argument that TCSA was very resourceful. Jeffreys termed TCSA support as "phenomenal," as Jeffreys said, "Without TCSA, there would not have been—I am not sure that we would have made it in expertise." Larry agreed with Jeffreys' and Baker's sentiment on the resourcefulness of TCSA in his commentary of Baker's statement that TCSA was "a good investment." Finally, Karen's most important takeaway was that the charter application process was filled with political showdowns, although she felt that they are a common part of the process: "They are all a little bit different, but they are all political one way or the other. As all schools are." Karen recommended that the team can only attempt to be accommodating as the Ki Charter Academy strived to be.

### **Improving the TEA Application Process**

Although the process was completed successfully, I felt it critical to understand how the TEA application process could be improved in order to streamline the process for future charter applications. I requested the participants to explain whether there were areas that needed to change in the TEA application process for charter schools. Baker explained that the process has a bureaucracy that he thought needed to change, supported by prior research (Luca, 2016; Olsen, 2007). Baker held the opinion that change was necessary and streamlining the process would significantly reduce bureaucracy. Here, the TEA should reevaluate all the stages and requirements of the process and get rid of the redundancy and bureaucracy in the process while maintaining the core stages of the process.

Likewise, Gregory argued that the TEA should evaluate the section on residential facilities to make it more detailed. According to Gregory, the process was insufficient in

the prescription of the correlation and co-existence of a residential facility for the distinct populace of students and open enrolment charter schools for other students. Gregory explained that the TEA should review their policy guidelines on the requirements of each type of charter school, as the TEA guidelines did not differentiate between the two as much as Gregory would have liked.

Regarding the completion check, part of the charter application process, Larry asserted:

Well, I think the completion check should be a two-part process. I think a charter should have an opportunity to—The timeline part of it is that is not the challenge. It is just the fact that it is a pass or fails kind of thing. I think that the completion check should be a two part. A charter should get a chance to resubmit. Then I think the external review, it should be a single panel of experts who are writing one another's. I do not know what their criteria are. I do not know what it is that they are looking for in that external review, but I think that that needs to be a dedicated panel.

Larry's principal argument was that TEA should review the evaluation process and criteria of the applicants to incorporate a chance for revision and resubmission for the applicants that may have fallen short of the required standards. Larry argued that such applicants require a second chance to revise the application and comply with all the applications requirements and best practices. Moreover, Karen explained that TEA should rethink their sustainability policies, explaining that, "They are probably the prime example right now of not having sustainability. They are keeping the same thing, but they are calling it something different." Karen issue with the process in this regard was that



TEA guidelines on the application process for a charter school kept on changing, which for her, was not sustainable.

Karen argued that the inconsistency in the process needed to be reviewed and rectified. The changes in generation guidelines from generation 1 to generation 19 were redundant. The other participants supported her viewpoint in their arguments that the rapid changes in the process guidelines increased the uncertainty of the success rate of the process. The participants explained that the changes in the generation for their case when their application process was ongoing led to a myriad of other challenges for the team. Jeffreys also added that streamlining the process would give other applicants a fair chance of getting a charter. Jeffreys revealed that entering into a partnership with the Texas Charter Schools Association also had a financial implication, as the founders had to pay \$10,000 for the consultancy service. In Jeffreys' viewpoint, some applicants may not afford the TCSA services. Therefore, such applicants require more favorable conditions to complete charter applications and earn charters.

### **Future Participation if the Application Failed**

Given the rigor and complexity of the charter application process, I was interested in comprehending how participants felt about repeating the process if Ki Charter Academy had not earned the charter, as I aimed to comprehend the persistence of the team in getting the charter. Karen explained that she would probably repeat the process. Baker said that he was not sure whether he would go through the experience again. Larry, Gregory, and Jeffreys said they would repeat the process if Ki Charter Academy had not secured the award.

In many ways, the determination of the team was fueled by the need in the

community for serving the kids in San Marcos. As discussed in the introductory and literature review chapters, the founders noticed there was an educational gap, especially among the high-risk students and other individual cadres of students in San Marcos. As a result, the founders understood that the community required a solution through a learning approach that was different from the learning methods used in the traditional public school, exercising the freedom that charter schools often have as supported by prior research (Epple et al., 2016; Fox, 2002; Lawton, 2009). Therefore, the founders desired to serve unique students and other students, and this zeal for service to kids explained their impeccable determination in establishing Ki Charter Academy.

Likewise, I asked the participants whether they would have adopted different perspectives or used different approaches during the application process had the application failed. The process had challenges that the participants encountered during the process and were a revelation and a learning process. I suggested a repetition of the process and asked the participants what they would do differently if they were to repeat the process. This question aimed to articulate the learning experiences and areas that participants felt they needed a different approach, considering the challenges discussed above.

The participants unanimously agreed that they would not change much during the process in the event of repetition. Larry explained that the process was “well thought.” Likewise, Jeffreys and Gregory explained that the participants made all the changes needed to be made and invested in the process sufficiently. Further, I asked the participants whether there was any part of the application that they would change if they had to repeat the process. Responses were largely mixed. Larry, Karen, and Jeffreys

responded that they would not change anything, while Gregory responded that he was unsure. Although Baker and I provided vague and ambiguous responses for this specific question, I was convinced that the team was well composed with all the necessary skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for the application. The findings of this question in the interviews slightly differed with the findings of the focus group discussion, however. In the interviews, all the participants said that they would not have changed anything in the process, while only three maintained this response in the focus group discussion.

Moreover, I wanted to explore specific parts of the application process that could be amended and justifications for those amendments. Jeffreys explained that he would amend the completion check, as he reasoned that the completion check had limitations because it gave shallow feedback on whether the application satisfied the requirement to push through to the next stage or not. Jeffreys argued that he would amend the completion check to ensure that it provides positive feedback to the applicant with a chance to rectify the areas with shortcomings. However, Larry differed with Jeffreys in his viewpoint that the completion check should not be simplified. Larry's objection was evident:

I would not change that at all if you cannot complete a packet to get a charter. How are you going to run a charter? That would be my take. I would cut out the veto process if the State Board of Education or Commissioners rep say you get it, you should get it.

Larry explained that getting all the requirements right would have been better instead of shortcutting generation 18 into 19, as generation 19 featured new application processes and information. Therefore, Larry emphasized that he would remove the veto

process to ensure that all applications must complete all of the requirements. Jeffreys explained that the TEA application guidelines had a major drawback because TEA collectively considered residential facilities and open enrollment facilities as the same school, yet Jeffrey noted that the two were different. Jeffreys asserted:

We are an RF [residential facility], we are a niche facility, we serve the niche, and there is not an application for us. We are all lumped into the same. We stated in our application that we are serving residential facilities, but what does that look like, how does that look like, what is the differentiation of that on the actual application throughout their process at TEA? I think it is just, we are all lumped into one, and we are not all the same

Notably, Ki Charter Academy is an open enrollment charter school serving residential care students and required specific guidelines as opposed to the general guidelines postulated by TEA. Here, multiple participants agreed that our proposal for Ki Charter Academy was unique and different enough from more common charter school applications that the TEA should have recognized these differences and been much more accommodating.

Likewise, Karen explained that she would amend the inconsistency in TEA support, arguing that the TEA's promised support was not always delivered. Karen explained that she had been observing TEA for the last ten years, and the support promised to some successful applicants did not match the actual support given. The above inconsistency could be due to the fluctuation in local revenue and state funds advanced by the national or state government. Karen's assertions may be supported by

prior research, as 4% of the Texas schools have been burdened with 51% of the total 5.1 million public school learners, demonstrating the disparity in resource allocation, and more specifically, the teacher-student ratio in public schools (Texas Education Agency Snapshot, 2014).

I argued that the disproportionality of resources in the public sector needed solutions such as charter schools. The TEA has pledged support to these institutions but has only partly honored some of their promises. Karen argued that she would amend resource allocation to public schools to ensure balance and consistency. Further, Karen explained that TEA lacked legislative understanding in her assertion:

The lack of legislative understanding and the implementation and understanding by the powers to be at the agency to put into place what needs to be. They do not have that. I would debate any of them. It is just not there. Lip service.

Karen also argued that the guidelines were inconsistent. For instance, the process changed from generation 18 to 19, while Ki Charter Academy was in process. Here, the participants urged that the educational agencies involved with establishing charter schools, primarily the TEA, consider how changes in application policies affect applications in-progress.

Larry also asserted that the charter school's application process needed to be amended and streamlined to be favorable for applicants. I then asked Gregory to evaluate the board selection process. Gregory explained the selection was within the confines of Texas Tribunal on school boards, and I continued to discuss the concept of board selection of charter schools and suggested that TEA should investigate how schools select

their board members and the criteria used in the selection process. Gregory agreed with my thoughts on the board selection process.

The argument that Gregory and I attempted to pursue was that TEA should have a clear guideline with elaborate criteria of how schools in Texas should appoint their board of management, including charter schools. Karen explained that an open enrollment charter school should live its vision of an open enrollment facility where every student has the right to the best quality education. This includes selection of the very best school board to lead the charter school. Going an opposite direction, Baker added that familiarizing oneself with the charter school interviews and the application package was critical for the Ki Charter Academy's application success. However, Baker argued that the main challenge was in the implementation of the charter school itself further down the road. Lastly, Jeffreys explained that applicants should justify a charter school in the context of a specific geographical location which is supported by reliable research findings to give the application more credibility. Therefore, a credible application should substantiate the charter school's outline for the resources necessary for successful operation, ultimately supporting students' education.

### **Cost/Benefit Analysis of Re-Applying**

I asked the participants about the costs and benefits of starting over and re-applying for another charter had the original charter application been rejected. Without anticipation, the participants' responses to this question were problematic due to the following reasons.

The first reason was that the interviewer-related limitations were partly responsible for the low response rate, as I was an insider researcher could have affected

how participants responded. Moreover, as crucial stakeholder in the charter application process, the question was posed to Baker only, given time restraints and other unforeseen circumstances during the data collection and analysis process. There are conceivable clarifications as to why an interviewer can choose to administer questions in a survey selectively. However, the most probable reason in this context was that I was seeking clarification on an earlier question. Priede, JoKinen, Ruuskanen and Farrall (2013) and Given (2008) explained that going off-script in an interview was expected, as some cases may call for further probing to clarify as the subject of the interview. I had previously asked the likelihood of repeating the application process, which Baker was the only participant who gave a 'not sure' response. Therefore, I chose to probe the subject further with another question, where I was expected to reply first and explain my own costs and benefits of re-applying for the charter.

Baker explained that the amount of time and effort the founding team had put into the process would end in vain. Secondly, Baker argued that the application had consumed a substantial financial amount, considering the team sought support and guidance from the TEA, acquired stationery, and procured other resources needed for the process. Baker's concerns were supported by prior research, as the Pennsylvania School Board Association (2014) explained that the charter school application process has a financial impact on the founders. For instance, Jeffreys explained that the process cost the founders \$10,000 to secure TCSA consultancy services in the application process. Such resources would have been used in vain had the TEA rejected the Ki Charter Academy application. Subsequently, Baker explained that the process would consume more resources when repeated. Lastly, participants suggested that the rejection of the application would be

demoralizing to some members of the team. On the contrary, I felt that repeating the process had benefits because the team would learn from their mistakes and ensure that the application conformed to the guidelines and requirements of the TEA. Ultimately, some founders reasoned that there was a considerable financial cost to re-applying for the charter that may not have been worth the benefit, while others justified the cost as a learning process and one that would serve students.

### **Suggestions to Future Charter School Applicants**

One of the primary functions of this study was to provide future charter school leadership teams with guidance on how to best navigate the charter application process. I inquired about the suggestions the participants would make to guide future applicants for a charter school award. The question aimed at evaluating the use of the learning experience of the participants to advise or recommended a feasible course of action to future applicants. Larry advised future applicants to be prepared for unexpected developments and have contingencies for them, and he also explained that delays might happen in the process, and the founders must be prepared to handle issues arising from such delays. Finally, Larry recommended that a good team with the right balance of skills, knowledge, and experience was needed because the process has several areas which may require members to share experience and knowledge.

According to Gregory, numerous factors influenced the success of the charter school application. Gregory pinpointed that future applicants should invest in procuring external support services if they can afford them as this support increased the success rate of the application in the context of Ki Charter Academy. Sharing a similar viewpoint, Baker also advised that applicants should purchase the services of TCSA in Texas school



contexts. However, Gregory explained that the Ki Charter Academy application did not receive much stage-based feedback, and the little feedback that came was a notification that the application had qualified for next stage in the process. As a result, Gregory recommended that the TEA should review the application process to clarify the guidelines on residential facility partnerships with regular charter schools and provide much more robust feedback throughout the process.

Notably, Gregory recommended that future applications that involve residential facilities should clarify the plan of a residential facility. He elucidated that failure to sufficiently explain the residential aspect of the application could lead to more questions, revisions, and probably rejection of the application, concurring with prior research (Day et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2014). Related to the application process, Karen asserted that future applicants should tailor their applications in a manner that conforms with the TEA guidelines and reflects sustainability. Baker also explained that future applicants should review the application submitted in the last two years to familiarize themselves with the expectations, standards required, and errors to avoid. Finally, Karen also advised that future applicants comprehend the need and the educational gap they intend to fill.

Speaking to how applications are crafted, Jeffreys advised that future applicants should be creative and innovative in crafting the models to be used in the school among other aspects of the envisioned charter school. I probed Jeffreys further and asked him for specific advice he would give to future applicants. Jeffreys supported Baker's recommendations that future applicants should review previous applications. Jeffreys also added that applicants should conduct detailed research work on the educational gap, educational models, and best practices to enhance creativity and innovation, supported by

prior research (Epple et al., 2016). These findings suggest that the charter school application process is a resource- and time-demanding process for which future applicants should be adequately prepared for through research, planning, and rehearsing.

I explained that the application team did not receive much of the support that the team initially needed, stating, “We were not given a whole lot of advice.” The following statement made by Baker unmasked the critical nature of guidance and support during the application process:

From the get-go, you cannot do this alone. You need outside support. You need outside guidance whether it is TCSA or whether it is other charter school founders, you must get some guidance from outside of your bubble.

According to Baker, the external support extended to the applicants was crucial in comprehending the requirements of the process, and future applicants should seek the same support and request feedback and advice from any supportive agencies or individuals.

Likewise, Karen emphasized the need for support and guidance from experts and applicants who have previously gone through the process. Further, Karen advised that future applicants should also engage the founding team with the right combination of skills needed to develop a comprehensive proposal for a charter school. Larry suggested that applicants should be proactive listeners precisely during the training and prepare a complete, credible, objective proposal with a definitive statement of the problem, learning gaps, and proposed solutions to the identified problem. Lastly, Baker asserted that future applicants in Texas-specific contexts should be “proactive in seeking and creating a relationship with TEA. Seek guidance, create those relationships, continue to

ask the questions until you get the answers that you need. I think it is important to create those relationships.” Here, all participants suggested that future applicants seek advice from successful applicants and external agencies, as well as invest the necessary resources to compile a high-quality application. However, a clear vision and adequate funding were also important to many of this study’s participants.

Regarding the initial vision of the charter school, Jeffreys agreed with me that any person with limited knowledge on the charter application process should put their ideas on paper and document their development process, while Gregory explained that the crucial aspect of starting the application was crafting the vision and mission of the proposed charter school. Gregory explained that the vision and mission can provide a strong foundation for seeking support and financing, continuing by saying that future application teams should sell the idea of the proposed charter school to relevant stakeholders using the vision and mission. Jeffreys added that the concept of financing was critical and should be clarified in the proposal. Jeffreys explained the significance of procuring funding:

Programming is ultimately going to be decided by your funding. The entire charters that you just wrote, your entire charter could be total shenanigans because you cannot afford any of the programming’s and then the money you do have, you will have a 10% of what you wanted. As far as programming, you’re compromised.

Jeffreys emphasized that applicants should consider financial projection for the proposed charter school to avoid having a proposal that has no economic viability. The nature of learning, instructional methods, quality of teachers, amenities, and other factors

are determined by the funds available, and I also recommended that the charter school grant should be included in the financial provisions. By aligning the charter school vision with qualified leaders and a solid funding structure, a new charter school can thrive in challenging educational environments, such as the one in Texas.

### **Conclusion**

The application and establishment process of Ki Charter Academy was a valuable learning process for all participants, as they experienced the document preparation, evaluation, interview, and establishment activities. The participants revealed that some of the activities they completed produced a humbling feel. There were also misperceptions which were changed by personal experiences. The participants revealed that they had little information regarding the nature and operations of the charter school, and therefore, their involvement in the process enriched their knowledge of charter schools in general. The participants also said that the timeline provided by the TEA was sufficient for the process but noted that occasionally feedback came in late, thus forcing the applicants to expedite some stages.

The participants mentioned that timely feedback would be critical in ensuring that applicants have ample time during various stages in the application. The process had challenges which the participants dealt with and used them as a learning experience to improve for the next stage. However, the participants revealed that there were areas that needed improvement. The data analyzed and discussed showed that external support, adequate preparation, collaboration, mock interviews, and identifying the founder with the right skills and experience was critical in the success of the Ki Charter Academy application process. Many of these findings led to the conclusions and recommendations

which will be discussed in the final chapter of this study.

## **V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Chapter Overview**

Discussion and implications, chapter five of this study, provides a brief overview of this study, its guiding questions and design, followed by a discussion of the conclusions that I drew based on the data analysis and findings of this study. Chapter five also discusses the key findings of the study regarding the process of establishing a charter school. The conclusions are discussed collectively. Further, the chapter includes a detailed discourse on the recommendations made based on the findings and conclusion of this study. The recommendations are outlined in three categories: Research, practice, and policy.

### **Brief Overview of Study**

I utilized a qualitative strategy in this study to help understand the perspectives of the founders and the board members of Ki Charter Academy through humanistic and holistic methods. Moreover, I wanted to understand the process of establishing the charter school and the people's roles within the school, as well as the role of such schools in promoting quality education for students with special needs. As such, this study used a qualitative method to investigate and answer the following research questions:

1. What was the process of establishing Ki Charter Academy, a specialized charter school in Central Texas?
2. What roles did stakeholders play in the establishment of the charter school?
3. What lessons can be learned from the successes and challenges of establishing Ki Charter Academy to inform future specialized charter schools?

The study employed Vygotsky's social constructivism framework developed in 1896

(Vygotsky, 1978). The theory emerged as an attempt to make sense of the social world of learning and to connect people to their experiences with one another. Constructivism advocates for sharing people's, experiences, challenges and successes through interactions and gaining a common-sense knowledge that permeates understanding of current relations (O'Connor, 2017). Within a constructivist framework, as the researcher, I wanted to identify voices and perspectives that were collaborative and constructive in establishing Ki Charter Academy.

## **Discussion of Key Findings**

### **Challenges in the Establishment Process of a Charter School**

Starting a charter school in Texas was a highly involved process that required sacrifices, commitments, and a great fervor to see the process through. However, the charter school establishment process varies from state depending on strictness and provisions of the state education agency. Given the findings of the current study, applicants in Texas are likely to encounter challenges in the establishment process of a charter school.

More broadly in Texas, the numerous hurdles that applicants encounter in the charter application process has occasionally discouraged some applicants, while others face the rather unfortunate verdict of rejection by the Commissioner of Education and the SBOE. On the contrary, the hurdles not only serve as a learning experience but also improves the resilience and determination of the applicants in providing solutions to the needs of the education market identified. The participants in interviews and focus group discussion identified numerous challenges, but there were several that dominated the discussion.

To begin, Sullins and Miron (2005) researched the challenges encountered when establishing a charter school, and this study uncovered many of these same challenges. Many charter school applicants find themselves in a strained financial situation to procure physical infrastructure to start up the school. For instance, in the focus group discussions, Gregory supported Baker's argument that starting up Ki Charter Academy was challenging, especially because the infrastructure to enable the smooth running of the school was inadequate or lacking at all. Gregory asserted that, "When I first started teaching here, we had chalkboards and no chalk. Yes. You had to buy your chalk, and your hand was your eraser. That was it. That is where we started."

Furthermore, the study showed that opening a charter school was an involved process marred with challenges in every stage: Getting approval from the SBOE was identified as the main challenge, as elected officials are incredibly difficult to schedule for meetings, let alone a meeting with prospective charter applicants. The first time we saw the members of the state board was at our interview. As a result, the entire process would have helped tremendously if the leadership team could have met and discussed fully what our prospective charter wished to offer in a setting that was not at the final interview.

Likewise, the governance and management of a charter school can be challenging. Sullins and Miron (2005) explained that autonomy and freedom of management was a core tenet in the establishment of a charter school. However, the process of selecting the school board presents a fair share of challenges, and there were no set standards in appointing the school board members. However, the process must be open and transparent. I noted that the current regulation by the TEA had no set provisions



governing how the board of management of schools would be selected, thus creating ambiguity. Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (2014) explained:

Ineffective board governance, whether because of poor recruitment, inadequate training or education, a lack of commitment, feeble decision-making processes, or weak leadership, creates demands for more external controls, restraints, restrictions, regulations, and reports on charters. The external requirements employed to address ineffective board governance not only undermines one of the basic concepts of chartering, but it also undermines the quality of education provided to students. (para. 6)

Management was vital in the success of the charter application process. The participants revealed that they had various distinct roles in the application process and running of charter schools. These participants eventually became the founding team and took various roles in the management of Ki Charter Academy. The founders were suitable for a top management position because they had more information about the charter and the vision and mission of the charter school, and if leaders were not selected correctly, the quality of education could have been affected, suggested by prior research as problematic for charter schools (Casey, 2014; Schwenkenberg & VanderHoff, 2015; Uludag, 2014).

Further, Casey's (2015) study on U.S. charter school challenges noted that U.S. charter schools often experience political interference. The above revelation coincided with the findings of this study. The process of approval of a charter school proposal and charter award has political participants who may have different self-aligned interests in the establishment of a charter school or the charter award process. The participants

revealed that the process had political interference which led to feuding, mentioned by Jeffreys. Similarly, the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (2014) asserted:

Whether people want to acknowledge it or not, education is political.

While education within a school may not be political (and that is doubtful), education on the broader stage is political, as it is about philosophy, policy, and the public purse. (p. 2)

Karen also noted that politics and establishment of a charter school are inseparable, but the founders should find a balance and draw a clear line between healthy and detrimental politics in the process. Mead, Mitchel, and Rotherham (2015) also reasoned that politics are an inevitable aspect in the charter school application process, the evaluation of the proposal, the charter award, and establishment of the school. Lastly, the participants found that the process of establishing a charter school faces grave challenges emanating from erroneous perceptions about charter schools.

Strauss (2014) explained that the public had often held negative perceptions regarding charter schools, ranging from financial mismanagement to poor quality of education, among others. Such perceptions make the process of establishing a charter school a challenge because the founders must change the ill perceptions the community has toward charter schools. Since the open enrollment charter school application applies to all charters, Ki Charter Academy should have done a better job soliciting and telling of the story to state board members that we were proposing a specialized charter school which would serve a distinct need in a certain geographical boundary that is different than the local school district. The reality is that Ki Charter Academy is not only a specialized charter, but a niche charter that serves a distinct and finite population. The

population served is in fact a distinct factor that should have been explained in the charter application. The critical aspect that separates Ki Charter apart from other charter schools is the student population Ki Charter serves. Ki Charter Academy serves a niche population that other charters do not want or cannot necessarily serve. That is the delineating factor in the separation of Ki Charter Academy and other charters. Ki Charter serves students that are often unrepresented, as these students have exhausted all community efforts. This could have possibly changed people's perception of charter schools and any hesitancy in considering Ki Charter Academy for the charter award.

### **Critical Success Factors in the Application Process**

The findings of the participants discussed in the preceding sections revealed several success factors of the charter school application process. The group discussion revealed several factors that a successful charter proposal must have and the necessities for the process to yield the desired results of charter award. First, the participants revealed that collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork were essential components in the success of a charter application process, as explained by Jeffreys and Larry. The concept of collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork was discussed in two dimensions here. The first was between the founders during the application process, and the second was the ability of the proposal to demonstrate the collaboration with traditional public schools and other pertinent stakeholders in the educational system.

These research findings coincide with those of Fryer (2013), whose arguments alluded to the need for cooperation and collaboration in charter schools. The charter proposal must demonstrate how the charter school will collaborate with the other stakeholders in the education sector to deliver all-round education to students who enroll.

Further, the founders worked as a team and came together regarding ideas on how to create an impressive charter application. This was done on weekends, after work hours, and in any capacity where the co-founders had free time. Ideas were generated and time was scheduled to transcribe those ideas into the written application. During this process, there were numerous ideas presented: Everyone had their own opinion. However, it was vital to the mission that everyone acted professionally and courteously to those in the group, as we all had different lenses and vantage points.

Second, the application process requires the right blend of members to ensure that the skills needed were well represented in the team. A discussion of the roles of the participants in the application process of Ki Charter Academy showed that the founding team had the right blend of relevant skills to ensure that the process was successful. Some of the relevant skills was having the professional courtesy to be respectful to others' ideas and viewpoints, as if it had not been that way, the actionable charter application would never have come to fruition. The blend of business and education experience and skills also assisted tremendously in the incubation of ideas, allowing education and business ideas to come together to form a solid charter school financial plan. These skills and traits of the founders helped answer this question. Having a team with diverse skills was advantageous because it enables role sharing and advisory on best practices in various aspects of the application process.

Further, procuring all of the required documents needed was a critical success factor in the application process for a charter school. Baker, Larry, Jeffreys, and Gregory explained that getting the completion check correct was a significant milestone in the application process. These required documents needed satisfactory explanations on how

the proposed charter school would look from the operational, education, and welfare perspectives. Multiple participants emphasized that the completion check was the most crucial and challenging aspect of the process because it determined the success of the process. Baker explained it as a win-or-lose affair. Therefore, getting all the documents right needed for evaluation was critical to the success of the application process.

Third, external support during the application process was crucial in fostering the success of the application process. Participants partnered with the Texas Charter School Association, and Gregory and Baker described the partnership as a significant contributor to the success of the application process. TCSA trained the participants on the requirements, milestones, and issues to watch out for, and conducted a mock interview with the participants before the actual interview with SBOE. Notably, Baker described the help of the TCSA as the main reason the proposed Ki Charter Academy was awarded the charter. Of the TCSA, Baker asserted, “That was what did it for us in my opinion,” and further noted that external support from various sources such as TCSA among others was critical in the success of the application process, aligned with prior research (Jones & List, 2018).

The participants also revealed that the Ki Charter Academy application process had little feedback on areas to correct because the founders had been trained and guided in how to prepare a good quality proposal that would surpass the evaluation requirement for charter consideration. Jones and List (2018) discussed the charter school application process in Texas and noted that the current application regulations require that the applicant must submit six copies. The remarkable aspect was that the applicants are not notified about the incomplete application and given a chance to complete the process but

instead are notified that the incompleteness led to rejection (Jones & List, 2018). This revelation meant that external guidance was critical for the charter award, as was the case for the successful charter application for Ki Charter Academy.

### **Major Lessons Learned from the Application Process**

The participants learned much about charter schools from the application process of Ki Charter Academy. The major lesson learned by all participants was that applying for a charter school in Texas was a highly challenging, difficult, and sensitive process marred with a lot of bureaucracy and politics. The participants learned the process was complex, intensive, and detailed, ultimately affecting whether the application would be considered for further scrutiny or rejected. The rejection decision has no appeal, which means that the founders must be thorough in preparing all the documents necessary for the charter school application in Texas. Similarly, Jones and List (2018) explained that the application process includes only one attempt, and therefore, the applicant must do everything necessary to ensure that they qualify for a charter award. In the case of Ki Charter Academy, this study suggested that the leadership team prepared adequately, and through communication and collaboration, drafted an initial application that was strong enough to earn the charter.

### **Conclusions Drawn from the Key Findings**

Applying for a charter school was a challenging process with various hurdles along the way. The experience of applying for a charter school varies across the U.S. because some have more relaxed rules and requirements, while others have more stringent and unfavorable requirements that not only makes the process challenging but also highly involved and difficult. The process of establishing Ki Charter Academy

showed that applying for a charter school in Texas was a challenging process and applicants must embrace themselves with all the necessary documents, meet all the regulatory requirements, and have contingency plans for the projected risks and challenges in the process.

Moreover, politics and bureaucracy are inevitable in the establishment of a charter school in Texas. Establishing a charter school entails an application process that involves political figures. For instance, the application process for Ki Charter Academy involved the mayor of San Marcos and Commissioner of Education, among other representatives in the Texas SBOE with political affiliations. The political interference also brought about bureaucracy. Of bureaucracy, Karen based her arguments on her extensive experience working with charter schools in various states and contended that political interference was common in such a process. This study's research findings disclosed that political interference and bureaucracy were inevitable, witnessed by this study's articulation of a stage-based application process that had to pass various checkpoints for approval. The study also revealed that there are often bottlenecks imposed by the bureaucracy and political interference in the establishment process of charter schools. For instance, the lack of appeal on SBOE verdict on the proposed charter award by the state Commissioner of Education provides room for political manipulation in the charter award.

Also, revisions are inevitable in the establishment process of a charter school. The guidance and coaching provided by the TCSA identified errors that we had made in the application process. For instance, the mock interview with the TCSA showed that there were areas that we had overlooked in the application documents and had no idea on how

to respond to some questions, while some areas were unclear on what type of the charter school we were proposing to establish in San Marcos. These drawbacks meant that we had to give the application another look from multiple dimensions to ensure that everything was captured clearly. Despite the above revisions, the TEA external evaluation also gave a comprehensive report on revisions to incorporate based on unclear areas and omissions in the application process. Therefore, starting a charter school in Texas was a highly involved process with revisions playing an integral role in refining the final charter proposal application for the school charter award.

The process of establishing Ki Charter Academy demonstrated that the external evaluation was a significant milestone in the process that determines the progress of the application to the next stage or rejection. Applications that are rejected are not given a chance to redeem themselves through revision or redrafting the application to meet the TEA requirements. A small mistake of overlooking one component or aspect of the application process can lead to rejection of the application, instead of revision to polish the overlooked or unclear sections of the application. Therefore, this study suggests that completing the application in a clear manner was essential in the approval of the application for the charter award. In such a scenario, we ensured that all sections and requirements were prepared and thoroughly reviewed to confirm that they met all the requirements of the TEA.

The above challenges facing the establishment of a charter school in Texas mean that the TEA requirements for the establishment of a charter school's application and guidelines need to be reviewed for efficiency and not simplicity. The findings discussed in the conclusion revealed that the current application and review of application



guidelines formulated by the TEA have shortcomings that need to be addressed. For instance, the use of a two-way response in the form of rejection or approval for the application was a limiting factor, which may end up in the rejection of good charter schools because of minor issues that can be rectified through a revision of the initial application. Secondly, the constant revision of the generations guiding the establishment process of charter schools requires thorough revision and consistency because these guidelines are generally confusing to applicants and could lead to rejection of applications. For instance, we had initially prepared application documents for Ki Charter Academy using generation 18 guidelines, only for these guidelines to change in generation 19. Had we not prepared adequately for such an event, we may not have been awarded the charter.

Notably, the establishment process of a charter school in Texas presents a learning opportunity for all the founders, irrespective of their experience and knowledge in a charter school. The pooling of intellectual resources into a unified process of founding a charter school in Texas presents a valuable opportunity for founders to exchange ideas, learn new ideas, and advance the existing ideas. The participants agreed that although they had varying levels of experience and knowledge in charter schools, the process of establishing Ki Charter Academy was a crucial learning process for them. The process validated existing theoretical postulations on the process of establishing charter schools, as well as invalidated misperceptions. The aforementioned cannot be stressed enough, as the differing viewpoints allowed Ki Charter Academy to appeal to the likes of more than one group of people. It allowed for different groups to see the value of Ki Charter Academy.

A smooth application process for a charter school requires adequate preparation. We prepared ourselves sufficiently. We also sought guidance from the TCSA regarding the documents that were required. The TCSA coached us on how questions were asked, and the mock interview was insightful, making us realize the shortcomings of the current application for improvement ahead of the real interview with the SBOE. Sometimes we had to expedite the process where the feedback from TCSA and TEA came late. The above revelation means that founders must be prepared to work with tight schedules and deadlines when applying for a charter school. Future leaders and charter applicants need to get out in front of the application timelines and review with previous charter applicants that were awarded a charter. Communication, such as community engagement meetings, need to occur to garner buy-in from stakeholders. We made sure that the time wasted waiting for feedback on evaluation of the application was recovered. Reviewing previous applications was also essential in providing a glimpse of the application and establishment process of a charter school in Texas.

Further, external assistance was critical in the success of the application process of a charter school in Texas. The finding of this study has shown that the assistance from other people was critical in the success of the process and charter award. The TCSA contributed to the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. The TCSA guided the application in drafting comprehensive application documents that met the requirements of TEA. The participants revealed that without the help of TCSA, the application would not have passed, thus revealing the importance of external assistance from persons or organizations with experience on how charter schools operate. TCSA suggested that each founder should be ready to contribute new ideas for the application of Ki Charter

Academy. Despite the assistance made by external stakeholders, there were also challenges encountered, and we had to reconvene and come up with response strategies to the challenges as well and mitigations for projected challenges.

Moreover, collaboration, teamwork, and cooperation are critical to the success of the application process. This study's findings disclosed that cooperation among founders of a charter school influences the success of the application and charter award. Teamwork and consultation allow for the exchange of the best ideas on ways to approach various aspects of the establishment process of the charter school. We also ensured that we worked as a team and continuously consulted each other on various sections of the application for Ki Charter Academy: Every founder had a responsibility.

The charter award was the culmination of the efforts of each founder in the application. Teamwork provides a room for evaluating the scenario or aspect at hand using multiple perspectives to get the general and the critical view of the subject matter in the application process. Founders have to collaborate with the local community, traditional public-school stakeholders, TEA, and TCSA, among other interested parties to secure the stakeholder buy-in in the establishment of the proposed charter school. Cooperation and teamwork are essential in establishing a charter school.

Furthermore, timely feedback is essential in ensuring that the application is completed within the stipulated TEA timeline. The findings of this study established that, occasionally, the feedback from the TEA comes late, forcing the applicants to expedite the next stages in the application process. Late feedback may lead to ad-hoc preparations, which may lead to rejection of the application. Therefore, the principal conclusion regarding this is that TEA should strictly adhere to timely responses on various inquiries

and review of establishment process in various stages.

Also, a charter school application should be clear on the type of the proposed charter school. One participant explained that ensuring that our application brought out the aspect of a residential facility avoided further questions that could have stalled the process because we clarified that Ki Charter Academy was a charter school primarily serving a residential facility. Therefore, an application should explain objectively on whether a proposed open enrollment charter school services a residential facility, or another entity.

The external evaluation of the application and interviews are the most critical milestones in the establishment process of a charter school. The external evaluation of the application documents is a critical stage in the process because it determines whether an application is standard and qualified to warrant an interview with the Texas Education Agency. The evaluation by the TEA scrutinizes the application document and thoroughly identifying strengths, conformance, non-conformance, and areas to be improved in the charter school proposal. The findings discussed in the previous chapter illustrated the significance of completing the application correctly and completely, while preparing for the interviews with TEA. We also reviewed previous applications and revised the current version of Ki Charter Academy application documents according to TCSA advice to ensure that we gave our application the best chance at getting the charter award. The use of mock interviews also exemplified the importance of performing impressively in the SBOE interview to boost the odds of getting the charter award for Ki Charter Academy.

Further, getting the right blend of skills within the founding team is essential in the success of the process. The accomplishment of the process is depended on the skills,

cooperation, and the teamwork of the team. The findings of this study have established that getting a team with the right combination of skills boosts the success rates of the application for a charter school. For instance, the Ki Charter Academy founding team is comprised of experienced persons in the education sector. A team with diverse skills and knowledge share ideas and solutions to solving various challenges encountered in the establishment process.

However, the charter school financial plan was the most critical component in the establishment process of a charter school in Texas. The findings discussed in the previous chapter revealed that a financial plan was the most critical component of the school charter award proposal. Securing funds for setting up a charter school was critical and was identified by Gregory as a shortcoming in TEA guidelines. The current TEA guidelines lack a detailed guideline on financing a charter school. Envisioning a charter school and getting a charter award for the proposed charter school without securing funds needed to operate can be an effort in futility. Ki Charter received the state start-up grant. If we were not afforded this, we would have needed to scout for finances in order to set up Ki Charter Academy.

External financing is extremely important, as not every charter is guaranteed the start-up grant. According to Nelson, Muir, and Drown (2000), inadequate external support through funding is a major barrier in the implementation and creation of charter schools. This barrier is due to the notion that behind every charter design there needs to be viable financial backing to begin and maintain charter operation. In a similar study of early implementation in Massachusetts, Millot and Lake (1997) found that “next to facilities, finances were the biggest obstacle reported by charter schools” (p. 17). Millot

and Lake (1997) also explained that, “It may be smart to require prospective charter schools to acquire external support as evidence of their viability” (p. 55). The findings of this study led to the conclusion that we started Ki Charter Academy under difficult circumstances due to strained infrastructure, but we would later improve the facilities at the Ki Charter Academy.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Research, Policy, and Practice**

This research study on the establishment process of a charter school in Texas yielded findings that have implications on future research work, policy, and practice.

#### **Implications for Research**

Given the contentious political environment facing new charter schools in Texas (Swaby, 2019), this study reveals much for future research, especially for newly founded charter schools in complex, difficult political climates.

First and foremost, this study of the establishment of a charter school in Texas study was qualitative. Interviews and focus group discussions provided extensive data and findings on what an establishment process of a charter school in Texas entails. Future applicants can rely on these findings to have an idea of requirements for establishing a charter school in Texas. The study findings and conclusions have added to the current knowledge base in the charter school application and setup process. During the literature review, the study ascertained that there was limited data on charter school’s establishment process, considering that the majority of studies concentrate on traditional public schools. Therefore, this study’s findings augment existing literature on charter schools in Texas by increasing the literature to encompass the charter establishment process, possibly rendering the founding of future charter schools simpler.

The study identified the following key research gaps in the establishment process of charter schools. There was inadequate literature on studies on the application process requirements, not only in Texas but also in other states in the U.S. Therefore, I recommend that future research studies should focus on elucidating the process of setting up a charter school in Texas. The research should be expanded to other states in the U.S., considering that the process could be different in other states. This study was qualitative research. Therefore, I recommend that future researchers consider exploring the establishment of charter schools using other research methodologies, such as mixed methods or quantitative designs. I also recommend future researchers study the topic in different contexts and scope. The future researchers should also narrow the scope of study from the entire establishment process and focus on a few aspects of the process such as challenges, critical success factors, and legal provisions in the establishment of charter schools in Texas, among others. As previously mentioned, Texas is a difficult political climate in which to launch a new charter school (Swaby, 2019), and future researchers in other areas could learn from how the Ki Charter founding team persisted despite some political interference. Such studies would illuminate specific aspects of the establishment process exhaustively.

### **Implications for Policy**

This study scrutinized the establishment of a charter school in Texas. The findings ascertained that the establishment process of a charter school in Texas was challenging, lengthy, and requires the applicants to give much attention to the requirements and completion checks of the process. These findings support the notion that Texas may be a particularly demanding location to launch a new charter school (Swaby, 2019). However,

this study shed light on the policies guiding the establishment process of a charter school from the idea incubation, drafting of documents to interviews and actual set up of the charter school. Directed policy change needs to come from the TEA to put into place for future charter school applicants.

To alleviate any hurdles when founding a new charter school, I would recommend that the process entail a meeting with the charter school's respective geographical boundary State Board of Education representative, state representative, and state senator. This policy recommendation is necessary in bridging the communication gap through constituents within that geographical boundary. This also allows these respective stakeholders to address concerns, issues, or foreseeable contentions with the charter, and allow them to remedy these prior to the State Board of Education interviews. The above findings discussed in the previous chapter showed that the process had flaws which required re-evaluation. Further, the finding and conclusions reached in this study show the need to review the education policies such as charter school application process, charter school amendments, and charter school legislation in starting a charter school to ensure that the process was streamlined for fairness and equality among applicants in the process.

### **Implications for Practice**

Education and teaching are demanding practices with a fair share of challenges. In the past, there was insufficient guidance on the requirements in the process of setting up a charter school considering that award and approval of charters to a school was a dynamic and sensitive process. The findings of this study positively impact the practice of applying and setting up charter schools in Texas, a politically divisive educational



environment in the United States (Swaby, 2019).

First, the findings and conclusions of this study provided future applicants with a preparatory point in comprehending what the process entails, thus giving the applicants a broad idea on the process. Secondly, the specific findings of various aspects of the establishment process discussed in this study provided comprehensive information on various stages and aspects of the establishment process. Lastly, this study cautions future applicants on challenges and risks they may encounter when establishing a charter school. Therefore, the applicants can come up with mitigation strategies to the identified challenges and risks, paying special attention to how charter school founders can build relationships with political constituencies to smooth the founding process.

In saying this, prospective charters applicants should embrace collaboration efforts to improve their chance of effectively and efficiently maneuvering through the process towards the awarding of the respective charter. Another recommendation is for the Texas Charter School Association to lower their costs to prospective charters so that once a charter is awarded, the TCSA can then accept payment only after the school opens and revenue is generated. If the charter is not awarded, I would recommend a payment plan be put in place upon advising and preparation of the charter application

### **Specific Recommendations in a Texas Context**

This research study produced several policy recommendations specific to the charter application process in Texas. I have several observations and recommendations for the TEA, future applicants, and stakeholders in the charter school sector based on the results and conclusions reached in this study.

First, the study found that external assistance was a critical success factor in the

approval of a charter school proposal. Therefore, future applicants intending to apply for a charter school in Texas should seek external guidance from persons and organizations with experience on starting a charter school in Texas. For instance, the applicants can approach the Texas Charter Schools Association or another applicant who has experience in the process irrespective of whether the proposal passed, or the charter proposal was rejected. The two categories provided useful lessons to prepare the applicant in what was expected, mistakes to avoid, and areas to capitalize on the application process. In following this guidance, future charter founders can navigate a complex education environment in Texas (Swaby, 2019), providing students and their families greater educational options.

Second, the study identified that preparation was vital. Therefore, I recommend that applicants should take their time to prepare the required documents and research on the proposal. Adequate preparation ensures that applicants do not rush through various stages of the application, resulting in a poor charter school proposal application for charter consideration. I would recommend that the process entail a meeting with the charter's respective geographical boundary State Board of Education representative, state representative, and state senator. This policy recommendation is necessary in bridging the communication gap through constituents within that geographical boundary, working to build political relationships and better communicate the processes in establishing a new charter school. This also allows these respective stakeholders to address concerns, issues or foreseeable contentions with the charter, and allow them to remedy these prior to the State Board of Education interviews. Preliminary research was crucial in providing essential information regarding charter schools and how they operate. Any applicant who

desires their application documents to exceed the external evaluation and interviews for a charter consideration must plan and prepare for their application process months before the TEA timeline starts.

Third, the study found that drafting a precise application that specifies the type of charter school the proposal intends to establish boosts the chances of the application passing the TEA external evaluation and interviews. Therefore, based on the above findings and the conclusions reached regarding this aspect, I recommend that applicants for a charter school in Texas must ensure that the aspect of a designation for open enrollment is stated clearly in the application. This clarity avoids confusion that may arise when evaluators are assessing other related aspects of the proposed charter school.

Fourth, the study found that politics and bureaucracy are inevitable in the process of starting a charter school in Texas. Therefore, I recommend that the applicants should be prepared with strategies on how to maneuver various political interferences to ensure that they do not affect the application process of the proposed charter school. Building relationships with various political organizations and individuals would lead to a greater understanding of the new charter school and a smoother application and establishment process of the charter school itself. Lastly, the study found that revisions in the initial draft of application documents are standard. Interestingly, revisions can be recommended after the charter has been awarded for aligning the areas recommended for amendments. Therefore, I recommend that the applicants should be prepared to take revisions positively as a way of ensuring that the application is correct. Furthermore, the TEA must ensure that Texas learning populace is getting the best education services by recommending revisions on the charter proposal applications to ensure that standards are

met. These recommendations and contingencies that the State Board of Education puts in place on charters need to be monitored, addressed, and followed up by the TEA prior to the awarding of the charter.

The second category involved education policies on the actual establishment (setting up) of charter schools and the evaluation of the process. Establishing a charter school incorporates the application for a charter award and setting up the school once the charter has been approved. The study found that getting finances was critical in smooth setting up in preparation of launching of the school. Founders must secure finances to install the necessary infrastructure. Therefore, considering the above findings, I recommend that the applicants must have a comprehensive financial plan and budget. The financial plan must indicate projected costs and sources of incomes for the application and setting up the school. Although grants are given by the state education department, the charter applicants must devise ways of financing infrastructure, human resources, and learning material, among other elements necessary to operate a school.

Therefore, I recommend that the applicants should prioritize procuring the required finances and infrastructure needed before launching the school. I recommend that an applicant can engage donors and potential stakeholders for public-private partnerships. Having a sound financial plan for the proposed school ensures that the school does not launch without the necessary infrastructure as this could affect the quality of educational services provided in the school. Perhaps the first step during the idea generation process is for prospective charter school leadership teams to conduct a personal inventory of their business and social connections to brainstorm as many possible sources of financing as possible. Here, the charter school can be planned with

finances already considered, perhaps increasing the creativity and innovation of the planning team or leadership team.

Collaboration and teamwork were found to be crucial in applying and setting a charter school in Texas. The complex, and highly involved nature of the establishment process of a charter school in Texas calls for an abundance of cooperation among founding members of the charter school. Therefore, I recommend that future applications should consider engaging members who can cooperate with fellow founders in drafting a quality proposal. For instance, the participants revealed that they had to share responsibilities at some point to expedite the process, especially when feedback came in late. Such revelations portray the essence of having team members who value collaboration and teamwork. I recommend that future founders of charter schools should foster cooperation and teamwork in the process.

Lastly, I recommend that future applicants should consider attaining a founding team with the right blend of skills needed in drafting a high-quality proposal and running the proposed charter school once it is granted the charter. The recommendation was based on the tenet that the founders of a project should manage and oversee the project during its infancy states to ensure that what was implemented remains in line with the proposed vision and mission. Therefore, it is vital to have the right team as founders to ensure a smooth oversight of the charter school. For instance, in the case of Ki Charter Academy, some of the founders took over senior management of Ki Charter Academy. Larry became the school principal, while Baker became the operations and human resource management head. Karen became the board president, while the others became board members. I recommend that founders have a balanced blend of skills and participate in

the running of the charter school during the establishment and post-launch period to ensure its success.

Regarding the intense dedication of the founders of Ki Charter Academy during the establishment process, it was evident that setting up Ki Charter Academy was a conglomeration of founders' sacrificing and providing an unwavering effort to see the process through. Even though the process had major hurdles, founders managed to persist and were awarded the charter. Therefore, I recommend that future charter school founders be committed to ensuring the school operations lives up to the vision and mission of the charter. I also recommend periodic reviews of the management and operations in charter schools in Texas—including those at Ki Charter Academy—to ensure that the school framework of operation conforms to the provisions of the TEA charter school generation guidelines. This recommendation is based on the findings that generation guidelines for charters school are reviewed periodically and amended in line with any major developments in charters schools in Texas.

Likewise, the findings of this study unmasked two undesirable aspects of the establishment process of a charter school in Texas emanating from the TEA. I recommend the TEA review the establishment process of a charter school to streamline the areas that were identified as roadblocks in this study. For instance, the TEA should revisit the two-fold evaluation of the application for charter schools, where an application either passes the external evaluation or fails. Opportunities should be given to allow the applicant a chance to revise the application and meet standards. This recommendation was based on the observation that good charter applications can be rejected based on a single omission that can be fixed through a simple revision. I also recommend that the

TEA should ensure that feedback is relayed to applicants on time to avoid making the applicants rush to complete their application, thus leading to errors. Lastly, I recommend that the TEA and the Texas SBOE should refrain from any politically instigated allegations, maneuvers, or feuds that could derail or stall the establishment of a charter school, thus denying learners in Texas charter school education services.

Ultimately, the preceding recommendations should assist future charter school applicants and leaders to navigate the charter application process more smoothly, resulting in well-organized charter school applications. When these recommendations are adopted and communication gaps are closed, charter schools will be able to reach the constituents within their geographical boundary more soundly, thus serving the students who require specific a charter school education.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion of key findings in this section showed that establishing a charter school in Texas is a highly involved and challenging process with numerous hurdles identified in the findings of this study. The process has challenges, starting with the generation of ideas where the founders must identify the right blend of leaders to establish the charter school. Securing external stakeholder buy-in is also challenging but a major milestone in the process, because the success of the process was significantly influenced by the cooperation and support of the external stakeholders in the education system. Also, this study's findings pointed out that role sharing was essential in ensuring that various tasks were shared out for more efficient preparation of the documents required. For instance, the study showed that sharing roles amongst the charter school founders helped in completing the application faster. However, findings showed that role

sharing should be done cautiously to ensure that roles are shared with those with the rights skills and expertise to handle them.

Moreover, having the right blend of skills fostered role sharing. The findings also showed that applicants capitalized on the critical success factors in establishing and running a charter school in Texas. External support services, such as the consultancy services of the TCSA, were instrumental in increasing the success rate of attaining the charter award. Also, the study recommends that the TCSA should review and streamline the fees charged to the future charter school applicant to ensure that they are affordable to most of the applicants. Likewise, this study's conclusions pointed out a challenging process that required adequate planning months ahead of the submission deadlines to avoid making errors.

The main conclusion drawn from this study was that critical milestones of the application process in the initial evaluation, primarily the TEA evaluation and the face-to-face interview with the SBOE, determined the success of the process. As a result, applicants must clarify the type of charter school they are applying for and ensure all the requisite documents are completed and attached. Lastly, this study uncovered a flaw in the evaluation of the applications for charter schools by the TEA. Subsequently, I recommend that the TEA application process be made flexible to ensure that applicants who make a simple mistake are given another chance to redeem their application through a revision.

### **Final Thoughts: Coming Full Circle**

This study opened with two narratives: Ray's and mine. In many ways, the establishment of Ki Charter Academy was for students who needed educational services



in the San Marcos area. However, I have learned that Ki Charter Academy largely symbolizes what can be accomplished by educators who have been underserved by the very system they work within. For me, I felt the education system was failing students like Ray, and I felt the obligation to intervene and provide a brighter educational future for other students. Yet, what resulted from this study and the efforts to establish a charter school will serve as an exemplar for other charter school leaders to follow. In the future, I truly wish that more institutions like Ki Charter Academy are established: This would mean more students like Ray—and myself—would be receiving the education they deserve.

This study embodies the needed roadmap for schools to undertake in order to start specialized charters to serve the likes of Ray and me. The collaboration, dedication and perseverance of participants in this study allowed students to benefit from Ki Charter Academy. The qualitative design allowed for key stakeholders to thoroughly explain the necessary change that students needed in the development of Ki Charter Academy. With participants' authentic conversations and action, Ki Charter Academy now exists to serve often unrepresented students: This effort should be applauded in Texas and beyond.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

### **APPENDIX A**

#### **Informed Consent**

Study Title: Establishing a Texas Charter School: A Case Study of Ki Charter Academy.

Principal Investigator: Jerome Lager

Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr.

Melissa Martinez

Email: jl1237@txstate.edu

Email: mm224@txstate.edu

Phone: 254-291-3912

Phone: 512-245-4587

Sponsor: none

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form, and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

#### **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about the process of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy, share and define stakeholder's roles and experiences in the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. Identify lessons that were learned from the success and challenges of establishing Ki Charter Academy to inform future specialized charter school operators of a replication roadmap. You will be one of 6 people (including me) involved in this study.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in:

1. A one-page demographic questionnaire, to be completed at the time of the individual interview; There will be a total of 8 questions on the questionnaire.
2. One 45-60-minute, semi-structured individual interview. It will take place at a time and location convenient for you; I will ask nine questions with a possibility of 16 added probing questions.

3. One 90-120-minute, semi-structured focus group interview, with up to five participants. It will take place at a time and location convenient for you; I will ask 14 guiding questions with the possibility of 9 added probing questions.

During the interviews, you will be asked about the process of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy, and others will be about the roles, experiences, lessons learned and insight to inform future charter school founders in establishing a charter school. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded, and the researcher may take notes as well. All transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms, and I ask that you not share what is discussed in the focus group with anyone else to protect the privacy of participants.

### **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There are minimal risks/discomforts associated with participating in this study. If some of the questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating, you may contact:

Cedar Creek Associates Counseling  
631 Mill Street, San Marcos, TX 78666  
512-396-8540

### **BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will assist interested parties to understand different layers of the Texas open-enrollment public charter school application process, the stringent, rigorous and laboring process of the application process, and how the leadership team initiated the entire development process of Ki Charter Academy. Also, the report will offer a roadmap for those planning to set up charter schools to replicate the process within their vision of a school of their choice.

### **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is

completed and then destroyed.

## **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

## **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

## **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Melissa Martinez: 512-245-4587 or [mm224@txstate.edu](mailto:mm224@txstate.edu).

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on September 25, 2018. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Goubert 512-245-8351 – ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)).

***Participation in the focus group discussion will imply as your consent to participate in this research project.***

## **DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Printed Name of Study Participant

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Demographic Questions**

I will start with asking you to fill out a questionnaire to the best of your ability regarding general demographic information. This hard copy questionnaire will be filled out right before your interview. This information is very valuable, and the information you provide is completely voluntary and anonymous. I value any information you will be able to provide.

1. What is your gender (Ex., Male, Female, etc.)?
2. From what type of high school did you graduate (public, private, charter, etc.)?
3. What is the highest level of education you have attained?
4. What is your race/ethnicity?
5. What is the language you are most comfortable speaking?
6. If currently employed, what is your profession?
  - If currently unemployed, what was your most recent profession?
  - How long have were you in that profession?
8. If you did not list education for question 6, Have you ever been in the education profession?
  - If so, how long?

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Protocol

Interview # \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Protocol

*Script*

Welcome, and thank you for your participation today. My name is Jerome Lager, and I am a doctoral student at Texas State University, conducting my dissertation study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in School Improvement. This interview will take about 60 minutes and will include 14 questions, along with several probing questions regarding your experiences in the establishment of Ki Charter Academy, and what role you played throughout the process. I will also ask questions about the challenges and successes that you went through with the process to better inform future charter school operators in this regard. I would like your permission to audio record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know. All your responses will remain confidential and will help to inform my study. The purpose of this study is to develop a roadmap for future charter operators in sharing your valuable experiences in the process of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy.

At this time, I would like to remind you of your written consent to participate in this study. I am the responsible investigator, specifying your participation in the research project: Establishing a Texas Charter School: A Case Study of Ki Charter. You and I have both signed and dated each copy, certifying that we agree to continue this interview. You will receive one copy, and I will keep the other under lock and key, separate from your reported responses. Thank you.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, take a break, or return a page, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission, we will begin the interview.

#### Questions:

- Please describe your experiences briefly with Ki Charter Academy.
- Probe: How did you get involved with Ki Charter?
- How did you first learn about charter schools?
- Probe: What were your initial perceptions about charter schools?

- How have those perceptions changed over time and with the process of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy?
- What was your role within the process of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy?
- Probe: Did your role change at any time during this process, and if so, how?
- What did you learn from the application process that you previously did not know?
- How would you describe the application process?
- How did you prepare for this endeavor?
- Knowing now what you did not previously know, how would you prepare for this endeavor?
- What do you perceive as some challenges with the charter school application process and the submission of the application?
- Probe: How did you adapt to the challenges?
- How do you think these challenges affected the application process?
- Move you in a different path or direction?
- What are some ways that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) application process can be improved upon?
- Probe: What are some ways that the timeline affected the process?
- How was feedback given or disseminated at each juncture of the process?
- Probe: Did you feel that this was adequate?
- Why or why not?

- Would you participate in this process again, if Ki Charter Academy had not been selected?
  - Probe: Why or why not?
- What was the most important lesson learned through both the process and the role you played within the process?
  - Probe: what are suggestions to future charter applicants?
  - How can future charter applicants prepare for the application?

### **Concluding Question**

- Of all the things we have discussed today, what would you say are the most important issues you would like to express about this process and your role?



## **APPENDIX D:**

### **Focus Group Protocol**

#### **Facilitator's Welcome, Introduction, and Instructions to Participants**

Welcome, and thank you for volunteering to take part in this focus group. You have been asked to participate as your point of view is important. I realize you are busy, and I appreciate your time.

**Introduction:** This focus group discussion is designed to assess your current thoughts and feelings about your valuable, shared experiences as well as your story in the establishment of Ki Charter Academy. The focus group discussion will take no more than two hours. May I audio record the discussion to facilitate its recollection? (if yes, switch on the recorder). I will add insight into the focus group as a participant researcher.

**Anonymity:** Despite being recorded, I would like to assure you that the discussion will be anonymous, and you will be assigned a pseudonym. The tapes will be kept safely in a locked facility until they are transcribed word for word. Data will be kept for 3 years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed. The transcribed notes of the focus group will contain no information that would allow individual subjects to be linked to specific statements. You should try to answer and comment as accurately and truthfully as possible. I and the other focus group participants would appreciate it if you would refrain from discussing the comments of other group members outside the focus group. If there are any questions or discussions that you do not wish to answer or participate in, you do not have to do so; however, please try to answer and be as involved as possible.

### **Ground Rules**

- The most important rule is that only one person speaks at a time. There may be a temptation to jump in when someone is talking, but please wait until they have finished.
- There are no right or wrong answers
- You do not have to speak in any order
- When you do have something to say, please do so. There are many of you in the group, and it is important that I obtain the views of each of you
- You do not have to agree with the views of other people in the group
- Does anyone have any questions? (Answers).
- OK, let us begin

### **Warm Up**

- First, I would like everyone to introduce themselves. Can you tell us your name?

### **Introductory Question**

I am just going to give you a couple of minutes to think about your experience and role you played in the establishment of Ki Charter Academy, a specialized charter school serving at-risk students in Texas?

1. On a scale from 1-10 with 1 being nothing at all and 10 being the highest, how much did you know about charter schools, before you entered the charter school start-up process?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

2. Thinking about your answer to my previous question, would you please explain why you rated this at this level? (Ask for clarification and probe for deeper answers if possible):
3. Thinking about your previous answers, what factors influenced you to participate in this process?
4. What was the most significant takeaway from the process of the establishment of Ki Charter Academy?
5. Identify 1 or 2 challenges through the application process?
  - A. How did you address the challenge?
6. What would you have done differently during the application process if you could go back to the application period?
  - A. How would you go upon conducting this change?
7. What part off the application process would you amend if you could and why?
  - A. How would you amend this?
8. What part of the application process caused doubts about moving forward in the process?
  - A. What did you encounter that changed your thinking?
  - B. How did your thinking about moving forward change?
9. How did the target population affect the decisions you made throughout the application process?
10. What considerations guided your charter school vision?
  - A. How did you select your educational programs to mirror your vision?
11. What was the process of selecting board members?

- A. Did you provide choices or were the criteria drafted from input?
12. What do you consider the best charter school practices?
- A. How were these practices implemented in the design of Ki Charter Academy?
- B. How were stakeholders involved in this process?
13. What advice would give those seeking to establish a charter, with regards to the application process?
14. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else you would like to share?

### **Conclusion**

- Thank you for participating. This has been a very successful discussion, and I am most appreciative of your valuable time
- Your opinions will be an asset to the study
- I hope you have found the discussion interesting
- If there is anything you are unhappy with or wish to complain about, please contact the Texas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) or speak to me later
- I would like to remind you that any comments featuring in this report will be anonymous.

Please remember to maintain the confidentiality of the participating individuals by not disclosing their names.

\*\*\* If a participant wishes to discontinue study, ask if they would be willing to share why

\*\*\*Thank the participant for his/her participation.

## APPENDIX E

### Distribution of Charter Schools

State	<u>Charter Schools</u>	<u>Estimated Enrollment</u>	<u>% of public-school enrollment</u>
Texas	723	289,000	5.39%
Louisiana	143	80,100	11.21%
New Mexico	99	25,700	7.53%
Oklahoma	35	20,000	2.92%

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