Charter School Autonomy in an Era of Standards-based Reforms

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CHARTER SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN AN ERA OF
STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS

BY

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B.S., Psychology, Geneva College, 1980
M.Ed., Special Education, University of Pittsburgh, 1982

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May 2021
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the many charter school leaders and teachers striving to “do education better” for children and families. Your commitment and hard work, despite the many obstacles, to provide an innovative and quality education to meet the needs of all your students, is so inspiring. May your continued efforts be multiplied.

I also wish to dedicate this endeavor to my grandchildren, Kate and Gibson. May you always set high goals and persevere. In the words of Dr. Seuss (1990), “You’re off to great places. Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So…get on your way!”
Acknowledgements

I first wish to acknowledge my family for their unwavering support and encouragement on this long journey – my caring and kind husband Joe, my wonderful children Taylor and Quinn, and my precious grandchildren, Kate and Gibson. I also want to give special recognition and thanks to my kind and patient son-in-law Dylan, who always took time to listen and respond to my educational theories.

I wish to thank Dr. Allison Borden, for her support and assistance as the Chairperson of my committee and as my teacher. Her instruction, guidance, and expertise has taught me so much and has given me the skills and knowledge to complete this task. Her dedication to her students is so clearly evident in all that she does. She is truly an example of an exceptional educator!

I thank all the members of my committee for sharing their time, assistance, and expertise in this journey. Thank you, Dr. Arlie Woodrum and Dr. Tyson Marsh who have been my teachers, and taught me so much. Thank you, Dr. Jacque Boyd for being a supportive colleague and friend for many years.

And I also wish to acknowledge my sweet Chihuahua dogs, Pedro, Phoebe and Honey who have been constant companions by my side through this whole journey.

Finally, and most importantly, I thank God for all the blessings He has given me in my life. May I honor and glorify Him in all that I do.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of standards-based prescribed reforms on the
capacity of charter schools to maintain autonomy needed for innovation and to meet school-
specific goals and missions. Charter schools are constructed on the concept of autonomy and
innovation while standards-based reform initiatives are based on concepts of prescriptive
accountability and standardization.

Utilizing qualitative research case study methodology, I selected three case study
charter schools located in northern New Mexico and conducted semi-structured interviews
with leaders and teachers from the schools in addition to reviewing document artifacts. I
developed a conceptual framework of three interconnected elements of autonomy –
Regulation, School Level, and Teacher Autonomy to provide a structure for organizing and
interpreting the collected data. Employing the research paradigm of social constructivism, I
then interpreted the meanings and interconnections of identified themes and components by
developing six assumptions regarding the degree and interconnections of each element of
autonomy for the three case study charter schools and their capacity to fulfill their individual
missions and goals. Although the standards-based reforms had an impact on the autonomy of
the schools and the capacity to be innovative, the schools were able to implement their missions. The schools even adapted aspects of the reforms to match their unique missions. This study was exploratory in nature and caution should be taken before generalizing the results of this study to other charter schools.
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Chapter 1: Context for the Study

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 created an impetus for educational reform in the United States that has lasted for nearly four decades (Beal & Hendry, 2012; Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Graham, 2005; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; McGuinn, 2017; Ravitch, 2013; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005; Rothstein, 2008). This censorious report, declaring that American children were academically falling behind other nations and “that failing schools were eroding American’s place in the global economy” (Beal & Hendry, 2012, p. 523) led to the introduction and implementation of a myriad of reforms targeted to “fix” the American public education system (Cohen, Spillane, & Peurach, 2017; Cuban, 2013; Graham, 2005; McGuinn, 2017; Tanner, 2013). In the United States, “reform visions often depend on a view of the past as series of failures that killed a golden age of schooling” (Cuban, 1990, p. 3). Although the actual state of American education failure or success can be debated, the reform efforts indicate that the American people likewise have a “belief in progress and the experimental spirit governing the creation of a unique and universal system of public education” (Tanner, 2013, p. 11). Ostensibly, the cycles of reform can be defined as “fixing” a system that continues to be an embodiment of hope, forming the foundation of freedom (Graham, 2005).

It is within this context that the variety and constancy of reforms have been introduced into public education (Berkovich, 2017; Cohen et al., 2017; Cuban, 2013; Graham, 2005; Hess & Eden, 2017; McGuinn, 2017). The elements of reforms consist of “changing one or more aspects of the education system, usually a systemic or large-scale change aimed at achieving a definite set of objectives” (Berkovich, 2017, p. 414). Some of
the proposed reforms have been short lived, sampled for a brief period, and abandoned for lack of quick success, only to be followed by another reform effort (Berkovich, 2017; Cohen et al., 2017; Graham, 2005; Holyoke, Henig, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2009; Porter, 1989). Some reforms have evolved and proliferated into accepted and established practices (Cuban, 1990). Many reforms introduced have been controversial and divisive within the American education system (Chatterji, 2019; Cohen et al., 2017; Ertas, 2015; Heise, 2017). Given the overabundance of reform initiatives, it has become difficult to decipher what works and what does not work (Berkovich, 2017; Cuban, 1990; Holyoke et al., 2009).

However, several standards-based reforms introduced during the past two decades have had substantial impact on U.S. public education policies and practices, producing changes in federal, state, and local education systems, and challenging federal versus states’ educational rights (Heise, 2017; Howell & Magazinnik, 2017; Mathias, 2010; McGuinn, 2017; Wrabel, Saultz, Polikoff, McEachin, & Duque, 2018). With the implementation of these reform measures, changes have been made within the educational system regarding how teachers and schools are held accountable for student learning, how student achievement is measured, and what curriculum and standards are taught (Chatterji, 2019; Cohen et al., 2017; Elmore, 2000; Hess & Eden, 2017; McGuinn, 2017; Ravitch, 2013; Wrabel et al., 2018). With standards-based reform there has been “a fundamental shift in the relationship between policy and institutional practice” (Elmore, 2000, p. 4).

Along with this transformational shift in focus on standards-based accountability reforms, school choice has taken a place in public education policies (Berends, 2015; Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Cohen et al., 2017; Mavrogordato, 2019; McGuinn, 2012; Ravitch, 2013; Sizer, 2005). School choice reforms, specifically charter schools, were first
legislatively introduced in the United States in the 1990s as an option for parental choice and in response to the demand for public school educational reform (Beal & Hendry, 2012; DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Rapa, Katsiyannis, & Ennis, 2018; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005; Sizer & Wood, 2008; Torres, 2018). The intentions of charter school proponents were to develop publicly funded schools that would provide a “choice” for students and parents for innovative educational opportunities that would in turn, create positive changes in the public education system (Beal & Hendry, 2012; Berends, 2015; Cohen et al., 2017; DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Mavrogordato, 2019; Rapa et al., 2018; Sizer & Wood, 2008).

In 2001, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), in an effort to reform public education (Graham, 2005; Hess & Eden, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Mathias, 2010; McGuinn, 2017; Ravitch, 2013). NCLB mandated that states were accountable to the federal government for meeting the lofty goal of having all students proficient in reading and math skills (Heise, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Mathias, 2010; McGuinn, 2017). NCLB introduced the era of using high stakes testing as the chief measure of student achievement and teacher accountability (Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Graham, 2005; Hess & Eden, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Mathias & Trujillo, 2016; McGuinn, 2017; Stillings, 2005; Wright, Shields, Black, Banjeree, & Waxman, 2018). Included in NCLB was also the mandate to establish more charter schools based on the theory that offering choices for innovative school programs would improve overall achievement (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Renzulli & Rosicno, 2005; Stillings, 2005). With the passage of NCLB, “the federal government [was given] unprecedented influence over the
The subsequent federal competitive grant program, Race to The Top (RTTT), introduced under the Obama administration in 2009, was an additional vehicle for the federal government to progressively influence states’ decisions concerning educational reform practices (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Hess & Eden, 2017; Howell & Magazinnik, 2017; Kornhaber, Barkauskas, & Griffith, 2016; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; McGuinn, 2012). NCLB set the precedent, followed by the RTTT incentives, for an immense shift in the focus of education, influencing states’ decisions and practices concerning issues such as student achievement, teacher accountability, adoption of national curriculum standards, and implementation of national standardized testing while calling for the creation of additional charter schools (Aldeman, 2017; Gottlieb, 2009; Heise, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Rapa et al., 2018; Ravitch, 2013; Tanner, 2013; Wright et al., 2018).

Two years after the implementation of the RTTT program, the Obama administration offered state waivers for NCLB requirements, also called ESEA flexibility waivers (Aldeman, 2017; Heise, 2017; Ladd, 2017; McNeil, Klein, & Cavanagh, 2011; Wrabel et al., 2018). The NCLB/ESEA waivers were offered owing to the failure of states to meet the 100% proficiency requirements for student performance as required by NCLB and failure of Congress to reauthorize ESEA/NCLB by the deadline of 2007 (Aldeman, 2017; Heise, 2017; Ladd, 2017; McNeil et al., 2011; Wrabel et al., 2018). With the failure of Congress to update ESEA, the requirements of NCLB continued to be “in force, leading to the untenable situation in which most schools would eventually be failing” (Ladd, 2017, p. 466). The
waivers offered states the flexibility “to adopt standards for college and career readiness, focus improvement efforts on 15 percent of the most troubled schools, and create guidelines for teacher evaluations based in part on student performance” (McNeil et al., 2011, p. 2). A requirement for an ESEA/NCLB waiver was to adopt the Common Core State Standards (Heise, 2017; McNeil et al., 2011). By 2015, forty-four states and the District of Columbia were approved for ESEA/NCLB waivers (Wrabel et al., 2018).

Eventually, NCLB was reauthorized by Congress as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December, 2015 (Heise, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Ladd, 2017; National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), 2019; Plans, 2015). ESSA is “a major shift from the increased federal authority of NCLB…to increased flexibility to states and school districts” (NASSP, 2019, p.1). Under ESSA each state must propose an accountability plan for approval from the U.S. Department of Education (Hess & Eden, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Plans, 2015). Within the plan, states are required to create goals to address “proficiency on tests, English-language proficiency and graduation rates” (Plans, 2015, p. 16). In continuing with the standards-based reform agenda, ESSA requires states to annually test students in grades 3-8 and once in high school and use the results to provide disaggregated data for subgroups of students, but does allow states the flexibility of test selection (Heise, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; NASSP, 2019; Plans, 2015). ESSA requires states to adopt academic standards but does not require use of the Common Core State Standards (Hess & Eden, 2017; Plans, 2015). ESSA also has changed some of NCLB and RTTT requirements regarding teacher evaluation, with the option to not utilize student assessment results to evaluate teacher effectiveness (Hess & Eden, 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; NASSP, 2019; Plans, 2015). New Mexico submitted the state’s ESSA plan in
August 2017 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017b). Due to changes in New Mexico’s governor and subsequent state public education administration during 2019, the state’s ESSA plan is in the process of being revised and resubmitted (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019b), but as of 2020, the resubmitted plan as not been approved.

Federal funding for charter school startups is also included in ESSA (Petrilli, 2018). The current U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is an advocate of school choice (Cheng, Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2019; Heilig & Clark, 2018; Petrilli, 2018; Rapa et al., 2018). Secretary DeVos has proposed “federal funding for charter school start-ups, a redesign of the compensatory education program that would foster parental choice, and a new choice program for military personnel” (Cheng et al., 2019, p. 17).

Within the framework of the two reform initiatives, NCLB and RTTT, measures were introduced that embraced the two divergent values of “standard-based reform, which stresses accountability for results on standardized tests; and school choice, which promises greater flexibility” (Shober, Manna, & White, 2006, p. 565). These conflicting values represented a “debate over autonomy and control in public education” (Archbald & Porter, 1994, p. 21).

Within the current reform policies “orientation tends to be characterized by the instrumentalism of government initiatives as well as the marketized environment of schooling” (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017, p. 175).

The accountability reform measures of RTTT promoted the establishment of prescribed regimens for implementing changes within the public school educational system to create uniform standards and procedures (Aldeman, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Mathias, 2010; Ravitch, 2013). Examples of these prescribed measures included teacher evaluation systems tied to student achievement scores on high stakes standardized testing regimens and
common national standards (Aldeman, 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; McGuinn, 2012; Ravitch, 2013). Through NCLB and RTTT, a one-size fits all standards-based educational reform approach was introduced. These types of reforms are implemented for the purposes of improving student achievement and “fixing” the system by creating regulated and standardized methods for teaching and measuring student progress (Aldeman, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Mathias, 2010). Through the implementation of these reforms, the “state” or bureaucracy enforces the decisions to regulate and control the pedagogy and structures of education using accountability standards (Hatch, 2002; Heise, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Sizer, 2005; Stillings, 2005, Tanner, 2013). ESSA also includes requirements for accountability through testing and “preserves most of the unproductive structures and reforms that NCLB prescribed” (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, p. 6). Thus, “standards-based reform has become …a fundamental part of the architecture of policy and governance in American education” (Elmore, 2000, p. 4).

In contradiction to the prescriptiveness of standards-based reforms, charter schools were to be decentralized, free of bureaucratic constraints, operating with the intent to provide not only the innovation for reform but also challenge the status quo and create change within a “failing” public education system (Berends, Springer, & Walberg, 2008; DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Heise, 2017; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Mavrogordato, 2019; Sizer & Wood, 2008; Stillings, 2005). Charter school advocates believe establishing “small decentralized institutions” allows for the creation of schools that have “the chance to innovate and be more democratic than traditional public schools” (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014, p. 5).
Charter Schools

In 1988, Ray Budde, a retired teacher, wrote a book entitled *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*, which proposed and articulated the original concept of a “charter” school. Budde (1988) conceptualized an independent school within a school district and utilized the historical “written agreement” or charter between the East India Company and Henry Hudson to illustrate how “Education by Charter” would function (p. 37). Budde (1988) described the organizational elements of Education by Charter as “building curriculum on the basis of societal needs; designating beginning and ending dates for funding cycles; planning for individual needs and learning styles of students; and providing outside program evaluation” (p. 37), through the presentation of a case study focused on a fictional school superintendent and school district. Budde (1988) proposed that a local school board would grant a charter to a group of teachers who would implement a more rigorous and innovative course of study and have an increased amount of accountability for evaluating and analyzing successes.

That same year, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, took the idea further and proposed the creation of “schools within schools” (Weil, 2000, p. 62), autonomous public schools chartered by a local district, he called “chartered schools” (Weil, 2000, p. 63). Shanker’s intent was for chartered schools to be independent of bureaucratic regulations in order to “experiment with innovative approaches to educating students” (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015, p. 4).

In 1992, the state of Minnesota formalized this autonomous schools idea, creating and passing the first charter school legislation in the U.S. (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Rapa et al., 2018; Vergari, 2007; Weil, 2000). During the past nearly three decades, the number of
charter schools has greatly expanded, with 44 states along with Washington, D.C., Guam and Puerto Rico enacting charter school laws (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Since the initial legislation, a total of 7,000 charter schools have been established, serving 3.3 million students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020).

Charter schools are publicly funded, independent schools with their own crafted missions and instructional objectives (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Ertas, 2015; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). Charter school mission statements outline the goals of the school and other pertinent information, offering a “declaration of an organization’s aspirations...by describing curricula, pedagogical styles, and teaching methodologies” (Lubienski & Lee, 2016, p. 67). The mission statements of charter schools “reflect the educational philosophies and strategies” (Lubienski & Lee, 2016, p. 67), presenting a picture of the school’s identity and differentiating it from other schools (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee, 2016). A school’s mission statement provides the structure for school-wide decision making and resource allocation (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee, 2016).

Such institutions “were developed to provide schools and educators with incentives to innovate” (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005, p. 345). A charter school offers an option of free educational choice to parents and students and has a “detailed framework of its own ‘charter’ or petition, agreed upon between the charter authorizer and the school” (Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2015, p. 115). Charter authorizers vary according to individual state charter laws and may include local school boards, public universities, city or mayor’s offices; nonprofit organizations; or state boards of education (Berends, 2015; Mavrogordato, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 2015).
For this study, only charter schools operated as “stand-alone schools [that are] created and operated” (Torres, 2018, p. 4) by individuals or small groups are discussed. The New Mexico charter statute, NMSA 1978, 22-8B-13; 2006, states, “The governing body shall not contract with a for-profit entity for the management of the charter school” (New Mexico State Statutes, 2018), therefore for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) are not relevant to New Mexico and are not included in this study.

In the state of New Mexico, the first charter schools were approved and opened under the passage of the state Charter School Act of 1999 (Casey, Andreson, Yelverton, & Wedeen, 2002). The NM Charter School Act (NMSA 1978, 22-8B-13) was amended in 2006 to include a state-level authorization of charter schools (New Mexico State Statutes, 2018). Currently, there are ninety-six charter schools in New Mexico, each with a unique mission and purpose as developed and approved by their charter agreement (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020a). Charter schools in New Mexico were created to produce innovative, alternative options for education (Casey et al., 2002). In the New Mexico Charter School Act (NMSA 1978 § 22-8B-1; 1999), the stated purposes envisioned for charter schools are:

- to enable individual schools to structure their educational curriculum to encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods that are based on reliable research and effective practices or have been replicated successfully in schools with diverse characteristics; to allow the development of different and innovative forms of measuring student learning and achievement; to address the needs of all students, including those determined to be at risk; to create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning programs at the
school sites; to improve student achievement; to provide parents and students with an educational alternative; to create new, innovative and more flexible ways of educating children within the public school system; to encourage parental and community involvement in the public school system; to develop and use site-based budgeting; and to hold charter schools accountable for meeting the department’s educational standards and fiscal requirements. (New Mexico State Statutes, 2018)

In New Mexico, a group or an individual submits an initial charter application to either a local school district or to the Public Education Commission (PEC) (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a). The PEC consists of an elected board of commissioners representing regions across the state (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a). Schools that choose to be a district-authorized charter obtain approval from the local school board in which the school is geographically located (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a). State authorized charters obtain approval from the PEC. Both district and state charters are approved for a period of no longer than five years, with an option to apply for reauthorization from either authorizer for additional five-year charter renewal terms (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a).

The school’s charter application, either initial or renewal, outlines the purpose, mission, goals, and other specifics of the charter such as grade levels, student demographics, and required cap on the number of students the school may serve (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019g). State authorized charters negotiate a performance contract agreement with the PEC (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019g). District authorizers vary in charter school requirements for contractual agreements, with some districts not requiring any other contract beyond the charter application document. Once the
initial or renewal charter is approved, with accompanying contractual agreements, the school is responsible for fully implementing the charter (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019g).

A charter school must accept all enrolling students that meet the grade levels specified in the school’s charter at no costs to parents and students, up to the agreed upon enrollment cap according to NMSA 1978, 22-8B-4.1; 1999 (New Mexico State Statutes, 2018; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a; Rapa et al., 2018; Vargari, 2007). In New Mexico, under NMSA 1978 § 22-8B-4.1 (1999), charter schools must give priority to currently enrolled students and their siblings for each year’s enrollment (New Mexico State Statutes, 2018). If the charter has more student applications than allowed or available grade or classroom openings, then the school must conduct a lottery, which consists of a random selection of students to fill the vacant spaces (Berends, 2015; DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a; New Mexico State Statutes, 2018). In New Mexico, students not selected through the lottery process are placed on a charter school’s wait list as first come, first serve until the following school year (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a).

Proponents consider charter schools to be one of the most important innovations in American public education (Mavrogordato, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). However, charter schools are not without opposition within the public education landscape (Berends, 2015; Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Heilig & Clark, 2018; Gawlik, 2016; Hill & Jochim, 2009; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Stoddard & Corcoran, 2007). School choice represents a shift in power and control of schools from government to parents, “restructur[ing] the balance of power…with respect to school
attendance and materially disrupts a status quo that structurally favors public school attendance” (Heise, 2017, p. 1895). Within the politics of choice, the two opposing sides view charter schools as either destructive (critics) or bolstering (proponents) of public education (Berends et al., 2008; Heilig & Clark, 2018; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

Many critics of charter schools are teacher unions, district and state bureaucracies, and other organizations with ties to these groups, such as the NAACP, ACLU, and the League of Women Voters (Cheng et al., 2019; Heilig & Clark, 2018; Hill & Jochim, 2009; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Stoddard & Corcoran, 2006, Vargari, 2007). The primary “interests at stake are those of people whose jobs, incomes, or positions of power depend on the current arrangements in public education” (Hill & Jochim, 2009, p. 12).

Some criticisms of charter schools include privatization of public education, failure to increase student achievement, continued or even increased segregation based on race and income, and detrimental effects on students left behind in traditional public schools due to decreased resources being allocated to students choosing to attend charter schools (Archbald, Hurwitz, & Hurwitz, 2018; Berends, 2015; Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Frankenberg, Kotok, Schafft, & Mann, 2017; Heilig & Clark, 2018; Hill & Jochim, 2009; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Nelson & Miron, 2005; Ravitch, 2013; Rapa et al., 2018). In October 2016, the Board of Directors of the NAACP, in a vote “inspired by historical support of public schools” passed a moratorium on the expansion of charter schools, citing concerns of accountability and “perpetuating a de facto segregation of the highest performing children” (NAACP Press Release, 2016). Critics question whether charter schools will add to the further segregation of
students of color and those from lower income families (Archbald et al., 2017; Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Heilig & Clark, 2018; Keddie, 2016; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Ravitch, 2013). U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos advocates for expansion of charter schools but critics have concerns that the research indicates that “charter schools do not perform at higher levels than public schools, yet they segregate, remain prone to fiscal mismanagement and often have opaque management and accountability” (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, p. 4) and instead recommend that the number of charter schools should be reduced (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

There are critics that oppose on point of principle, viewing charter schools as a means of privatizing education (Berends, 2015; Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Ravitch, 2013; Vergari, 2007). Privatization of charter schools entails “shift[ing] delivery of education from the public sector to private providers” (Vergari, 2007, p. 17). Vergari (2007) identified four dimensions of “privatization politics” in education: delivery of services, financial sources, governance and regulation, and educational purposes (p. 18). Critics of school choice claim the movement “is not meant to reform public education but is a deliberate effort to replace public education with a privately managed, free-market system of schooling” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 4). Critics warn against the possibility of charters and other choice options “becom[ing] matters of individual taste, preference, and judgment, rather than matters of public policy discourse and debate ‘that may allow’ the public purposes of public education [to] drift away” (Elmore, 2000, p. 11). Critics claim that by allowing the creation of charter schools, the “splitting up of the school system [has been] promoted and supported” (Tanner, 2013, p. 8). Critics assert that charter school research does not support the claim that
“a competitive market will solve problems” (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, p. 11) and that charter schools have not closed the achievement gap (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

Research is mixed on whether charter schools increase racial segregation of students (Archbald et al., 2018; Frankenberg et al., 2017). The question of “whether or not charters exacerbate segregation…has no single answer because methods differ among studies, because many local context variables shape enrollment patterns in any given district” (Archbald et al., 2017, p. 8). Studies show that most charters are representative of their neighborhoods (de facto segregation) and within that context, minority students enroll in charter schools that have majorities of the same race and do create increasing racial isolation (Archbald et al., 2018; Frankenberg et al., 2017). A Dear Colleague Letter was released from the Office of U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2014) with guidance on creating more diversity in charter school enrollments, that included reminders to follow federal civil rights laws and regulations, to publicize and recruit a diversity of students within communities, including providing admissions information for the school that ensures access for language-minority parents, to “avoid and redress discrimination in the administration of school discipline on the basis of race, color, national origin; disability; and sex” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 6), and enroll and provide adequate services for students with disabilities and English-language learner students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Interestingly, one suggestion in the letter is for a charter school to use a “weighted lottery” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 4). The conditions for a weighted lottery, established by nonregulatory guidance from the U.S. Department of Education, are (if state law allows) to give “slightly better chances for admission…to educationally disadvantaged students, including students who are economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities,
migrant students, limited English proficient students, neglected or delinquent students, and homeless students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 4). This is an example of the complexity of charter schools. On one hand, charter schools are to provide equal choice opportunities for all students and on the other hand, charter schools may be given the opportunity to “select” students.

The differences between proponents’ and critics’ concerns regarding segregation in charter schools can be dichotomously exemplified by the results of a 2013 Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) study of Michigan charter schools. The 2013 CREDO study findings concluded that charter schools “enroll greater shares of Black students and students in poverty than the feeder schools” (p. 11). Yet the CREDO study also found that “Black students enrolled in charter schools show significantly better performance in reading and math compared to Black students in TPS [traditional public schools]” (CREDO Report, 2013, p. 24). This finding was repeated for Hispanic students living in poverty enrolled in Michigan charter schools (CREDO Report, 2013). The issue of charter school segregation is complicated with:

- differences in racial/ethnic composition due to many social factors within American society not the least of which is that charter schools are located predominately in urban centers that have disproportionate numbers of students of color attending public schools, whether traditional or charter. (Berends, 2015, p. 163)

Proponents believe that charter schools can address issues of individual family educational priorities better than large, impersonal traditional public school systems (Berends, 2015; DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018). The image of “parents shopping around at different schools in pursuit of private interests just doesn’t match the communal forms of
discourse that characterize what many parents and teachers say about charter schools” (Fuller, 2009, p. 14). According to a survey conducted by “Education Next”, parents of students enrolled in charter schools indicated higher levels of satisfaction than parents of students enrolled in district schools (Barrows, Peterson, & West, 2017). Charter school proponents seek the decentralization and deregulation (autonomy) from the “stifling bureaucracy-heavy system of public education embracing conformity over innovation” (Brown, Henig, Lacireno-Paquet, & Holyoke, 2004, p. 1037). Among charter school supporters there may be a variety of incentives for support, such as:

- dissatisfaction with the performance of traditional public schools, desire for greater parental involvement or control, frustration with stringent state regulations or inefficient local bureaucracies, diverging preferences for education driven by a rise in local population heterogeneity, or other unmet demands for sorting across schools or districts. (Stoddard & Corcoran, 2007, p. 28)

On the 2018 EDNEXT Poll, 58% of the respondents supported “universal choice” (Cheng et al., 2019, p. 17), with 31% of respondents disapproving (remaining respondents had no opinion) (Cheng et al., 2019). Forty-four percent of respondents supported charter schools with 35% opposed (Cheng et al., 2019).

**Standards-Based Accountability Reforms in New Mexico**

The standards-based reform measures advocated by NCLB and RTTT, and later the ESEA/NCLB waivers, offered a prescribed system of accountability that includes uniform teacher evaluation systems tied to student achievement scores on “high-stakes” standardized tests and statewide implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Aldeman, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Wrabel et al., 2018). From 2013 to 2018, the
model of teacher evaluation and accountability in New Mexico asserted that teacher effectiveness could be quantified through a value-added measure (VAM) statistical model that purported to assess teachers’ impact on student learning (Aldeman, 2017; Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b). During the 2013-14 school year, the Public Education Department of New Mexico (NMPED), an applicant for RTTT funding, launched a teacher evaluation system for measuring teacher effectiveness. The New Mexico teacher evaluation system, called the New Mexico Teacher Educator Effectiveness System (NMTEACH), provides a prescribed framework of what constitutes teacher effectiveness measures that includes defined teacher practices and behaviors and a VAM statistical analysis of student assessment scores (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The NMTEACH Educator Effectiveness system is designed to:

- establish a framework for continuous improvement and professional growth for teachers and principals, which, in turn, will promote student success. The NMTEACH system was created to ensure that every student has equitable access to an effective principal and teacher every day they are in school. Implementing a rigorous, uniform observation protocol, providing immediate constructive feedback, using meaningful student data, and other multiple measures will provide valuable information to aid the personal development and growth of each teacher and principal. (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a, p. 3)

In 2019, the New Mexico Public Education Department began soliciting public feedback on possible changes to this system (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019c). For the 2019-2020 school year, the NMPED continued to utilize NMTEACH as the
teacher evaluation system with some changes to the system (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019f). These changes included having only one formal classroom observation along with three classroom walk-throughs and elimination of the usage of student assessment scores to measure teacher performance (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019f). For the 2020-2021 school year, the New Mexico Public Education Department renamed the statewide teacher evaluation system to “Elevate NM” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b). Elevate NM consists of the same domains and competencies of the NMTEACH, along with one formal observation and three classroom walk-throughs (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b). For the purposes of this study, I am referring to NMTEACH as the New Mexico teacher evaluation system because it was still in effect during data collection for this research.

The NMTEACH consists of four performance areas of evaluation for all teachers in New Mexico (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Figure 1 presents the performance areas, corresponding evaluation question, and performance measures. The four performance areas of NMTEACH are: Student Opportunity to Learn (OTL), Student Achievement, Instructional Quality, and Professionalism (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Each of the four performance areas is correlated to an evaluation question and specific measurement components (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

As shown in Figure 1, the performance area of Student Opportunity to Learn (OTL) seeks to answer the question, “To what extent do teacher practices and behaviors create student opportunity to learn?” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a, p. 3) and is measured by the student/parent OTL survey, evaluation domains 1, 2, and 3, and teacher
attendance. The area of Student Achievement seeks to answer the question, “To what extent does the teacher enable students to exceed expectation of achievement on standardized tests?” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a, p. 3) and utilizes student achievement gains calculated with a VAM statistical analysis as measurement (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Instructional Quality seeks to answer, “To what extent do teacher practices and behaviors maintain high standards of academic quality?” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a, p. 3) and is measured by evaluation domains 1, 2, and 3. Professionalism, the fourth area, seeks to answer the question of “To what extent do teachers contribute to positive school culture and climate?” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a, p. 3) and is measured by evaluation domain 4 and teacher attendance.

**Figure 1**

*NMTEACH Performance Areas with Correlated Questions and Measurements* (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).
Figure 2 displays the percentage distribution of the performance measures used to evaluate the NMTEACH performance areas. At the start of the 2018-19 school year, NMTEACH was designed to have thirty-five percent of the evaluation based on the Student Achievement measurement component (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Student Achievement was calculated through a VAM statistical analysis of student scores on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) for grades 3-11 or End of Course (EoC) results for grades 7-12 or the IStation Reading Assessment or Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura for students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The measurement component of Classroom Observation counts for forty percent of the evaluation and is based on two to three (optional) yearly classroom observations (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The observations are completed utilizing evaluation criteria consisting of specific teaching domains with defined behaviors (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The third measurement component, Planning, Preparation and Professionalism, is fifteen percent of the evaluation and is also based on teacher evaluation criteria consisting of defined teacher behaviors (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

Student/Parent OTL Surveys and Teacher Attendance, the fourth and fifth measurement components of the system, each count as five percent of the evaluation system (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The OTL surveys consist of questions “that measure student or parent perception of the opportunity to learn created by the teacher” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a, p. 10). The Student Survey is completed by students in grades 3-12 and the Parent Survey is completed by parents for students in grades K-2 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). For the Teacher Attendance
measurement, the number of acceptable days a teacher can be absent is six days (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

**Figure 2**

*Percentage Values for Measurement Components of NMTEACH* (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a)

The Theory of Action for NMTEACH proposes that if teacher effectiveness improves, then instructional practice will improve, leading to improved student achievement (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). NMTEACH utilizes the performance measurement components in Figure 2 to “capture the complexity” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a, p. 4) of teacher effectiveness.

The observation and evaluation domains of NMTEACH are based on Danielson’s (2007) Framework for Teaching. The Framework for Teaching was developed to meet two goals for teacher evaluation—quality assurance for “contribut[ing] substantially to the quality of teaching” (Danielson, 2001, p. 12) and to “promote professional development”
(Danielson, 2010, p. 37). A major premise of the Framework for Teaching is the shared and consistent definitions of the behaviors that constitute “good teaching” (Danielson, 2010, p. 36). The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument (Danielson, 2013) “identifies those aspects of a teacher’s responsibilities that have been documented through empirical studies and theoretical research as promoting improved student learning” (p. 1). The NMTEACH incorporates the four domains of teaching responsibilities of the Framework for Teaching: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities (Danielson, 2013; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). In New Mexico, the four domains are broken down into specific components of teacher behaviors, which are scored on a scale of 0-5, with zero being ineffective, one being minimally effective, two being effective, four being highly effective, and five being exemplary for specific listed teacher behaviors (Danielson, 2013; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

NMTEACH evaluation domains 2 and 3 consist of Classroom Environment and Instruction and require uniform and calibrated classroom observation protocols of defined teacher behaviors, documented by evidence and artifacts accumulated by the observer (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Behaviors are rated on a scale of zero to five with two to three observations (district/charter school optional choice) per teacher required per school year (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Planning and Preparation (domain 1) and Professional Responsibilities (domain 4) also consist of specific teacher behaviors that are rated on the same zero to five scale once per school year documented by evidence and artifacts accumulated by the observer (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).
The NMTEACH is mandatory for all districts and charter schools in New Mexico, replacing other systems of teacher evaluation and observation that previously existed in school districts and charter schools (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Within this system there are limited plan choices consisting of choosing two or three formal observations and adding a NMPED evaluator to conduct one or more observations at the school (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). District and school level administrators are required to attend yearly training on implementation of the NMTEACH and accompanying web-based documentation platform of Frontline OASYS (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Administrators must pass a yearly proficiency assessment in order to be qualified to observe and rate teachers on the NMTEACH evaluation domains (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

Another component of the standards-based reform in New Mexico was the transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS were developed by the National Governor’s Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (Mathis, 2010). The Common Core State Standards Initiative “developed these standards as state-led efforts to establish consensus on expectations for student knowledge and skills that should be developed in Grades K-12” (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011, p. 103). State adoption of CCSS was a condition for receiving RTTT funding and for approval of a NCLB/ESEA waiver offered by the U.S. Department of Education in 2011 (Aldeman, 2017; Heise, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Porter et al., 2011).

The New Mexico Common Core Standards (NMCCS) were fully implemented in the 2015-2016 school year (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016). The Common Core State Standards are:
a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2020, para. 2)

All districts and charter schools in New Mexico are required to implement and align instruction with the NMCCS (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016). The NMCCS are the standards used to annually assess student achievement performance and learning on the state mandated assessments (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016). The state mandated assessments are the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment for Mathematics and English Language Arts (previously the PARCC) for grades 3-11, End of Course (EoC) assessment for grades 7-12, or the IStation Reading Assessment or Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura for students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019h).

**Autonomy of Charter Schools**

Autonomy is a fundamental component in the conception and design of charter schools (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends, Penaloza, Cannata, & Goldring, 2019; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnagan, 2007; Hassel, 1999; Mavrogordato, 2019; Stillings, 2005). Charter schools are based on the “three key aspects of schools that the choice movement intends to improve-autonomy, innovation, and accountability” (Berends et al., 2019, p. 92). The concept of autonomy is multidimensional, with various meanings and interpretations (Cheng, Ko, & Lee, 2016; Lakoff, 1990; Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). For this study,
autonomy is defined as the “political freedom to regulate some of [the school’s] affairs [and is] characterized by the absence of constraints from external sources, but does not constitute complete freedom for the organization” (Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995, p. 340).

Political science literature provides a basis for an operational definition of autonomy, leading to the formulation of a conceptual framework of charter school autonomy (Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Three types of autonomy were identified in a study conducted by Wohlstetter et al. (1995): autonomy from higher levels of government, autonomy of internal organization, and consumer autonomy. For this study, I constructed a unique conceptual framework of three elements of charter school autonomy utilizing an autonomy framework developed by Wohlstetter et al. (1995) and charter school theory (Budde, 1988; Fuller, 2009; Honig, 2009; Ross, Pinder, & Coles-White, 2015; Wells, 2002; Wohlstetter & Chau, 2004; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). Figure 3 presents the conceptual framework of the interconnecting elements of autonomy and supporting research literature citations. This conceptual framework provided me with a structure and framework for analyzing the impact of standards-based reforms on three elements of interrelated charter school autonomy.

The outlying circle in Figure 3 represents regulation autonomy and includes the state laws and regulations that grant charter schools the autonomy to develop and implement unique school missions, educational programs, and accountability measures (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Brown et al., 2004; Casey et al., 2002; Cheng et al., 2016; Finnigan, 2007; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; McGree & Mutchler, 1998; Shober et al., 2006; Sizer, 2005; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015).
Within the state of New Mexico, educational laws and statutes, such as the New Mexico Charter School Act of 1999 are implemented, and educational reform regulations such as NMTEACH are required. Currently, the New Mexico laws and regulations provide autonomy for charter schools, as outlined in the NM Charter School Act of 1999 (NMSA 1978 § 22-8B; 1999) and at the same time mandate specific accountability reform processes (New Mexico State Statutes, 2018). These reforms are contradictory and have an impact on the components that comprise charter school autonomy (Finnigan, 2007).
The middle circle in Figure 3 represents the element of school level autonomy that enables charter schools to implement innovative educational practices and creates the capacity for flexibility needed to meet unique school missions (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Casey et al., 2002; Cheng et al., 2016; Finnigan, 2007; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Sizer, 2005; Stillings, 2005; Vergari, 2007; Wohlsetetter et al., 2015). This autonomy element includes school governance, level of parental involvement, leadership practices, and the capacity to create a democratic school empowering teachers, parents, and students.

The inner circle in Figure 3 represents the third element of autonomy, which is the autonomy of charter school teachers within classrooms to provide innovative and flexible teaching methodology and pedagogies needed to meet school mission and goals and improve student learning and achievement (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Budde, 1998; Cannata, 2007; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; Mavrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Oberfield, 2016; Prichard & Moore, 2016; Wei, Patel, & Young, 2014; Wright et al., 2018). This autonomy element provides teachers with independent instructional decision making, innovative practices, and higher student achievement.

Autonomy is multi-dimensional and differentiated within charter schools. The three elements of charter school autonomy (Figure 3) are interconnected and provide a framework for examining the levels and types of autonomy in charter schools. The first element, regulation autonomy, allows charter schools to be independent public entities. This element can be at high levels of autonomy or have limits on charter school autonomy through governmental laws and statutes. The next interconnected autonomy in the framework is school level autonomy. If schools have a high level of regulation autonomy, then it is
assumed that schools will have the school level autonomy to create innovative learning programs. School level autonomy enables schools to create unique missions and goals. The mission and goals reflect a school’s educational philosophy and provides the structure for the development and implementation of innovative educational programs. The third interconnected element is teacher autonomy. In order to implement the unique and innovative learning program, charter school teachers need the autonomy to provide instruction to meet student learning needs. High levels of teacher autonomy provide opportunities for teachers to be creative decision-makers within their classrooms, creating instruction and learning environments that fulfill the school’s mission and goals, and provide effective instruction to students and families that choose to attend a charter school.

These interconnected elements of autonomy helped me examine how charter school autonomy intersects with standards-based reforms such as prescribed teacher evaluation systems and mandated teaching standards, such as the Common Core State Standards.

**Statement of Problem**

As the implementation and conceptualization of charter schools has progressed, the simplistic assumptions of the original proponents have become much more complicated and the road to ideal implementation and educational transformation filled with opposition and misunderstanding (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2018; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005; Stillings, 2005). Over the past several years, the standards-based accountability reform movement has produced increasingly prescriptive strategies to create standardized changes within the public education system, which in turn may impact the autonomy of charter schools, possibly limiting capacity to implement innovative educational opportunities (Keddie, 2016; Stillings, 2005). Within the existing
structure of public education, “most innovation is about maintaining the logic of confidence between the public and schools, not about changing the conditions of teaching and learning for actual teachers and students” (Elmore, 2000, p. 6).

The purpose of this study was to collect information on the current capacity of charter schools in New Mexico to maintain the autonomy needed to fulfill individualized missions and goals and create innovative educational practices, within the confines of prescribed standards based reform measures currently mandated. Having to implement several reform initiatives within the same period can be problematic for schools where “the cumulative demands and resulting fragmentation and incoherence can undermine the capacity of schools to make the very improvements so many desire” (Hatch, 2002, p. 626).

It is possible that “the approval process in New Mexico and a few other states may effectively water down the charter statutes to the point that charter schools have few differences from traditional public schools” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 347). Prescriptive measures in New Mexico include the mandated teacher evaluation system (NMTEACH), implementation of the NMCCS, use of specified assessments to evaluate student achievement, and prescribed teacher evaluation systems based on the results from high-stakes assessments. If state mandated restrictions are interfering with charter school autonomy and charter schools begin to operate, teach, and look like every other public school in the state, then the question remains as to how charters can fulfill the optimistic intentions of proponents and the NM Charter School Act by being the catalyst of innovation and reform for public education (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Sizer, 2005; Stillings, 2005, Wohlstetter et al., 1995).
Purpose of Study

Charter schools are caught between two types of reform, standards-based and school choice. The educational reform movement has produced increasingly prescribed strategies to create changes within the public education system, which could impact the autonomy of charter schools and possibly limit the capacity for charter schools to create and implement innovative educational opportunities (Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Stillings, 2005). A critical question for research is “what conditions are necessary for charter schools to operate autonomously to enhance the potential for high performance” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995). The subject of charter school autonomy needs further examination (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Gawlik, 2018). In this study, I examined the impact of standards-based prescribed reforms on the viability of charter schools to maintain autonomy needed for innovation and to meet school-specific goals and missions as presented in charter school theory.

The dichotomous reforms, charter schools and prescribed standards-based accountability initiatives, are based on opposing concepts (Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Rapa et al., 2018; Shober et al., 2006). Charter schools are constructed on the concept of autonomy and innovation while standards-based initiatives are based on concepts of prescriptive accountability and standardization. Within this incongruity of reform efforts, charter school leaders are now facing the dilemma of how to integrate these two conflicting concepts (Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Rapa et al., 2018). On one hand, charter school leaders embrace the applications and practices of autonomy, including the autonomy to determine accountability measures and on the other hand, charter school leaders are required to adhere to the state mandated reform measures which offer little to no autonomy for creating alternative systems of accountability.
My goal in this study was to examine the effects of mandated standards-based reform initiatives on the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico. There is a need for studies to examine how progressively restrictive reforms are impacting the autonomy and innovation of charter schools (Cohen et al., 2018) because “in the process, rather than contribute to substantial improvements, the adoption of these programs may further sap the strength and spirit of schools and their communities” (Hatch, 2002, p. 627). Since the passage of NCLB “our educational policies became more test-based, top-down, prescriptive, narrow, and punitive” (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, p. 6). Through this study, I have hopefully provided insights into the charter school policy landscape in New Mexico and how it influences charter schools’ autonomy.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were: How are standards-based reform measures impacting the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico? How are these reforms impacting the capacity of charter schools in New Mexico to fulfill their individual missions and goals?

Limitations

Limitations are inherent in all research studies (Creswell, 2013). The variable factors and contexts of charter schools are identified limitations of the proposed study (Archbald et al., 2017; Cannata, 2007; DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Torres, 2018). One variable factor to be considered is that charter schools have individual missions and goals. Each charter school mission defines the individualized school philosophy and other aspects that make the charter unique. A school’s mission may affect how autonomy and reforms are interpreted by the staff (Foreman & Maranto, 2018).
A possible limitation may be the diversity of the geographical areas of New Mexico. For this study, I selected the case study charter schools in a specific area of the state. These schools may have shared characteristics that may differ from other areas of the state.

Another factor that may be a limitation is the leadership style and history of the charter school leader (Gawlik, 2018). For example, charter school leaders that utilize a distributed or shared leadership model may have a specific view of autonomy and standards-based reforms versus a leader that utilizes a more traditional hierarchical approach. The length of tenure of a charter school leader and job experience in traditional public schools and charter schools may also affect their position on autonomy and the mandated state standards-based reforms.

**Researcher Positionality**

There is potential for bias based on the subjectivity of the researcher in any study (Creswell, 2014). My professional experience includes over thirty years in education, serving as a teacher and administrator in Pittsburgh, PA., Washington, D.C., Fort Worth, TX., and New Mexico. From August 2003 until June 2018, I served as the School Administrator/Director of the Red River Valley Charter School, a small rural, state authorized public charter school located in northern New Mexico. Having varied and unique educational positions has influenced my perspectives and opinions. In particular, the experiences and knowledge I gained as a charter school administrator spurred my interest to examine this subject and the related topics. As a charter school director, I became increasingly concerned with how mandatory standards-based accountability reforms enacted in New Mexico may be impacting the ways in which charter schools continue to be innovative and provide quality education for students.
In an effort to bracket or “mitigate the…effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 80), I have attempted to identify known preconceptions or biases that I bring to this study (Creswell, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2010). My preconceptions include support of school choice through the establishment of charter schools; a belief in the efficacy of the charter school movement to bring about positive changes in education; a belief that charter schools are public schools and are to be held accountable for fulfilling their charters; and a belief in the need for charter schools to have autonomy in order to be innovative, meet school missions, and facilitate change. In addition to these preconceptions, I also have attempted to bracket other areas of potential bias, such as my own administrative practices and approaches, and my professional experiences with standards-based reforms.

Assisted by oversight and input by my dissertation committee chairperson and other committee members, I have attempted to identify and bracket any preconceptions that may have influenced the design, data collection, analyses, and interpretations of this study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review consists of topical areas related to my research questions: How are standards-based reform measures impacting the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico? How are these reforms impacting the capacity of charter schools in New Mexico to fulfill their individual missions and goals?

Public Education

The public education system in the United States, specifically public education in the state of New Mexico, provides the context for this study. Public schools are “the core upon which Americans have relied to assure the continuity and evolution of their government, their economy, and their social values” (Graham, 2005, p. 3). The focus of public education policies following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 became driven to economically boost the nation by preparing students for employment, instead of simply developing good citizens (Beal & Hendry, 2012; Graham, 2005; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; McGuinn, 2017). The change in focus became what Graham (2005) refers to as “the movement for academic achievement” and was “by far the most radical and difficult of all the educational efforts of the twentieth century” (p. 176). The shift “demand[ed] that all children achieve academically at a high level and the measure of that achievement [was] tests” (Graham, 2005, p. 1).

This new movement spurred varying educational reform policies throughout the country, with federal, state, and local legislative and policy initiatives (Berkovich, 2017; Graham, 2005; McGuinn, 2017). These educational policies can be categorized as “implementable policies,” which can be incorporated into schools by mandate and “successful policies,” which produce demonstrable improvements in students’ school performance (Honig, 2009, p. 1).
Policies that mandate standards-based academic achievement reforms have created a public education system that is increasingly becoming standardized; yet, schools are unique places, invoking struggles over the competing interests of communities, regional demographics, and individual student and family needs (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Graham, 2005; Hatch, 2002; McGuinn, 2017; McLaren, 2007; Ravitch, 2013; Wright et al., 2018). Within this context of standardization, the public school system must face the dilemma of “how to respond to the public’s different and sometimes conflicting demands upon schools” (Graham, 2005, p. 5).

In order to address the issues created from the change in policy focus and the subsequent reforms, the public education system has become more bureaucratic (Berkovich, 2017; Chubb & Moe, 2011; Cohen et al., 2018; Flanders, 2017; Graham, 2005; Ladd, 2017; McGuinn, 2017) and can be described as both “bureaucratic and political” (Chubb & Moe, 2011, p. 520). Within this changing system, schools are bureaucratic and mutually political and cultural sites of conflict (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; McLaren, 2007; Prichard & Moore, 2016; Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991), turning into “cultural arenas where a heterogeneity of ideological and social forms often collide in an unremitting struggle for dominance” (McLaren, 2007, p. 187). The public education system is:

- a democratic political system in which diverse interests are constantly expressed.
- From this standpoint, establishing processes that schools can use to examine and negotiate diverse interests seems particularly important. (Hatch, 2002, p. 624)
- Public schools strive to fulfill their purpose, that of educating the young people of our country within the context of these struggles and conflicts (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017;
Graham, 2005; McGuinn, 2017; McLaren, 2007). On one hand, the federal and state bureaucracies impose rules and regulations as a one-size-fits-all and on the other hand, local education systems attempt to prioritize and reflect the unique needs of their communities (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Berkman & Plutzer, 2011; Brown et al., 2004; Graham, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Keddie, 2016; McGuinn, 2017).

It is within these dynamics that the public schools’ bureaucracy “rel[ies] on hierarchy, division of labor, specialization, formal rules, and the like in order to coordinate and control their members toward common ends” (Chubb & Moe, 2011, p. 520). This bureaucracy can provide the structure needed to coordinate actions for meeting goals but has the potential to overwhelm the system, becoming “too hierarchical, too rule-bound, too formalistic-to allow for the kind of autonomy and professionalism schools need if they are to perform well” (Chubb & Moe, 2011, p. 520). Public schools can be criticized as having a “political problem” in that they “actively promote and protect this overbureaucratization” (Chubb & Moe, 2011, p. 520).

A central area of conflict is whether the American public education system should be centralized through federal and state mandates such as common standards and teacher accountability practices or whether the system should be decentralized, with autonomy given to local schools to make decisions regarding instructional content and practices (Berkovich, 2017; Brown et al., 2004; Cheng et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2017; Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013; Ravitch, 2013; Wells, 2002; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). This conflict between centralization and autonomy has become “a dichotomy or tension [that] exists between school autonomy and national frameworks” (Cheng et al., 2016, p. 189). It is within this milieu that charter schools struggle both politically and culturally because “this political
theme also more closely links charter school reform to what have become known as ‘new social movements’, because it represents very localized activity around issues of recognition, identity, difference, voice, and empowerment” (Wells, 2002, p. 7).

Charter Schools

During the past two decades, the charter school movement has developed into a maverick style of schooling, eschewing bureaucratic control in an attempt for individual schools to function as independent entities, pursuing the goal of creating innovative educational practices (Berends, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Gawlik, 2018; Hassel, 1999; Miron, 2017; Wells, 2002). A central goal of charter schools is to be “deliberately, thoughtfully, boldly different from existing public…schools” (Sizer, 2005, p. 59). Charter schools offer the opportunity to make structural changes for schooling to “alter fundamentally the conditions under which schools operate” (Miron, 2017, p. 226). Within the charter school movement, “a political theme [has] shaped the demand for charter school reform and that is the age-old call for decentralization and giving more control over governance and decision making to the local school community” (Wells, 2002, p. 7). Charter schools “challenge the legitimacy of traditional power and funding arrangement in public education” (Vergari, 2007, p.15).

Within the framework of charter school theory, Miron (2017) describes the goals of charter schools as consisting of: structural changes-choice, deregulation/autonomy, and accountability; opportunity space/intermediate goals-governance, parental and community involvement, teacher autonomy and professionalism, curricular and pedagogical innovations, and privatization; and outcomes and final goals-increased levels of student achievement and customer satisfaction. In meeting these goals, charter schools offer the opportunity for
reformers to design autonomous schools “grounded in a shared set of values” (Lopez, Wells, & Holme, 2002, p. 129) that enable students and families to have greater input and access to their schools and the public education system (Flanders, 2017). A foremost objective of charter schools is “to shift the power in schools away from the bureaucracy and administration towards parents and teachers” (Flanders, 2017, p. 3).

Bringing innovative and de-centralized education to challenge the status quo, “charter schools have tremendous potential to fulfill the great democratic mission of American public education at once promoting social mobility and social cohesion” (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014, p. 5). Democratic endeavors to “establish community control of schools generally originated from people who had little power in the educational system—the poor and the disenfranchised—and who argued that the public schools in their neighborhoods were not serving the needs of their children” (Wells, 2002, p. 7). Changes within the state and local bureaucracies to allow for more democratic and autonomous schooling could cause a “transform[ation] from regulatory agencies…to dynamic, entrepreneurial organizations that seed and support systems of autonomous and differentiated schools” (Honig, 2009, p. 388).

Utilizing Nancy Fraser’s political theories, Abowitz (2001) depicted charter schools as having “democratic potential in multiple publics that are strong in the sense that they, too, can design and govern institutions that are public” (p. 159; italics in original). In this quest for democratic control:

these multiple publics should be participants in larger publics but should also have the legitimate authority to form their own informal groups as well as formalized institutions. This is where the democratic possibilities for charter schooling enter the scene. (Abowitz, 2001, p. 159)
This is the basis for the charter school movement, creating democratic autonomous institutions that offer alternatives and innovations to the American public education system (Abowitz, 2001; Gawlik, 2018; Kahlenberg & Porter, 2014; Miron, 2017; Oberfield, 2016; Wells, 2002).

There are mixed results from studies examining student achievement in charter schools (Betts & Tang, 2019; Rapa et al., 2018). The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) conducted charter school performance studies in New York state (CREDO, 2017a), New York City (CREDO, 2017b), and Texas (CREDO, 2017c). These three studies examined school performance, with the addition of school effects for ELL students and students with disabilities and compared similar charter school students with traditional public school students (CREDO, 2017a; CREDO, 2017b; CREDO, 2017c). The studies used a “virtual control record analysis technique” (Rapa et al., 2018, p. 3136) to match and compare charter school students with their traditional public school peers (CREDO, 2017a; CREDO, 2017b; CREDO, 2017c). The compared effects were labelled as days of learning to describe student performance (CREDO, 2017a; CREDO, 2017b; CREDO, 2017c). Compared to peers in traditional public schools, charter school students in New York state had a gain of 34 days of learning for reading and 63 days of learning for math (CREDO, 2017a). In New York City, the charter school students had a gain of 23 days of learning for reading and 63 days of learning for math when compared to traditional public school students (CREDO, 2017b). Compared to traditional public school peers in Texas, charter school students had a gain of 17 days of learning in reading with equal days of learning for math for both groups (CREDO, 2017c).
Angrist, Cohodes, Dynarski, Pathak, and Walters (2016) conducted a study of charter high schools in Boston examining “outcomes beyond standardized tests that are used for statutory accountability reviews and charter renewal [purposes]” (p. 276). Angrist et al. (2016) found that charter school attendance had no effect on high school graduation or likelihood of college enrollment, but more charter school students did enroll in 4-year versus 2-year colleges. The study found that attending a charter school “doubled the likelihood of sitting for an Advanced Placement exam, with especially large effects on the likelihood of taking and passing AP Calculus” (Angrist et al., 2016, p. 306). Attending a charter school “significantly increased SAT scores, with charter students scoring a third of a standard deviation higher than students in Boston’s traditional public schools” (Angrist et al., 2016, p. 306). Angrist et al. (2016) concluded that “Boston’s charter schools seem to be highly effective for subgroups that are often difficult to serve, including boys, special education students, and students with low achievement at high school entry” (p. 307).

Betts and Tang (2019) completed an analysis of charter school effectiveness and achievement research studies conducted since 2003, determining that:

On average, for the limited set of charter schools, locations, and years that been studied to date, charter schools are producing higher achievement gains in math relative to traditional public school elementary and middle but not high schools. For reading achievement charter schools on average are producing higher gains in middle schools but not in elementary or high schools. For both math and reading, middle school studies tend to produce the highest effect sizes of all of the grade groupings. The literature shows a large variation in estimated charter school effects across
locations and some studies also show large variations within a given city or state. (p. 69)

**Autonomy**

Autonomy within the context of education and charter schools has a variety of meanings (Cheng et al., 2016; Finnigan, 2007; Hanushek et al., 2013; Neeleman, 2019; Steinberg, 2014; Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Wright et al., 2018) and is multidimensional (Cheng et al., 2016; Finnigan, 2007; Hassel, 1999; Hanushek et al., 2013; Lakoff, 1990; Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Within the framework of democracy, Lakoff (1990) describes autonomy as “an essence of democratic citizenship” (p. 389) and as a “venerable idea closely associated with the belief in liberty and equality” (p. 384). The Greek word *autonomia* was used to describe a political concept that was “understood as the independence and self-determination of the community in its external and internal relations” (Lakoff, 1990, p. 388). Autonomy and freedom are closely related (Lakoff, 1990; Wohlstetter et al., 1995) but “freedom impl[ies] the absence of self-restraint, whereas autonomy impl[ies] the imposition of self-restraint, or more positively, self-determination” (Lakoff, 1990, p. 389). Autonomy as applied in education is associated with local decision making (Cheng, et al., 2016; Hanushek et al., 2013; Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995) and “is total when the actions of the organization perfectly correspond with its preferences” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 341). Having increased school autonomy allows schools to “depart from traditional institutional patterns of school in ways that strengthen increased teacher engagement and the likelihood that schools will depart from traditional institutional patterns...of schooling in ways that strengthen the relevance and rigor of school programs” (Honig, 2009, p. 389).
In proposing a framework for research on school autonomy, Cheng et al. (2016) suggested three major categories: “functional autonomy…consisting of areas of school practice and performance such as staffing, budgeting, student policies, and curriculum and assessment (instructional policies) (p. 180); “structural autonomy [which] describes a school’s authority to make decisions at a certain structural level” (p. 182), distinguishing between “external authorities (such as national offices, regional/district offices and school boards) and internal school authorities” (p. 182); and “cultural autonomy” (p. 183), such as “the presence of a culture of collaboration between teachers and principals in school management” (p. 183).

The assumed outcome of increased school autonomy is increased student achievement (Cheng et al., 2016; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2018; Hanushek et al., 2013; Honig, 2009; Mavrogordato, 2019; Neeleman, 2019; Steinberg, 2014). By having autonomy, schools are able to respond to student learning needs because “local decision-makers have better understanding of the capacity of their schools and the demands that are placed on them by varying student populations” (Hanushek et al., 2013, p. 213). Autonomy allows schools to “adapt more quickly to changing educational circumstances, and to have sufficient capacity and self-ownership to make curricular and pedagogical changes that enhance students’ learning” (Cheng et al., 2016, p. 178).

Hanushek et al. (2013) conducted a cross-country study to “investigate the impact of local autonomy on student achievement” (p. 227). Hanushek et al. (2013) examined the level of autonomy of school leaders for six decision categories consisting of: “deciding which courses to offer,” “determining course content,” “choosing which textbooks are used,” “selecting teachers for hire,” “establishing teachers’ starting salaries,” and “deciding on
budget allocations within the school” (p. 216). Hanushek et al. (2013) concluded that “local autonomy has an important impact on student achievement, but this impact varies systematically across countries, depending on the level of economic and educational development” (p. 213). Hanushek et al. (2013) found that “autonomy effects are most pronounced in decision making of academic content, with some additional relevance for personnel autonomy and, less so, for budgetary autonomy” (p. 227).

Steinberg (2014) analyzed the level of student achievement of elementary schools participating in Chicago Public Schools’ Autonomous Management and Performance Schools (AMPS) project. Schools in the AMPS project were granted increased autonomy for decision making in the areas of budget, curriculum, instruction and assessment, calendar and schedule, and professional development (Steinberg, 2014). Steinberg (2014) found “a large positive effect of autonomy on reading proficiency rates” (p. 29) for students enrolled in AMPS schools. By granting autonomy, “decision makers at the school level are most aware of and potentially most able to efficiently respond to the school’s organizational needs” (Steinberg, 2014, p. 2).

**Regulation Autonomy**

One element of the conceptual framework of charter school autonomy (see Figure 3) I developed for this study is regulation autonomy granted through federal and state laws. Regulation autonomy provides the waivers or consent for charter schools to be free of some regulations and to function as independent public entities (Miron, 2017; Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). This autonomy can vary from high to low levels of regulation requirements (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2017; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). Limited regulations provide charter schools with the
autonomy to create independent schools, having the freedom to make school wide decisions for the development and implementation of unique school missions, innovative educational programs, and accountability measures (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2017; Hassel, 1999; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Mavrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Shober et al., 2006; Sizer, 2005; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). The importance of autonomy in charter school laws is repeatedly referred to in the literature on charter schools (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2017; Hassel, 1999; Mavrogordato, 2019; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Within charter school theory, “the promise of charter schools hinges on whether they can utilize the autonomy they are granted to alter the core technology of schools, teaching, and learning” (Mavrogordato, 2019, p. 124). Charter school proponents suggest “that increased autonomy and flexibility in exchange for heightened accountability would lead to the creation and maintenance of more effective schools” (Stillings, 2005, p. 55).

In charter school theory, the conceptualization of autonomy is to have the independence to determine the goals, practices, and outcomes of the school (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2017; Gawlik, 2018; Hassel, 1999; Mavrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Robertson, Wohlstetter, & Mohman, 1995; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Autonomy includes “both internal operations of the organization and its external relations” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 339). Autonomy is needed for charters to have the flexibility to focus on meeting their missions and goals (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Robertson et al., 1995). Without autonomy: charter schools cannot provide unique educational options for children. They cannot serve as experimental ‘laboratories’ or ‘lighthouses’ from which other schools can learn. And they
cannot act as market competitors, threatening the public school monopoly and inducing it to change (Hassel, 1999, p. 78).

A crucial question is how the concept of autonomy as originally envisioned in charter school theory is reflected in the current federal and state charter school laws and policies. This includes examining what is successfully “work[ing] for whom, where, when, and why” (Honig, 2006, p. 2). Foreman and Maranto (2018) found charter school leaders “noted the difficulties of innovating while also complying with state curricular mandates” (p. 252).

Charter schools should not be autonomous simply to throw off bureaucratic regulations, but rather because autonomy provides schools the opportunity “to do things that previously were not allowed or available” (Finnigan, 2007, p. 505) and be innovative. Autonomy grants a charter school the capacity to self-manage and gives each school the “freedom to regulate [their] own affairs” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 340). Within this self-determining autonomy, charter schools are “nested in, not released from district or state authority” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 339).

The first charter school law was passed in 1992 by the state of Minnesota (Kalenberg & Potter, 2014; Rapa et al., 2018). Since that time, 44 states have enacted charter school laws (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Charter school laws vary from state to state (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005; Vargari, 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). A state’s “political friendliness to educational innovation and other innovation tendencies may affect...[the] likelihood of adopting charter school legislation” (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005, p. 352). Charter school laws should “allow multiple publics to form around educational visions that are funded by, and are accountable to, larger publics and the state” (Abowitz, 2001, p. 160).
The type and amount of regulations and policies that enable autonomy are “at the heart of charter school politics” (Vergari, 2007, p. 17). Studies conducted to examine the degree of autonomy in charter schools have found that the level is not as high as advocated in charter school theory (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Gawlik, 2018; Mavrogordato, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Charter schools can be regarded as “an incremental reform evolving unevenly along the continuum of autonomy” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 352). The implication of these findings is that further encroachment on charter school autonomy may occur with additional state regulations and mandates (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). If charter schools do not have “sufficient autonomy to make a real difference in performance…the potential for educational improvement might be less than expected by some reformers” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 353).

Wohlstetter et al. (1995) formulated a conceptual framework of charter school autonomy based on political science literature to assess the degree of autonomy among state charter school policies, identifying autonomy from higher levels of government and internal organizational and consumer autonomy. Wohlstetter et al. (1995) found that state charter school laws varied in the amount of autonomy granted to schools, affecting the capacity of charter schools to be independent and innovative.

Finnigan (2007) examined the degree of autonomy and the factors limiting charter autonomy by “conduct[ing] a multiyear, multimethod study” (p. 507) of charter schools across the country. The concept of autonomy for the study was multidimensional and defined as “a combination of deregulation and school-level control over decisions” (Finnigan, 2007,
Finnigan (2007) divided the findings into the conceptual areas of autonomy from higher levels of government and autonomy within schools. Finnigan (2007) found that half of all charter schools had to negotiate exemptions from state law, did not have full authority over key decisions, and were least likely to have control over their budgets. Only one quarter of the case study schools had high levels of autonomy (Finnigan, 2007). Finnigan (2007) concluded from these results that “many schools do not have the autonomy that charter school theory assumes…[and] autonomy in practice is limited by state laws and regulations and statewide accountability requirements” (p. 519).

As part of a study to examine legislative objectives of charter schools, Barghaus and Boe (2011) examined levels of autonomy by comparing charter schools with regular public schools. The study compared data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) of 220 charter schools within 17 states and DC to a sample of 2,860 regular public schools within the same states. Barghaus and Boe (2011) concluded that while “charter principals did experience more autonomy than regular school principals…only 39 percent of charter school principals experienced little state influence, and only 18 percentage experienced little district influence over school operations” (Barghaus & Boe, 2011, p. 78). The extent to which charter schools should be autonomous as intended in the original policy propositions has not been realized (Barghaus & Boe, 2011).

Brinson and Rosch (2010) conducted a methodical study on charter school autonomy, rating twenty-six states and a sample of identified charter schools within each of those states on a scale of zero, for least freedom, to 100 for most freedom and then turned the score into a letter grade (Brinson & Rosch, 2010, p. 5). They found that “the typical charter school in America today lacks the autonomy it needs to succeed – a degree of freedom we equate with
a grade no better than a C+, once federal, state, and authorizer impositions are considered” (Brinson & Rosch, 2010, p. 5). Charter school autonomy varied significantly by state, with high autonomy tending to be in states with larger amounts of charter schools (Brinson & Rosch, 2010). State laws focused their restrictions on certain areas of charter operation with authorizer contracts adding another layer of restrictions on charter schools (Brinson & Rosch, 2010). For many charter schools, “the promise of autonomy has not been kept” (Brinson & Rosch, 2010, p. 6). When considering this relative lack of autonomy Finn and Winkler (2010) concluded, “America’s charter schools resemble an artist who is expected to paint masterpieces while forced to wear thick mittens” (p. 4).

Flanders (2017) designed a study to measure the impact of autonomy on production efficiency of schools, defined as “the set of schools and funding levels that produce the highest levels of academic achievement by students per taxpayer money spent on the schools” (p. 2). Flanders (2017) compared the production efficiency of “no autonomy” to “great autonomy” (p. 3) schools in Milwaukee, having varying levels of funding. Flanders (2017) found independent charter schools, that were autonomous and had less funding than the traditional public schools in Milwaukee, were more efficient, “strongly suggest[ing] that greater autonomy leads to better performance” (p. 12). By focusing on the levels of autonomy in these schools, Flanders (2017) concluded that in less autonomous schools “the interests of those expanding inefficiencies, such as the entrenched bureaucracy may tend to be given equal or greater weight than those who have an interest in seeing efficient outcomes” (p. 2).
In the state of New Mexico, there are ninety-six charter schools, each with a unique mission and vision (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020a). In 2014, the New Mexico state vision for charter schools was to:

support and advance vibrant and innovative public schools of choice which are models of educational excellence and which cultivate a passion for learning and respect for the teaching profession. We envision our work cultivating communities of passionate learners and teachers who inspire educational excellence for all. (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2014, para. 1)

In 2019, the charter school state mission simply stated, “Driving student success in New Mexico by supporting excellent authorizing practices and charter schools that provide innovative, quality education” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a, para. 1).

In order to meet these visions for developing and implementing models of innovative instructional practices and leadership, charter schools in New Mexico need to have autonomy (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2017; Hassel, 1999). Two studies conducted in the 1990s of charter school state laws and policies concluded that the most common purpose for charter school legislation in New Mexico was to facilitate innovative teaching (McGree & Mutchler, 1998; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

In a study conducted in 1998, McGree and Mutchler found that the charter school statutes in New Mexico had limited waivers from compliance with state regulations. In 2019, this remained the same, with limited waivers offered, such as class size or teacher load, in addition to required compliance with mandated prescriptive state systems, such as the prescribed teacher evaluation system NMTEACH, NMCCSS, and high-stakes testing (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019g).
Berkman and Plutzer (2011) conducted a study on “whether state standards, along with testing...shape local educational policy and constrain the ability of schools and teachers to respond to their local community preferences” (p. 612). The local issue in the study was a controversial policy regarding the balancing of evolution and creationism instruction in a small school district (Berkman & Plutzer, 2011). Teachers in the district were “less responsive to public opinion when state curricular standards are supported by high-stakes testing” (p. 610), indicating that top-down “regulations, guidelines, incentives, and sanctions developed by high level governments” (p. 630) can be barriers to local autonomy.

School Level Autonomy

School level autonomy is the second element in the conceptual framework of autonomy I developed for this study and is represented as the middle circle in Figure 3. Autonomous schools are decentralized, eschewing bureaucracy, which allows schools to respond to individual student and parent needs (Chubb & Moe, 201; Flanders, 2017; Wright et al., 2018). School level autonomy encompasses the capacity of a charter school to create and implement their own unique mission, innovation and pedagogy (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Cannata, 2007; Casey et al., 2002; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2017; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Sizer, 2005; Steinberg, 2014; Stillings, 2005; Vergari, 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2018). School level autonomy encompasses the internal dynamics of a school and the extent of control that allows for school specific decision making by stakeholders (Hanushek et al., 2013; Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). When there is a clearly defined school-wide mission, “staff members have shared beliefs...and teachers have common values about the purpose of education and goals for student learning” (Cannata, 2007, p. 3).
School level autonomy and management is based on the theory that “decision makers at the school are most aware of and potentially most able to efficiently respond to the school’s organizational needs” (Steinberg, 2014, p. 2). Autonomy for charter schools is “based on the premise…[of] freedom to conceptualize the outcomes to be obtained and the practices used to accomplish their goals” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 333). By putting key decisions at the school level, “deregulation might allow enlightened school leaders to craft more coherent and focused educational offerings than is possible under the kaleidoscope of cross-cutting mandates faced by most public schools” (Nelson & Miron, 2005, p. 5).

School level autonomy involves school governance, level of parental involvement, leadership practices, and the capacity to create a democratic school empowering teachers, parents, and students (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Cannata, 2007; Chubb & Moe, 2011; Honig, 2009; Neeleman, 2019; Sizer & Wood, 2008; Steinberg, 2014, Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Wright et al., 2018). School level autonomy provides opportunities for school leaders and other stakeholders “to focus their school program on students’ needs and strengths rather then, for example, mainly complying with external demands” (Honig, 2009, p. 389). By focusing on the common mission and goals, stakeholders share “a sense of responsibility for student learning” (Cannata, 2007, p. 3).

Autonomy is an important factor in principals’ decisions to lead a charter school (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Gawlik, 2018; Torres, 2018). Torres (2018) conducted a study on the career decisions of charter school leaders and found that “personal beliefs of participants, perceived autonomy and identification with the school’s mission were the most important factors in decisions to lead…as a potential push factor” (p. 13; italics in original).
School level autonomy, seen as public ownership, involves implementing the concept and practice of local decision making with stakeholders having “the ability to locally oversee the school and for students, educators, and parents to have input into programmatic and policy changes” (Sizer & Wood, 2008, p. 12). School level autonomy provides opportunities for teachers and parents to participate in collective efforts in the decision-making processes of the school (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Hanushek et al., 2013; Neeleman, 2019). In a study conducted in 2005, Bifulco and Ladd, found that parents were more involved in charter schools than in traditional public schools, citing higher levels of school level autonomy as a factor for the higher level of parental involvement.

Charter school autonomy should provide “clarity of mission, strong leadership, teacher professionalism, and team cooperation that public schools want but...are unlikely to have” (Chubb & Moe, 2011, p. 531). Autonomous schools offer opportunities to challenge what is taught and how it is taught, empowering teachers, parents, and students to provide feedback and evaluate educational practices and outcomes “to work outside of the dominant cultural power base” (McLaren, 2007, p. 190), creating a space for inclusive democracy. By establishing a shared mission, there is “agreement on educational philosophy by school staff and parents, in turn...allow[ing] schools to spend more time focusing on instruction and less time managing internal conflicts” (Nelson & Miron, 2005, p. 98).

Schools given the power to make decisions also have more capacity to be innovative (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Robertson et al., 1995). In a study of autonomous site-based management schools, Robertson et al. (1995) found higher levels of innovative practices were more likely to be implemented when the school had control over key areas of decision making and a wide group of participants involved in the process. Schools with lower levels
of decision making and autonomy conditions were less successful “in generat[ing] meaningful reforms” (Robertson et al., 1995, p. 388). Through having school-level autonomy, charter schools can “depart from traditional institutional patterns of schooling in ways that strengthen patterns of teacher engagement and the likelihood that schools will depart from traditional institutional patterns” (Honig, 2009, p. 389). Autonomous schools have:

- a well-defined vision delineating the school’s specific mission, values, and goals regarding student outcome. This vision serves as an impetus and a focal point for decisions regarding what types of reforms to implement. Without such a vision, schools are usually less able to get very far in terms of designing and implementing any reforms. (Robertson et al., 1995, p. 37)

**Teacher Autonomy**

The third element of the autonomy framework for this study is teacher autonomy, represented by the inner circle of Figure 3. This element of autonomy refers to the freedom of instructional decision-making by teachers needed to provide innovative and flexible educational opportunities for students (Budde, 1998; Cannata, 2007; Honig, 2009; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Mavrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Oberfield, 2016; Porter, 1989; Wei et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2018). In charter school theory, teacher autonomy is an important component needed to allow teachers to be innovative in the classroom (Mavrogordato, 2019; Oberfield, 2016; Wei et al., 2014).

Within the context of a K-12 classroom, “teachers are asked to make hundreds of decisions each day, and each decision has the potential to change students’ learning experiences” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 219). The daily activities of teaching require
teachers to make decisions regarding instruction, assessment, pacing, discipline, structure, parent communication, and other relevant areas (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2016; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Wright et al., 2018). Specific examples of teacher autonomy in the classroom include: “selecting textbooks and other instructional materials; choosing content, topics, and skills to be taught; evaluating and grading students; selecting teaching techniques; determining the amount of homework to be assigned; and disciplining students” (Ingersoll et al., 2016, p. 48). Being autonomous in the classroom allows teachers to participate “in an authentic relationship with students where teachers know and respond with intelligence and compassion to students and their learning” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, pp. 265-266). Wright et al. (2018) defined teacher autonomy as “curricular influence” (p. 9) and “pedagogical influence” (p. 10). Curricular influence consisted of “establishing curriculum”, “selecting text books and other instructional material”, and “selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught” (Wright et al., 2018, p. 9). Pedagogical influence consisted of “selecting teaching techniques”, “evaluating and grading students”, “discipling students”, and “determining the amount of homework to be assigned” (Wright et al., 2018, p. 10).

A review of the literature indicates that teacher autonomy is desirable and necessary for teachers to be held professionally accountable and to be empowered (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Dondero, 1997; Gawlik, 2007; Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Honig, 2009; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Mavrogordato, 2019; Prichard & Moore, 2016; Wright et al., 2018). Autonomy is an important factor in effective teaching, student learning and achievement (Gawlik, 2007; Hanushek et al., 2013; Ingersoll et al., 2016; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Mavrogordato, 2019; Neeleman, 2019; Oberfield, 2016; Wohlstetter & Chau, 2004; Wright et al., 2018).
With autonomy, teachers are given the opportunity to create and strengthen “the relevance and rigor of school programs” (Honig, 2009, p. 389), allowing teachers “the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their students” (Ingersoll et al., 2016, p. 44). In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) advocates teacher autonomy and freedom from the restriction of set curriculum and instructional directives with the freedom for teachers to teach in such a way as to create educational experience.

Teacher autonomy is viewed as the basis for empowering teacher professionalism (Dondero, 1997; McLaren, 2007). Enhanced classroom autonomy increases teacher morale, job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006; Wei et al., 2014; Wohlstetter & Chau, 2004; Wright et al., 2018).

Successful teaching and learning come from allowing teachers to be “autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process and exploiting the freedom it confers” (Little, 1995, p. 179). Positive effects, such as increased organizational efficiency and innovation occurs in schools with high levels of teacher autonomy and participation in decision making (Dondero, 1997; Gawlik, 2007; Honig, 2009; Mavrogordato, 2019; Oberfield, 2016; Robertson et al., 1995). Teacher autonomy provides opportunities for teachers to create and initiate innovative new practices in the classroom and allows teachers to “tak[e] the lead in getting these innovations diffused throughout the school” (Robertson et al., 1995, p. 391). Granting teachers roles for decision-making makes sense because teachers are at “the center of an extremely complex ecological process” (Knoester & Parkison, 2017, p. 254).
Wohlstetter and Chau (2004) investigated the connection between the types of autonomous teacher decisions that most influenced student achievement and concluded that teacher autonomy leads to improved decision making for “more effective classroom instruction and ultimately increased student performance” (p. 53). They found that “teachers in schools with higher levels of autonomy also tended to use more strategies that have been linked with student success in literacy” (Wohlstetter & Chau, 2004, p. 70).

Historically, American teachers were given autonomy on what to teach and how to teach (Anderson, 1987; Graham, 2005). With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, many questions were asked about the professionalism and competency of teachers pointing to the failure of schools and teachers to adequately prepare students academically, signifying teachers needed less autonomy and must be provided with more structure and accountability for what was taught in the classroom (Anderson, 1987; Dondero, 1997; Graham, 2005; Ravitch, 2013; Rothstein, 2008). In response, autonomy was removed from teachers and prescriptive external standards and other reform policies were implemented to provide teachers structure for academic standards and pedagogy, commencing the movement to remove instructional decision-making from teachers as manifested in the current standards-based reforms (Dondero, 1997; Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006; Porter, 1989; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Wright et al., 2018). Given the current standards-based reforms, teachers “are not free to teach what they want; rather, they are potentially constrained in their behavior by standards, and the monitoring, sanctions and rewards that accompany high stakes testing” (Berkman & Plutzer, 2011, p. 616). Porter (1989) used the term prescriptiveness to “denote how specific and explicit an external standard is in specifying classroom practice” (p. 347).
It is within this context of external and centralized control of teaching that “today’s imperatives for standardized achievement take us further and further from a complex and nuanced notion of what it means to teach” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 265). The imposed structure provides “set standards for student achievement [to] not only specify what content is held to be most worthwhile, they specify criteria for judging adequate teaching and learning” (Porter, 1989, p. 345). Teaching is negatively affected through “the increasing adoption of management-type pedagogies and accountability schemes…result[ing] in policy proposals that actively promote the deskilling of teachers” (McLaren, 2007, p. 188). With the high stakes assessment accountability of NCLB, teachers may be tempted to “teach to the test” (Ladd, 2017, p. 465) with a “narrowing of the curriculum” (Ladd, 2017, p. 465).

Reform policies that seek to centralize and limit the autonomy of teachers in the classroom have not included teachers in the policy decision making processes (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Webb, 2002). The consequences of not incorporating teachers into decisions that directly affect the classroom and instruction create a disconnect that “as less time, money, space, and value are given to a more complex notion of teaching, the voices of both teachers and students are being squeezed out and we are losing sight of what it means to teach” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 265).

In their conceptualization of charter schools, both Budde (1988) and Shanker (1988) stressed the autonomy of teachers as an important component needed for innovation and change (Budde, 1998; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015). Teacher professional autonomy is a goal of the charter school movement and allows teachers and schools to “develop innovations in curriculum and instruction” (Miron, 2017, p. 227).
Gawlik (2007) explored the relationship between charter schools and teacher autonomy, specifically examining the concepts of choice, accountability, and deregulation. The amount of autonomy granted to teachers varied on “a continuum spanning from complete constraint to complete freedom…[with] the assumption that as one moves along that continuum from constraint to freedom, school effectiveness increases” (Gawlik, 2007, p. 526). Gawlik (2007) found that teacher autonomy was a major factor in why teachers chose to be part of a charter school and that there is an assumption “that charter schools provide a breeding ground for teachers to exercise their professional autonomy and create a professional culture” (p. 529).

Wei et al. (2014) found similar results when comparing organizational differences between traditional public schools and charter schools in relation to teacher experiences. Wei et al. (2014) concluded that teachers choose to teach in charter schools “because they like the ostensible freedom and flexibility in teaching, educational philosophy, charter school mission and community, smaller classes, like-minded coworkers, and accountability for student achievement—all of which they view as features distinguishing charter schools from traditional public schools” (p. 4).

Providing increased autonomy indicates that there is also a need to pair valid accountability with teacher autonomy (Gawlik, 2007; Oberfield, 2016; Porter, 1989). Balancing the combination of accountability with autonomy is important as little say over the terms, processes, and outcomes of their work may undercut teachers’ sense of efficacy. Imposing accountability without autonomy is unfair. So, holding teachers accountable for student achievement when they have no autonomy does not make sense. Many policy makers
and reformers appear to assume that granting teachers more autonomy cannot exist with guaranteeing the public need for accountability (Gawlik, 2007, p. 549).

Webb (2002) conducted a study of teacher autonomy within a school district in the state of Washington and found that participants overrode state and district curriculum mandates and used their autonomy to meet individual students’ needs. Lack of inclusion of teachers in educational policy making infers the:

problems of education fall squarely on ‘non-compliant’ teachers [creating a] moral imperative breach [that is] exacerbated when teachers are excluded from developing initiatives aimed to improve the conditions for schooling at their local sites, sites where teachers may in fact, know more about students’ needs than policy-makers. Policy practices that sublimate the interests of those closest to the issues, indeed, the very people held accountable for the issues, are morally dubious. (Webb, 2002, p. 59)

**Standards-Based Reforms**

The need to standardize education “has a deceptively simple logic: schools and school systems should be held accountable for their contributions to student learning” (Elmore, 2000, p. 4). Federal or state polices that standardize education “reduce outcomes to what is easiest to monitor, count, assess, and manage” (Knoester & Parkison, 2017, p. 250). The standards-based reform movement “sought to create a new external structure of academic standards, assessments tied to the standards, and school and system accountability for students’ performance on the assessments” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 206). Federal initiatives implemented during the past two decades have sought to increase standardization, and therefore, accountability by creating the national standards-based reform movement (Cohen et al., 2017; Elmore, 2000; Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Ladd, 2017; Sizer & Wood, 2008).
NCLB required “each state to develop content standards and aligned student achievement tests in specific subjects and grades, along with a set of escalating sanctions that are tied to a repeated failure of schools to meet their student performance targets” (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2012, p. 150). With the passage of NCLB in 2002, the utilization of high-stakes assessments for measuring student achievement and teacher effectiveness was initiated (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Ladd, 2017; Sizer & Wood, 2008). NCLB used “top-down accountability pressure that was more punitive than constructive represent[ing] a flawed approach to school improvement” (Ladd, 2017, p. 464).

Hamilton, Stecher, and Yuan (2012) suggested there are five features of standards-based reform. The first feature is “academic expectations for students” (Hamilton et al., 2012, p. 152), which emphasizes the development of academic standards. Academic standards are the “focal point for changing other elements of the education system, including the testing system” (p. 152). The second feature is “alignment of the key elements of the educational system” (p. 153), which promotes the attainment of the academic standards and includes the alignment of “textbooks, assessment systems, and professional development that are explicitly marketed as being aligned with state standards” (p. 154). The third feature is the use of assessments of student achievement to measure outcomes, with the “demand [for] a high volume of assessment geared toward a concise, quantitative summary of performance” (p. 154) tied to the standards. The fourth feature of standards-based reform is support and technical assistance from states and districts “to focus on helping schools overcome obstacles to the attainment of standards” (p. 155). The fifth feature is accountability, “a view that assessments should be used not only to monitor progress but also to hold educators (and in some cases students) accountable” (p. 155).
Further standards-based reforms were introduced with the RTTT competitive grant program (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016). The fundamental structure of the RTTT competition was “explicitly designed to encourage broad policy change across the country” (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017, p. 508). Multiple educational areas have been affected owing to the implementation of standards-based reforms (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Howell & Magazinnik, 2017). Within the scope of standards-based reforms, educational policies and practices have changed to include national curriculum standards, national standardized assessments, and teacher accountability based on prescribed teacher evaluation systems with statistical analysis of student performance on assessments to correlate the impact of teachers on student achievement (Chetterji, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Elmore, 2000; Howell & Magazinnik, 2017; Mathias & Trujillo, 2016).

Critics of standards-based reforms view the standardization as an “attempt to bring a simplistic and linear map to an intrinsically complex ecology” (Knoester & Parkison, 2017, p. 249). Critics also question the efficacy of these reforms and “oppose the expanded federal role in education” (Mathias, 2010, p. 10). Standards-based reforms are:

likely to respond to serious educational problems by adding to the schools’ already disabling bureaucracy – rendering them even less capable of solving the problems that face them. The more poorly the schools perform, the more the authorities are pressured to respond with new bureaucratic constraints, which in turn make the schools still less effective. Hence the vicious circle. (Chubb & Moe, 2011, p. 530)

**Race to the Top (RTTT) Funding Incentive.** As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) implemented under the Obama administration, $4.35 billion was provided for the Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive state education grant
program (Berkovich, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016). Included in the $4.35 billion were $560 million set aside for the development and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative and $361.7 million given to two consortiums for the development of aligned assessments to the CCSS-Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) and SMARTER Balanced Assessment Coalition (SBAC) (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Mathias, 2010). The purpose behind the RTTT program was to:

- encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2)

In the RTTT grant application, four reform areas were emphasized: “adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2); the development and implementation of a data system that “measures student growth and success, and informs teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2); “recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals” (p. 2) in high need areas; and “turning around low achieving schools” (p. 2).

The criteria for selection for funding in the competitive RTTT program required states to implement several reforms within the state’s educational system. The first criteria in
the application was to develop a state reform plan with the “capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain” the systematic reforms (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). The state reform plan was to include: “participation in a consortium of States that…jointly develop and adopt a common set of K-12 standards” (p. 7); “participation in a consortium of States that…jointly develop and implement common, high-quality assessments…aligned with the consortium’s common set of K-12 standards” (p. 8); implementation of a “statewide longitudinal data system” (p. 8); the development and implementation of “rigorous…evaluation systems for teachers…that differentiate effectiveness using multiple rating categories that take into account data on student growth…as a significant factor” (p. 9); and intervention to “turn around the lowest-achieving schools” (p. 10). Additional criteria for RTTT was “ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charters and other innovative schools” (p. 11). RTTT provided “political cover for state education reformers to innovate and help states construct the administrative capacity to implement these innovations effectively” (McGuinn, 2012, p. 137).

New Mexico unsuccessfully applied for RTTT funds in 2010 for the phase 1 application cycle and in 2011 for the phase 2 application cycle. Although not funded, the RTTT applications provided an impetus and framework for reforms in New Mexico (Lavenia, Cohen-Vogel & Lang, 2014). Howell and Magazinnik (2017) found that “in the aftermath of RttT [Race to The Top]…states that participated in the competitions were especially likely to adopt RttT policies, particularly those on which they made explicit policy commitments in the RttT applications” (p. 503). The RTTT competition spurred states to implement the prescribed reforms that “would increase their chances in each round of the competition” (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017, p. 503). This also was true for New Mexico
(Lavenia et al., 2014; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

The vision for implementing the RTTT reforms as stated in New Mexico’s RTTT application was “to create a world-class educational system for New Mexico students” (New Mexico Race to the Top Application, 2010, p. 6). The standardized reforms in New Mexico’s RTTT application were fully implemented in 2015 into the state’s public education (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

As specified in the application, New Mexico officially adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in August 2010 (New Mexico Race to the Top Application, 2010) with full implementation in 2015 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). New Mexico originally joined the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium to “develop and implement high-quality assessments that are aligned with common core standards” (New Mexico Race to the Top Application, 2010, p. 57). New Mexico later changed assessment consortiums, joining the Partnership of Assessment for Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) Consortium (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The PARCC was then utilized by New Mexico to assess student achievement (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a) until 2019, when the NMPED changed the state assessment to a variation of the PARCC, called the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment of Mathematics and English Language Arts (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019h). The PARCC data were utilized in the NMTEACH, the state’s teacher evaluation system to measure teacher effectiveness and for
the state’s school grading system until 2019 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019h).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** In December 2015, U.S. Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to replace NCLB (Heise, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Ladd, 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). ESSA requires states to submit accountability plans with specified goals to address three priority areas of proficiency on tests, English-language proficiency, and graduation rates (GAO, 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Plans, 2015). As of 2019, the U.S. Department of Education had approved the accountability plans of all 50 states plus Washington, D.C. (Klein, 2019).

ESSA signifies a “major shift from the increased federal authority of NCLB…to increased flexibility to states and school districts” (NASSP, 2017, p. 1). ESSA represents a change in the role of the federal government in public education affording states “greater autonomy, both in terms of control over substantive standards setting and the consequences for states that fail to achieve their own self-defined achievement goals” (Heise, 2017, p. 1873).

Although ESSA provides some flexibility for states, “the state-designed accountability systems are still subject to federal approval” (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, p. 12). ESSA requires states “to measure the performance of their schools and use those measures to identify underperforming schools and student subgroups for additional assistance” (US Government Accounting Office (GAO), 2017, p. 1) with states having the “flexibility in how they design their systems” (GAO, 2017, p. 1). ESSA continues the trend of utilizing testing with:
The criteria for requiring schools to write improvement plans have been revised, yet standardized test scores continue to comprise the largest share of these criteria. Identification of schools in need of improvement continues to depend mostly on test scores, but now also includes one or more other academic and quality indicators. Formerly rigid prescriptions for school reforms have been relegated to districts and states, although the expanded range of potential reforms still encourages and funds charter schools and requires other NCLB-like corrective actions. (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, p. 6)

Key accountability components required for state ESSA plans consist of long-term and interim goals to address increased proficiency on assessments to measure student progress; strategies to address increased accountability for English-language learners (ELL), including public reporting of ELL students’ proficiency and growth in reading and math; strategies to increase high school graduation rates; adoption of state academic standards; turnaround interventions to assist and support the lower five percent of poor performing schools; and use of an annual assessment for students in grades 3-8 and once in high school, with disaggregated subgroup reporting (Chatterji, 2019; Heise, 2017; Hess & Eden, 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, NASSP, 2019; Plans, 2015).

New Mexico’s original ESSA state plan, titled New Mexico Rising, was submitted to the U.S. Department of Education on August 9, 2017 by then New Mexico Acting Secretary of Education, Christopher Ruszkowski (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017b). The New Mexico ESSA plan (2017) was very similar to the 2010 New Mexico RTTT application. The 2017 New Mexico ESSA plan continued the use of CCSS, PARCC,
NMTEACH, and the state’s School Grade system, with the inclusion of Science SBA scores and ELL proficiency added to the system for grading school performance (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017b). The ESSA plan mentioned charter schools in the context of “rigorous interventions” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017b, p. 107) for repeatedly low performing schools with the clause, “Restart: Close the school and reopen it under a charter school operator that has been selected through a rigorous state or local authorizer review process” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017b, p. 107).

In 2019, New Mexico pursued submission of a revised state ESSA plan that removes the PARCC as the state assessment as well as other revisions (Klein, 2019; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019b).

Even though responsibility shifted to states under ESSA, the New Mexico ESSA plan illustrates that many states “will continue to employ the same intervention strategies—at least over the short term” (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016, p. 9). ESSA has enabled some states to “significantly change their accountability systems while others are making more limited changes” (GAO, 2017, p. 1).

With a new governor taking office in New Mexico in 2019 and the subsequent appointment of a new secretary of education, the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) is proposing to revise New Mexico’s ESSA plan (Klein, 2019; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019b). The NMPED has called for general feedback on revisions to section 3—academic assessments, section 4—accountability, support and improvements for schools, and section 5—supporting excellent educators (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019b). The new revised plan will include “replacing the existing A-F school grading system with designations that shift the philosophy from identifying schools
as ‘failing’ to providing support for school in need, and celebrating success” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019d, para. 1). Amendments to the plan will include assistance to lower performing school by “provid[ing] critical resources…[to] restructure and redesign the school with intensive support for curricular, instructional, and pedagogical practices, as well as pairing schools with evidence-based interventions such as community schools models” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019d, para. 4). The proposed revised plan calls for replacement of the PARCC assessment and discontinuation of the VAM calculation for measuring teacher effectiveness (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019d). For sections 3 and 5 of the revised plan, the following statement was issued:

The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) is seeking general feedback on this section, as it is currently written and was submitted in 2017. The NMPED does not currently have any draft amendments, and instead, the NMPED is requesting all stakeholders across the State to submit comment/propose updates to this current section. The NMPED will review all feedback submitted, meet with stakeholders across the State, and then prepare amendments to Section 3: Academic Assessments [Section 5: Supporting Excellent Educators]. The NMPED will then publish those proposed amendments and share with stakeholders to solicit feedback during a public comment period at that time. (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019f, p.1)

**Common Core State Standards (CCSS).** In 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released the Common Core State Standards Initiative (Karnhaber et al.,
The CCSS provides K-12 academic standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a & 2010b). The impetus behind the CCSS Initiative was based on the belief that American education is falling behind, with American students being “less equipped to succeed in ‘college and careers’” (Gamson, Lu, & Eckert, 2013, p. 381). Proponents of CCSS put forward that textbook quality and rigor has deteriorated, “offer[ing] evidence of a languishing curriculum and thus serv[ing] as an explicit justification…[for] the creation of a new set of common standards” (Gamson et al., 2013, p. 381).

The purpose of the development and implementation of the CCSS Initiative was to create a national curriculum with the benefits of shared expectations, curriculum focus, mission, efficiency, quality of assessments, increased student achievement, increased global economic competitiveness, and educational equity (Cheng et al., 2019; Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Gamson et al., 2013; Mathias, 2010; McDuffie, Drake, Choppin, Davis, Magna, & Carson, 2017; Porter et al., 2011; Schmidt & Houang, 2012; Tuma, Hamilton, & Tsai, 2018). Coburn et al. (2016) identify two areas of the CCSS: “ambitious goals, for example, asking that students engage in disciplinary reasoning, develop the ability to build arguments and make inferences, and understand structure, similarities, and contrast” (p. 243); and “rigorous accountability, including teacher evaluation systems that hold teachers and schools to specific standards of instruction and compare teachers’ production of student outcomes to others in their school and district” (p. 243). The vision of the CCSS standards was to:

- ensure students have developed the capacity to read and listen critically for understanding; to write and speak clearly and persuasively with reference to
evidence; and to calculate and communicate mathematically, reason quantitatively
and design solutions to complex problems. (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 17)

The CCSS were incorporated into RTTT as criteria for the federal competitive grant
program (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Lavenia et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The RTTT set aside $560 million for the development and implementation of the CCSS Initiative (Kornhaber et al., 2016).

The CCSS provided standards for English Language Arts/Reading (ELAR) and Mathematics for K-12 (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a & 2010b). The content areas of the ELAR are reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a). Each of the content areas has key features; reading is focused on text complexity and the growth of comprehension; writing is focused on text types, responding to reading, and research; speaking and listening is focused on flexible communication; and language is focused on conventions, effective use, and vocabulary (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a). The Mathematics standards are grouped according to grade level bands (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b). The K-5 grade standards provide a solid foundation of mathematics, the 6-8 grade standards include geometry, algebra, probability, and statistics, and the high school standards are focused on application (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b). The key features of the Mathematics standards across all grade bands is for focus, coherence, and rigor. Rigor requires fluency, application, and deep understanding (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b). An effect of the CCSS was to produce aligned curriculum and textbooks and create aligned high-stakes assessments (Mathias, 2010).

New Mexico adopted the CCSS in 2010 and had full implementation by 2015 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016). The New Mexico CCSS provides the
framework for all classroom instruction and curriculum for traditional public schools and charter schools in (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016). The PARCC Assessment is aligned with the CCSS and is given annually to New Mexico students in grades 3-11 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016).

Porter et al. (2011) conducted an analysis of the alignment of the CCSS to current state assessment and the standards of selected countries. Porter et al. (2011) found that adoption of the CCSS necessitated “considerable change” and that the CCSS were “also different from standards of countries with higher student achievement, and they are different from what U.S. teachers report they are currently teaching” (p. 114). Schmidt and Houang (2012) compared the coherence and focus of the Common Core State Standards Mathematics (CCSSM) with all fifty states’ standards and the international A+ model and found that the CCSSM are both coherent and focused. New Mexico’s “degree of congruence of state standards as compared to the [CCSSM]” (Schmidt & Houang, 2012, p. 301) was in the middle of the fifty states for coherence and focus.

McDuffie et al. (2017) examined middle school mathematics teachers’ perceptions of the CCSS in relation to state assessments and teacher evaluation systems. McDuffie et al. (2017) found that teachers in the study had mixed views regarding the effectiveness of alignment of instruction and curriculum of the CCSS to meet student needs and had concerns regarding the use of the CCSS assessments for teacher evaluations. Based on the findings, McDuffie et al. (2017) suggest that teachers’ perceptions may be a “signal for potential challenges and complexities related to CCSSM [Common Core State Standards Mathematics] that could inform policy, professional development and support, state assessments, and teacher evaluations” (p. 169).
Critics object to having the CCSS aligned with high-stakes assessments, such as the PARCC. There is “a big difference between standards alone and state standards-based accountability systems grounded in high-stakes state exams” (Mathias, 2010, p. 9). There were concerns that the CCSS will “reduce teaching to only a narrow range of testable information and would not produce the knowledge, flexibility and creativity needed for a new and uncertain age” (Mathias, 2010, p. 3). The “top-down, high-stakes standards” (Mathias, 2010, p. 2) may have punitive elements, especially for marginalized students.

Utilizing a conceptual lens of resource dependence theory, Kornhaber et al. (2016) examined the funding initiatives that pushed implementation of the CCSS. The study found that CCSS backing and support included “venture philanthropists’ broad and strategic funding enabl[ing] them to purchase increased influence over public policy and public institutions without incurring any accountability for the policies they advanced” (Kornhaber et al., 2016, p. 25). Foundations, including the Gates Foundation, provided $159 million to advance the CCSS (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Mathias, 2010).

Under ESSA, states are no longer required to utilize the CCSS but can adopt other challenging academic standards as part of their accountability plan (Plans, 2015). Since the passage of ESSA, many states have opted out of the CCSS and related assessments (Chatterji, 2019). In New Mexico’s ESSA plan, submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in August 2017, the state’s use of the New Mexico CCSS “establishes a different approach to learning, teaching and testing that engenders a deeper understanding of critical concepts and practical application of that knowledge” (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016, p. 58).
On the 2018 EDNEXT poll, 45% of respondents were in support of the CCSS with 38% of respondents opposing (Cheng et al., 2019). Although the “debate over Common Core has largely faded, the standards themselves have not…but the name Common Core remains toxic” (Cheng et al., 2019, p. 19).

**Teacher Accountability System.** Teacher accountability has become a standards-based reform focus (Chatterji, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Marchant, David, Rodgers, & German, 2015; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Wright et al., 2018). Teacher accountability includes teacher evaluation systems with standardized observation protocols and standardized measures of teacher effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Marchant et al., 2015; Snyder & Bristol, 2015; Wright et al., 2018). A teacher accountability system “is an ecosystem of policies and practices emanating from a consistent view of teaching/learning and a professional model of accountability for improvement” (Snyder & Bristol, 2015, p. 1). The purpose of a system of teacher accountability is to “create a set of coherent, well-grounded supports for strong teaching throughout the profession” (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. vii) and provide a basis for “developing and retaining excellent teachers and continually improving teaching and learning” (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 74). A state system of teacher evaluation that included student high-stakes assessment results was a criterion of the RTTT competitive grant funding (Aldeman, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2013; McDuffie et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Wei et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2018).

New Mexico’s teacher evaluation system (NMTEACH) is “arguably the toughest in the country” (Klein, 2019, p. 1). NMTEACH consists of several components including a value-added measure (VAM) statistical model that asserts to measure teachers’ impact on
student learning, together with prescriptive observational protocols, and other measures, such as Opportunity to Learn (OTL) surveys (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a).

There are a variety of teacher evaluation systems utilized across states that reflect the increasing call for accountability of teachers (Marchant et al., 2015). The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) (2017) reports that 39 states mandate the use of student achievement measures in teacher accountability systems, 47 states mandate classroom observation, and 34 states include student surveys in their teacher evaluation systems. The NCTQ Teacher Policy Yearbook (2017) recommends that teacher accountability systems should “shift the culture of teaching to embrace the benefits of teacher evaluation” (p. 6) specifically for creating a system in which “effective teachers should be recognized and rewarded, both monetarily and through increased opportunities for teacher leadership” (p. 6).

In the area of Teacher and Principal Evaluation of the NCTQ Yearbook (2017), New Mexico’s ratings on relevant goals was “Meeting Goal” for “measures of professional practice” (p. 79) for “teacher evaluations [that] are well-structured to appropriately assess professional practice” (p. 79), “frequency of evaluation and observation” (p. 81), and “linking evaluation to professional growth” (p. 84). New Mexico was rated as “Nearly Meeting Goal” for “measures of student growth” (NCTQ, 2017, p. 76), “Meeting a Small Part of Goal” for “a data system that contributes some of the evidence needed to assess teacher effectiveness” (NCTQ, 2017, p. 86), and “Not Meeting Goal” for “distributing teacher talent equitably” (NCTQ, 2017, p. 89).

In a study conducted by Tuma et al. (2018), the most commonly reported components of teacher evaluations were classroom observations and student achievement data. Tuma et al. (2018) also found that “teachers who believed that evaluation systems were intended to
promote teacher growth and development were more likely to rate those systems as fair” (p. 4).

Two models of evaluation that are most prevalent are Marzano’s Teacher Evaluation from Learning Sciences International and Danielson’s Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument from the Danielson Group (Marchant et al., 2015). The Danielson Group received $2,962,620 in 2013 from Helmsley Trust to align its Framework for Teaching to the CCSS and became the prominent evaluation tool for states granted RTTT funding (Kornhaber et al., 2016).


The observational domains of New Mexico’s teacher evaluation system, NMTEACH, are based on the Framework for Teaching developed by the Danielson Group (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The NMTEACH incorporates the four domains of teaching responsibilities of the Framework for Teaching broken down into specific components of teacher behaviors for each domain (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Teacher behaviors were previously scored on a scale of 0-5, with zero being ineffective, one being minimally effective, two being effective, four being highly effective, and five being exemplary for specific listed teacher behaviors (Danielson, 2013; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The exemplary score was removed from the system in the 2019-20 school year and the name of the system was changed to Elevate NM (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b).
Previous to the 2019-20 school year, NMTEACH included several measures of teacher effectiveness—observation and professional domains, teacher attendance, student test scores, and parent and student surveys as presented in Figure 1 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The assessments used to measure teacher effectiveness on student achievement were the PARCC for grades 3-11 or EoC assessment for grades 7-12 or the IStation Reading Assessment or Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura for students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The NMTEACH utilized a value-added measure (VAM) statistical model to analyze student assessment scores for measuring teacher impact on student learning (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The use of the VAM model was an “attempt to isolate the effect that a teacher has on student achievement while controlling for other factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES) or more often—previous achievement on prior tests” (Marchant et al., 2015, p. 92). The use of VAM for measuring teacher effectiveness was a contentious issue, with “some researchers feel[ing] strongly that statistical modeling can accurately account for a teacher’s contribution to student achievement…[with] others question[ing] whether successful teaching can be measured at all using a student’s score on a standardized test” (Wright et al., 2018, p. 3).

There has been much “debate…on how to appropriately measure the relationship between teacher quality and student achievement” (Wright et al., 2018, p. 3). The American Statistical Association (ASA) (2014) cautioned against the use of value-added models (VAM) for “assessing teachers’ performance” (p. 2). VAM should not be used in teacher evaluations and for “high-stakes decisions due to limitations in the validity of inferences that can be drawn about the contributions of individual teachers to students standardized test
scores” (Wright et al., 2018, p. 5). ASA (2014) recommends that “estimates from VAMs should always be accompanied by measures of precision and a discussion of the assumptions and possible limitations of the model” (p. 1).

Wei et al. (2014) conducted an examination of the “differences in charter school teachers’ and traditional public school teachers’ perceived fairness of their teacher evaluation system to help explain any variation in teacher instruction; and ultimately, student achievement” (p. 7). The study participants were 2,559 charter school and traditional public school teachers in Texas (Wei et al., 2014). Although charter school teachers, when compared with traditional public school teachers, “reported a more supportive teaching environment, higher expectations of students among staff, a greater sense of responsibility for student learning, and higher levels of student engagement in learning” (Wei et al., 2014, p. 19), charter school teachers also “reported less usefulness, fairness, and transparency in their teacher evaluation system compared to their peers” (Wei et al., 2014, p.18).

**Standards-Based High Stakes Assessment.** The standards-based reform of using high-stakes assessment for measuring student achievement and teacher effectiveness on student performance was introduced with the passage of NCLB in 2002 (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Graham, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2008; Hess & Eden, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2016; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Ladd, 2017). The goal of standards-based assessment is to “assess all students on these deeper learning skills, more than doubling the emphasis on higher-order skills in English language arts tasks and increasing the number of items assessing such skills by more than ten-fold in mathematics” (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 19).
After the passage of NCLB, “the use of standards and standardized test scores had become a ubiquitous part of life for the great majority of teachers” (Ingersoll et al., 2016, p. 47). Participation in a CCSS standards-based assessment consortium was a criterion of RTTT (Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). RTTT went further than NCLB with a focus on “tying nationalized high-stakes testing to teacher accountability” (Tanner, 2013, p. 5). RTTT included $361.7 million given to two consortia for the development of aligned assessments to the CCSS (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Mathias, 2010). The two consortia were the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) and Smarter Balance Assessment Coalition (SBAC) (Education First, 2018; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016; Mathias, 2010). The consortiums were charged with developing “comprehensive, technology-based assessment systems to measure students’ attainment of the Common Core State Standards” (Herman & Linn, 2013, p. 4). By administering these assessments, states can “send powerful signals to schools about the meaning of the CCSS and what students know and are able to do” (Herman & Linn, 2013, p. 4). The use of these new assessments was to help students become aware and understand that “they are expected to engage deeply in learning and to devote serious time and effort to developing high-order thinking skills” (Conley, 2015, p. 23).

In 2010, 27 states joined the PARCC consortium, and 32 states joined the SBAC (Education First, 2018). The consortia membership has now declined to fifteen states and the District of Columbia planned on administering the PARCC or Smarter Balance assessments in the spring of 2019 (Chatterji, 2019). Concerns regarding the continued use of these Common Core tests “suggest that some essential types of validity evidence necessary to
support the proposed uses of information under ESSA are still unavailable” (Chatterji, 2019, p. 5).

Given the high-stakes nature of these assessments, teachers may be tempted to narrow the curriculum and teach to the tests, especially since the results could be tied to their evaluation and possibly their compensation (Angrist et al., 2016; Knoester & Parkison, 2017). These CCSS assessments have impelled educators and policy makers to move away from “a system in which curriculum scaffolding is recommended to guide local curriculum development toward a system in which the tests, also based on this scaffolding become the curriculum” (Knoester & Parkison, 2017, p. 252).

New Mexico was a participant with PARCC from 2014-2019 (New Mexico Department of Education, 2019b). In New Mexico’s ESSA plan submitted in 2017, the PARCC is cited as “the cornerstone” (New Mexico Department of Education, 2017b, p. 58) of the state testing program and is used to “measure New Mexico’s Common Core Standards” (New Mexico Department of Education, 2017b, p. 58). The PARCC consortium has:

- committed to building a K-12 student assessment system by build[ing] a pathway to college and career readiness for all students; creating high-quality assessments that measure the full range of the Common Core State Standards; support educators in the classroom; [and] makes better use of technology in assessments and advances accountability at all levels. (PARCC Assessment Website, 2018)

For charter schools, standards-based high stakes assessments “hide the conformity required in the curriculum to meet testing demands while implying that schools are free to teach as they see fit” (Opfer, 2001, p. 209). A consequence of standards-based high-stakes
assessments for charter schools is obstruction of innovation, with schools “making few changes because they must prove their quality using standardized performance measures” (Opfer, 2001, p. 208). Gawlik (2007) found that “state imposed accountability systems…restricted the schools from focusing on internal learning strategies and prompted the charter schools to focus on testing” (p. 547).

Autonomy is indissolubly connected with accountability in charter school theory and policies (Angrist et al., 2016; Berends et al., 2019; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2007; Gawlik, 2018; Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Wright et al., 2018). It is assumed that with the granting of greater autonomy for charter schools from the regulations and restrictions required of regular public schools, charter schools will in turn provide greater accountability (Finnigan, 2007). Charter school theory assumes that “this combination of autonomy and accountability will allow educators to implement innovative ideas and practices” (Finnigan, 2007, p. 504), including innovation for more effective and valid practices and methodology of accountability (Berends et al., 2019; Finnigan, 2007, Gawlik, 2007; Wohlstetter et al, 1995). Through the use of nationalized standards-based assessments, “national, state, and local actors are currently functioning to provide frameworks for schools (autonomous and otherwise) that, in effect, restrain freedom by delineating what students should know and be able to do” (Wohlstetter, et al., 1995, p. 340). For charter schools, the use of standards-based high-stakes assessments to measure “academic success, or lack thereof, is defined too narrowly for the charter concept” (Gawlik, 2007, p. 549).

Under ESSA many states have proposed to use “different types of statistically derived indices from test-based data to rank, rate, or examine growth of schools or education systems to fulfill ESSA’s requirements” (Chatterji, 2019, p. 5). In New Mexico, a new governor in
2019, Michelle Luján-Grisham, issued an executive order for the state to begin transition from the PARCC assessment. For the spring 2019 assessment, as required by ESSA, the state administered the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment of Mathematics and English Language Arts (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019h). This new test is aligned with the NMCCSS, requires less time to administer per subject, is comparable to previous years’ results, and is administered on the same testing platform as the PARCC (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019h).

**Current Educational Landscape in New Mexico**

With the election of the new Democratic governor who took office in January 2019, New Mexico is experiencing changes within the state’s education administration and focus. Changes in education in New Mexico are now focused on the revisions to be made to the 2017 State’s ESSA accountability plan (Klein, 2019; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e). The proposed revised ESSA plan includes changing the state’s A-F school grades system to differentiated labels of “spotlight”, “traditional support”, “targeted support” and “comprehensive support” schools (Klein, 2019, p. 1). Other proposed changes include replacing the PARCC tests with a state developed test and revising NMTEACH (Klein, 2019). These proposed revisions could “present an interesting test for U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and her team…to let the state go in an entirely new direction” (Klein, 2019, p. 1). New Mexico has begun to implement these proposed changes and it will be interesting to see the effects these proposed changes will have on schools and students (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b; New Mexico Vistas, 2020).
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this study was to describe the interactive effects of standards-based reforms on the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico. My specific research questions were: How are prescriptive reform measures impacting the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico? How are these reforms impacting the capacity of charter schools in New Mexico to fulfill their individual missions and goals? I designed a study utilizing qualitative research methodology, that facilitated the collection, analyses, and interpretation of information needed to answer the research questions. The methodology of a qualitative research study consists of “emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4).

I chose multiple case study methodology as the qualitative research method to best answer my research questions (Creswell, 2013; Honig, 2006). Case study qualitative research designs and methods are:

- important sources of knowledge for implementation researchers. In particular, strategic qualitative cases – cases that provide special opportunities to build knowledge about little understood and often complex phenomena – have long informed implementation in other fields and seem to be becoming more standard fare within education. Such methods and research designs, especially when well-grounded in theory, have allowed contemporary researchers to elaborate the dimensions of and interactions among policy, people, and places that comprise implantation in contemporary educational systems. In fact, the more complex portrait of implementation processes…may have become possible only recently thanks in part to
the use of theoretically grounded qualitative methods for capturing such complexity.

(Honig, 2006, p. 22)

Utilizing qualitative research case study methodology allowed me to examine events within a specific context, gaining an understanding of complex issues and giving individuals a means to have a “voice” on the issues (Creswell, 2013). The data collected by employing case study methodology provided “a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions, and explanations of human processes” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 4), allowing me to examine the “meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Qualitative case study inquiry enabled me to examine ordinary events within the natural setting of charter schools (Miles et al., 2014).

Charter schools in northern New Mexico provided the contextual setting for the collection of data to help answer my research questions. The setting of charter schools permitted me to examine “the subjective, qualitative experience of the human beings that inhabit schools” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 266), while allowing my research to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2003, p. 2), as it happens in charter schools.

Utilizing case study methodology to gather the information allowed me to explore a “real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) (Creswell, 2013, p. 97; italics in original). A case is a “unit of analysis…[and] provides boundaries for what is to be studied” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 28). The cases of my study consisted of three charter schools located in northern New Mexico.
To provide a structure for interpretation of the information I collected for this study, I developed a conceptual framework of three interconnected elements of autonomy as presented in Figure 3 (Budde, 1988; Fuller, 2009; Honig, 2009; Ross et al., 2015; Wells, 2002; Wohlstetter & Chau, 2004; Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). The three interconnected elements of the framework are regulation autonomy, school level autonomy, and teacher autonomy (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Budde, 1998; Cannata, 2007; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; Mavrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Oberfield, 2016; Prichard & Moore, 2016; Wei, Patel, & Young, 2014; Wright et al., 2018). The conceptual framework served as the structure for the collection, analyses, and interpretation of the collected data from three case study charter schools, focusing on the topics and interactions of charter school autonomy and standards-based reforms.

**Research Design**

A flowchart of steps of the research design of the study is presented in Figure 4. My first step was to select the three charter school cases from the list of eligible case study schools (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). I then collected data on topics related to my research questions by conducting semi-structured interviews with leaders and teachers from the case study charter schools (Galleta, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In addition, I also reviewed document artifacts from the three case study schools (Miles et al., 2014).
My next step was to conduct two cycles of analysis and coding of the collected data. I extracted and identified recurring themes in the first coding cycle, followed by a second cycle in which I identified themes and components that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).
After identifying the themes, I utilized a social constructivism paradigm to interpret the interconnections of the themes, creating assumptions to help answer my research questions (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Yin, 2003).

While I was still in the process of collecting data via interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic began, changing how the interviews were conducted. I conducted the Pre-COVID-19 pandemic interviews of the case study directors and two teachers in person at the case study schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted two teacher interviews over the phone.

**Case Study Selection.** Using the process of purposeful sampling, I chose three case study charter schools for the study (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). In purposeful sampling, the researcher “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Miles et al. (2014) suggest setting boundaries for defining attributes of the case samples that “connect directly to [the] research questions” (p. 31), so I developed criteria, presented in Table 1, for the purposeful sample selection of the case study charter schools.

Eligible case study schools needed to be located in northern New Mexico, authorized by either the local district or the state (PEC), and been in existence for more than five years. Applying the criteria of being in existence for five or more years ensured the schools had been granted at least a second charter term. My assumption was that these charter schools had established missions, with consistent school wide procedures and practices.
Another criterion for case selection was the school had a leader who have been principal or director of the school for three or more years. This criterion was based on the assumption that the leaders were experienced in day-to-day management of the school, had opportunity to endorse, understand and uphold the school’s mission and goals, had established leadership practices, and had experienced implementation of the standards-based reforms being mandated by the NMPED.

Table 1

*Purposeful Sample Selection Criteria for Case Study Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study Selection</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three case study charter schools</td>
<td>Located in northern New Mexico geographical area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authorized by either PEC (state) or local school district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School has been in existence for 5 or more years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School leader/director has served in the positions for at least 3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are ten charter schools in northern New Mexico (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020a). Table 2 presents seven out of the ten schools that met the selection criteria to be a case study school for this study. These seven schools met the case selection criteria of having been in existence for over five years with leaders having tenures of three or more years. The eligible schools consisted of schools that were authorized by either their local school districts (district authorized) or by the PEC (state authorized) (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020a). All the schools from the eligible case list were
invited to participate in the study. I provided the schools with written information on the purpose and details of the research study, including the research questions and methodology via emails to the school leaders. Of the seven eligible schools, five agreed to participate in the study. Out of those five schools, I selected three case study schools based on commonality of shared experiences and demographics, such as serving students in grades K-8, having similar enrollment numbers, and analogous school missions and learning models. Two of the case study schools are authorized by their local district and one school is state authorized by the PEC. The three selected case study schools wrote letters of support to participate in the study. The three selected case study schools were approved by the university’s IRB committee.

**Table 2**

*List of Eligible Charter Schools for Purposeful Sample Selection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter Schools (Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Met Criteria</th>
<th>Willing to Participate in Study</th>
<th>Selected for Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School G</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once the case study charter schools were approved by UNM’s IRB, I then conducted one-on-one interviews with the schools’ directors. I conducted the interviews at the individual directors’ schools before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study school director interviewees reviewed and submitted signed consent forms (see Appendix A) to voluntarily participate in the study.

I also recruited four volunteer teachers from two of the case study schools to participate in one-on-one interviews. The teacher interview participants met the criterion of having taught in a classroom for at least three years at the case study school. My assumption was that teachers with three or more years of teaching at the school would have adequate experience in implementing the school’s mission and goals, planning and teaching at the school, and implementation of mandated standards-based reforms.

I invited teachers meeting the criteria to participate in the study via an email from their director. The volunteer teachers were provided with written information on the purpose of the study along with consent forms for voluntary participation in the study (see Appendix A). Two teachers from two of the case study schools contacted me via email to volunteer to participate in an interview, for a total of four volunteer teacher participants. Despite reaching out several times, I was not successful in finding volunteer teachers from one of the case study schools that met the established criteria of having taught for three years at the school. These requests for volunteers were made during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted two teacher interviews from one case study school pre-COVID-19, individually, in-person at the teachers’ school. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I interviewed two teachers from another case study school, individually over the phone. The teacher interviewees signed consent forms for voluntary participation in the study (see Appendix A).
**Instrumentation and Data Collection.** The data collection methods of this study included gathering information from multiple sources as presented in Table 3 (Creswell, 2013). I conducted semi-structured interviews with the three case study school directors and four teachers from two of the case study schools (Galleta, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). I also reviewed document artifacts, extracting information related to the topics of the study (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

**Table 3**

*Data Collection Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semi-Structured Interviews</th>
<th>Document Artifact Reviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Three School Leaders/Directors (1 per case study school)</td>
<td>• School’s charter contract and framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Four Classroom Teachers from 2 case study schools</td>
<td>• School’s mission statement, goals, and other specific charter terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Governance Council documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School policies and procedures, i.e. employee and student handbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Information from school websites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the three charter school leaders and four teachers from two of the three case study schools for a total of seven interviews (Galleta, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The purpose of the interviews was to elicit information on the topics of the study (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). I developed separate questions for the leader and teacher interview protocols (see Appendix B). Both leader and teacher interview protocols consisted of questions that focused on variables of the research questions and included the school’s mission and learning philosophy, school-wide standards-based reform practices, such as teacher evaluation, assessment, and curriculum,
regulation autonomy, school level autonomy, teacher autonomy, roles and responsibilities, and definitions/descriptions of autonomy. Tables 4 and 5 present the alignment of the interview questions on the leader and teacher questionnaire protocols to the variables and topics of the research questions.

**Table 4**

*Alignment of Leader Interview Questions with Variables of Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Mission and Learning Philosophy</td>
<td>Questions 2 and 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Evaluation</td>
<td>Questions 6 and 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation Autonomy</td>
<td>Questions 3, 12, and 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level Autonomy</td>
<td>Questions 10 and 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Autonomy</td>
<td>Question 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Question 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>Questions 8 and 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Authorizer</td>
<td>Question 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance Council</td>
<td>Question 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Question 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles and Responsibilities</td>
<td>Questions 4, 5, and 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5**

*Alignment of Teacher Interview Questions with Variables of Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Mission and Learning Philosophy</td>
<td>Questions 2, 3, 8, and 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Evaluation</td>
<td>Question 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation Autonomy</td>
<td>Questions 7, 10, and 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted one-on-one interviews at the case study schools’ sites. During the COVID-19 pandemic I conducted one-on-one interviews over the phone. The interview protocols (see Appendix B) were semi-structured to allow for further questioning based on responses of the interview participants to gather more information on the topics (Creswell, 2013; Galletta, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). Utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol provided me with a means “to address specific topics related to the phenomenon of study, while leaving space for participants to offer new meanings to the study focus” (Galletta, 2013, p. 24). The process of semi-structured interviewing permitted me as the researcher to ask the topical questions and then follow up interviewees’ responses with unstructured questions for further clarification, meaning, and critical reflection (Galletta, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

I audio recorded both the in-person and phone interviews with participants for accuracy and then I transcribed the conversations (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). I gave each interviewee a copy of their interview transcription to review, with an opportunity to discuss the transcription with me (Creswell & Miller, 2000). None of the interview
participants requested to discuss their transcription. On one occasion, I asked a follow-up question to one of the case study school leaders via email to clarify a response.

An additional method of data collection for the study was the analysis of document artifacts (Creswell, 2013). I reviewed document artifacts from each case study charter school for the purpose of gathering information on the elements of autonomy in the conceptual framework and evidence of implementation of mandated standards-based reforms. The document artifacts I reviewed included each school’s current charter contract and framework, school handbooks, school policies and procedures documents, Governance Council By-Laws, and information from the case study schools’ websites. I then analyzed and coded the information gathered from the reviews of the document artifacts.

**Data Collection Analysis.** Data collection began in January 2020 and was completed by September 2020. Following the gathering of data through interviews and reviews of document artifacts as presented in Table 3, I then compiled case descriptions and conducted the first cycle of coding, extracting themes from the collected information. I utilized the process of coding as the analysis process (Miles et al., 2014). Codes are:

- **prompts or triggers** for deeper reflection on the data’s meanings. Coding is thus a

  **data condensation** task that enables you to retrieve the most meaningful material, to assemble chunks of data that go together, and to further condense the bulk into readily analyzable units. (Miles et al., 2014, p. 73, italics in original)

  The coding process allowed me to “determine the code for a chunk of data by careful reading and reflection on its core content or meaning…giv[ing] intimate, interpretive familiarity with every datum in the corpus” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 73). Coding the data helped
facilitate the extraction and identification of themes by “assign[ing] symbolic meaning to the
descriptive or inferential information complied during the study” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 71).

For the first cycle of the coding process I employed hypothesis coding, which is “the
application of a researcher-generated, predetermined list of codes…developed from a
theory/prediction about what will be found in the data” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 78). My
predetermined codes were based on the three interconnected elements of charter school
autonomy of the conceptual framework I developed for this study presented in Figure 3
(Miles et al., 2014). In addition to the autonomy elements, I examined repetitive phrases,
process coding words (gerunds), values, evaluation, and magnitude (Miles et al., 2014). This
first cycle of coding allowed me to extract, identify, and organize repeated patterns from the
collected data based on the three elements of autonomy and other topics related to the
research questions.

My next step was to conduct a second cycle of coding. For this cycle, I grouped the
recurring patterns identified during the first cycle coding process into themes. I sought to find
common themes as viewed through the conceptual framework of the elements of autonomy
by employing the process of analyzing and coding the extracted data and patterns (Creswell,
2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). The themes that emerged from this cycle of
coding provided “an assertion or interpretation of the meaning of the case” (Creswell, 2013,
p. 101). Some of the themes were comprised of “components,” smaller units of information,
that facilitated my analysis of the data, and understanding of the relationships and causes or
explanations of the themes and patterns (Miles et al., 2014). I present detailed descriptions of
the themes and accompanying components identified through the second cycle of the coding
process in Chapter 4 Findings.
To interpret the meanings and interconnections of the themes and components I identified through the coding process, I utilized the interpretative research paradigm of social constructivism (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A paradigm “represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world’, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107, italics in original). The social constructivism paradigm invites “individuals [to] seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). Through the paradigm of social constructivism, I interpreted the analyzed data collected from interviews with directors and teachers as “meanings…constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 52).

Incorporating the social constructivism paradigm with case study methodology, provided “sufficient scope and depth to afford vicarious experience, sufficient understanding to suggest working hypotheses, sufficient richness to point to useful metaphors, and sufficient detail (usually in the form of thick description)” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 79). Incorporating this paradigm with case study methodology enabled me to provide “thick description needed to apprehend, appreciate, and understand the circumstances of the setting including, more importantly its physical, social, economic, and cultural elements” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 80).

Through the lens of social constructivism, I was able to interpret the interconnections of the identified themes and components and create assumptions based on individuals’ experiences of phenomenon (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2003). The social constructivism paradigm allowed me to analyze data from “pluralistic, interpretive,
open-ended, and contextualized (e.g., sensitive to place and situation) perspectives” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). Within the paradigm of social constructivism, the “human meanings and intentions” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 7) are recorded and interpreted within the constructed framework and assumptions of meaning. These meanings and intentions are:

- varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation being studied. The questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of the situation. (Creswell, 2013, p. 8)

By interpreting the construction of the meanings and intentions of the interview participants that comprise the themes extracted from the data, and analyzing the interconnections of the themes and components, I developed assumptions that helped answer my research questions. These assumptions are presented in Chapter 5 Summary of Findings.

**Validity**

Validity or trustworthiness is an important component of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). However, it seems that validity within qualitative research is not so simplistic for many researchers (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Some researchers find that the terminology used for validity does not fully represent the complexity of concepts inherent in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Within the design of this study, the topics studied are reflected in the measures used for documentation and are assumed to provide valid data needed to answer the research questions.

Creswell (2013) defines validity as “assess[ing] the ‘accuracy’ of the findings” (p. 249) and recommends several validation strategies for qualitative research, with the use of at
least two per study (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). One of the strategies I used to validate my results is triangulation, which is a “process that involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251) and to use this evidence to substantiate the identified themes from the data collection (Creswell, 2014). Miles et al. (2013) describe triangulation as “support[ing] a finding by showing that at least three independent measures of it agree with it, or at least do not contradict it” (p. 299). Triangulation sources can consist of data sources, research methods, multiple researchers, theories, and data types (Miles et al., 2014). Creswell (2014) suggests themes should be “established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants” (p. 201). In this study, I was able to triangulate the identified themes and constructions with data collected using case study methodology and several data sources (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

A second validation strategy I used for this study is “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252; italics in original). In reporting the findings of this study, I provide detailed descriptions of participants’ statements from interviews regarding the identified themes extracted from the data, detailed descriptions of the case study charter school settings, and information extracted from the reviews of document artifacts. This strategy helped me conduct an in-depth analysis that I used to make assumptions about the themes and interconnections of the collected information.

Limitations

Limitations are inherent in qualitative research studies for generalizing the findings to other charter schools (Creswell, 2013). One possible limitation is the varying factors and contexts of charter schools (Archbald et al., 2017; Cannata, 2007; DeAngelis & Erickson,
Charter schools have unique missions and goals, with individualized learning philosophies as well as other school specific characteristics. A charter school’s mission may affect how autonomy and standards-based reforms are interpreted by the staff (Foreman & Maranto, 2018). The data collected as well as the themes identified and the assumptions of the interconnections of the themes in this study, may be specific to the three case study schools, to the specific geographic area, or to charter schools in the state of New Mexico and therefore, the findings may be limited for generalization to other charter schools and geographical locations.

Another possible limitation includes the possibility of dilution of the analysis of the collected data from the three case studies. Utilizing more than one case “dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases an individual studies, the less the depth in any single case” (Creswell, 2013, p. 101). Having more than one case within the study may make it difficult to find emerging themes to answer the research questions, especially given the individualized nature of charter schools (Creswell, 2013).

There was also another limitation that occurred during the interview data collection time period of the study. I conducted five of the interviews before the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews followed the proposed design of being conducted in-person at the participant’s school. I then conducted two interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, over the phone. It is possible that the responses of the phone interviewees may have been influenced by the events and circumstances of the pandemic. For example, one of the phone interviewees made references to how things were before pandemic and then how things are currently.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to collect information to examine the effects of standards-based reforms on the capacity of three case study charter schools in New Mexico to maintain the autonomy needed to fulfill individualized school missions. My specific research questions were: How are prescriptive reform measures impacting the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico? How are these reforms impacting the capacity of charter schools in New Mexico to fulfill their individual missions and goals? By utilizing case study methodology, I was able to examine complex issues within the context of three case study schools and provide opportunities for individuals to give voice to matters of significance to them (Creswell, 2013). I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the case study charter schools’ directors and with four teachers from two of the schools. The interviews were conducted using established protocols for questions and procedures (see Appendix B). I also reviewed document artifacts such as school websites, school handbooks, and charter documents of the case study schools.

After collecting and compiling information from the interviews and reviews of document artifacts, I conducted an analysis of the data by identifying and extracting themes and patterns utilizing two cycles of coding as described in Chapter 3 Research Design. The process of coding allowed me to condense and organize the data into meaningful information in the form of themes and components (Miles et al., 2014). I analyzed and coded the themes and patterns within a conceptual framework of three interconnected elements of autonomy-regulation autonomy, school level autonomy, and teacher autonomy described in Chapter 1 Context for the Study and presented in Figure 3. I constructed this unique framework utilizing an autonomy framework developed by Wohlstetter et al. (1995), in conjunction with charter school theory (Honig, 2009; Miron, 2017; Ross, Pinder, & Coles-White, 2015).
Interview participants provided abundant amounts of information regarding complex issues being examined in this study, enabling me to make suppositions or assumptions regarding the interconnectedness of the themes and patterns to gain information on the topic of charter school autonomy and help answer my research questions (Creswell, 2013). These assumptions are presented in Chapter 5 Summary of Findings.

This chapter provides descriptions of the three case study charter schools, followed by rich detailed descriptions of the themes and components that emerged from a comprehensive analysis of the data I collected (Miles, et al., 2014). The detailed descriptions of the themes and components contain information gathered from the responses of the seven interview participants and reviews of document artifacts (see Appendix C).

Description of Results

Case Study Schools. I selected three case study schools to participate in this study through purposeful sampling procedures as described in Chapter 3 Research Design (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). The case study schools are all located in northern New Mexico. In order to maintain the anonymity of the schools and participants, I labelled the schools as School A, School B, and School C. Schools A and C are district authorized schools and School B is a state authorized school. The enrollment of each school is around 200 students. Table 6 presents information regarding the demographics of the case study schools.
Table 6

Demographics of Three Case Study Schools (New Mexico Vistas, 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and Authorizer</th>
<th>Years in Operation and Grade Levels</th>
<th>Mission and Learning Philosophy</th>
<th>Demographics 1:</th>
<th>Demographics 2:</th>
<th>Academic Proficiency for Reading and Math (NM State Assessment 2018-19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Inquiry-Based Academic Rigor</td>
<td>C- 30%</td>
<td>F- 54%</td>
<td>Reading-60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local District</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td></td>
<td>H- 63%</td>
<td>M- 46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AA- 1%</td>
<td>ED- 56%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AI- 2%</td>
<td>EL- 0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A-0%</td>
<td>SWD- 15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MR- 4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Integrated Arts</td>
<td>C- 45%</td>
<td>F- 53%</td>
<td>Reading-37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State (PEC)</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td></td>
<td>H- 43%</td>
<td>M- 47%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AA- 2%</td>
<td>ED- 70%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AI- 9%</td>
<td>EL- 3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A- 0%</td>
<td>SWD- 18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MR- 0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>Academic and Social Emotional</td>
<td>C-61%</td>
<td>F- 55%</td>
<td>Reading-68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local District</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td></td>
<td>H- 32%</td>
<td>M- 45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AA- 0%</td>
<td>ED- 51%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AI- 3%</td>
<td>EL- 0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A- 3%</td>
<td>SWD- 19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MR-1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All three case study schools serve students in grades K-8, have unique missions and learning philosophies, and have similar demographics, such as percentages of economically disadvantaged students, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities (New Mexico Vistas, 2020). There are slight variations in the racial makeup of the schools. The three schools are considered high performing, and all earned a school grade of ‘A’ for the 2017-18 school year (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019i) and a designation of Spotlight School for the 2019-20 school year (New Mexico Vistas, 2020). School A is located in a less populated section of a small city and was founded by local community members in 2000. School B is located in a residential area of a small city and was founded by community members in 2009. School C is located in a rural area of a small town and began as a small privately-run school. School C, founded by the director, became a public charter school in 2001.

All three case study school directors were immensely proud of the accomplishments and successes of their schools. The director of School A shared that a few years ago the NMPED had asked the school to replicate their program but they had declined at that time. School C recently received national recognition for its high academic progress. This national award program “recognizes…schools based on their overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups” (United States Department of Education, 2020). Describing School C, the school director stated:

a school that balances emotional development with academics – high interventions, high student-centered learning, to lead to super high academic achievement and curiosity; just lifelong learning coupled with having the social emotional skills to be a
communicator, a problem solver, and an innovator. And that’s really the model of [School C].

Each case study school has a unique mission and learning philosophy. School A’s mission is focused on rigorous academics, utilizing an Inquiry Based learning model. The school’s mission as stated on the school’s website is "to deliver a college readiness curriculum to students from the [town name] community resulting in high levels of academic achievement for all students.” The school’s vision is “to be a community that loves to live, learn, and launch successful students into the world.”

School B’s mission and learning philosophy is based on an Integrated Arts approach to learning. The mission statement for School B’s as stated in the school’s handbook is:

[School B], in partnership with parents and community, will provide K-8 students in the [school district] with the opportunity to reach their maximum potential through a standards-based, multicultural, thematic, and arts-integrated curriculum. Arts integration creates more meaningful learning through using the arts – visual art, drama, music, dance – as a catalyst to create broader and deeper learning experiences. [Community name] is a multicultural community steeped in artistic tradition. [School B] is a school that provides students with a multicultural worldview while utilizing thematic units and the arts to facilitate academic learning. Our mission is to educate the whole child in order to cultivate in young people the skills, knowledge, and values they need to reach their highest potential.

School C’s mission, according to the school’s handbook “is to develop the academic potential and emotional intelligence of each learner. We strive to promote the love of learning through student engagement, innovative educational practices, and family and
community partnership.” The stated vision of School C is “to be a public community school that educates the heart and mind of each learner to ensure success.”

Table 7

*Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Years in Position at School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>5 Years (started as teacher at school in 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT1</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>19 years (Founder of school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT1</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview participants were from the three case study schools. Participants included the directors of each case study school and two teachers each from Schools A and C. Table 7
presents information regarding the interview participants. Director AL first started as a teacher at School A in 2001 and moved into the director position five years ago. He has been a long-time member of the community. Director BL became a part of the community about six years ago and has been director of School B for five years. Director CL is the longest serving director, with completion of nineteen years during the 2019-20 school year. She was the original founder of the school and has been a long-time member of the community. The teacher interview participants were teachers at Schools A and C. Teachers AT1 and AT2 had taught at School A for ten years and twelve years, respectively. Teacher CT1 had taught for seven years and Teacher CT2 for fifteen years at School C.

I conducted one interview with each participant. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted interviews with participants AL, BL, CL, CT1 and CT2 in person at their respective schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted phone interviews with teacher participants AT1 and AT2.

Themes. Through the process of coding, I analyzed the compiled data from interviews and reviews of artifact documents. I organized and grouped the recurring patterns identified during the coding processes into themes as I described in Chapter 3 Research Design (Miles et al., 2014). The themes provided smaller units of information, facilitating my analysis of the data, and understanding of the relationships and causes or explanations of the themes and patterns (Miles et al., 2014). I used a conceptual framework of three interconnected elements of autonomy that I developed and as presented in Figure 3 (Fuller, 2009; Honig, 2009; Ross et al., 2015; Wells, 2002; Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Wohlstetter et al., 2015) as the structure to analyze the information and create codes (Miles et al., 2014). Utilizing this process of analysis, I identified the four themes of Regulation Autonomy,
School Level Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy, and Innovation and Autonomy. The identified themes and components are presented with supporting literature citations in Table 8. Two of the themes, Regulation Autonomy and School Level Autonomy, had associated components that comprised the themes. Identifying, extracting, and coding the components added to my understanding of the interconnections of the themes.

Table 8

Themes and Components with Supporting Literature Citations

**Regulation Autonomy** (Berends et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2016; Wohlstetter et al., 2015)

- Teacher Evaluation System (Chatterji, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2013)
- High Stakes Assessment (Ingersoll et al., 2016; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Ladd, 2017)
- Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Mathis, 2010)
- Bureaucratic Entities (Berends, et al., 2019; Casey et al., 2002; Wohlstetter et al., 1995)
  - Local School District
  - Public Education Commission (PEC)
  - New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED)
  - Charter School Division (CSD)
  - State Legislature

**School Level Autonomy** (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2018; Sizer & Wood, 2008)

- School Mission (Cannata, 2007; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Wright et al., 2018)
- School Governance (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Neeleman, 2019; Sizer & Wood, 2008)
- Parent Involvement (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Neeleman 2019)
In the following sections, I describe the four themes and attending components, along with detailed descriptions of the information collected from the case study schools and interview participants that supported my analysis of the themes.

**Regulation Autonomy** The outer circle of the interconnected conceptual framework of charter school autonomy, presented in Figure 3, represents the element of Regulation Autonomy. Regulation Autonomy comprises the state laws and regulations and bureaucratic entities that impact the capacity of charter schools to have the autonomy for developing and implementing individualized school missions and educational programs (Berends et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2016; Sizer, 2005, Wohlstetter et al., 2015). These reforms have been implemented in an effort to create a standardized system for purposes of accountability (Cohen et al., 2017) through the use of high stakes for both schools and teachers (Ladd, 2017).

For this study, within the theme of Regulation Autonomy, I included the mandatory standards-based reforms of the New Mexico’s teacher evaluation system NMTEACH (recently renamed Elevate NM), the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and high stakes state assessment. The conceptual autonomy framework developed for this study provided a structure for analyzing the impact of these currently mandated prescribed standards-based
reform measures. In addition to inclusion of the standards-based reforms in the theme of Regulation Autonomy, five governmental bureaucratic entities—local school district, New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED), Public Education Commission (PEC), Charter School Division (CSD), and state Legislature/Educational Finance Committee (LEFC) were referenced in interviews and analyzed and coded as components of this theme.

Participants’ responses to Leader Interview Questions 3, 12, and 13 and Teacher Interview Questions 7, 10, and 13 on the questionnaire protocols (see Appendix B) were aligned to the element of Regulation Autonomy as presented in Tables 4 and 5. I analyzed responses to these questions, in addition to responses to other questions in which participants referenced the regulation autonomy components consisting of the specified standards-based reforms and bureaucratic entities. I then extracted and coded themes and patterns to represent responses regarding the components of Regulation Autonomy consisting of NMTEACH, CCSS, high stakes state assessment, and Bureaucratic Entities. Table 9 presents the components that comprised the theme of Regulation Autonomy.

Table 9

Components of Regulation Autonomy Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of Regulation Autonomy Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• NMTEACH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High Stakes State Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CCSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bureaucratic Entities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher Evaluation System (NMTEACH). Teacher evaluation and accountability has become a focus of standards-based reform (Chatterji, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2013) and was a component that emerged from the data collected within the framework element and theme of Regulation Autonomy. The interview participants discussed the New Mexico teacher evaluation system, NMTEACH, at length. Questions 6 and 7 on the Leader Interview Questionnaire, and Question 5 on the Teacher Interview Questionnaire (see Appendix B) were aligned to elicit information regarding the NMTEACH as presented in Tables 4 and 5. In addition, I analyzed and coded references to NMTEACH made by participants in response to other questions of the interview protocol. Participants mainly referred to NMTEACH as the “teacher evaluation system,” rather than by the name. NMTEACH has been recently renamed Elevate NM (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b). No interview participant used the term Elevate NM.

The NMTEACH, implemented in New Mexico in 2015, consists of standardized observation and evaluation protocols, and has included student assessment scores as measures of teacher effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2013; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a; Wright et al., 2018). In the ensuing five years since implementation, NMTEACH has gone through various changes in number and type of teacher observations as well as the exclusion of student assessment scores to measure teacher performance. NMTEACH has also recently been renamed Elevate NM (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b).
Department, 2020b). During the 2019-20 school year the number of formal classroom evaluations was lowered to one with the addition of three documented Walk-Throughs (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019f). The Walk Through system has been continued for the 2020-21 school year (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b). Previous years, two to three formal observations were required, without any documented Walk-Throughs (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). Other important changes to the NMTEACH for the 2019-20 school year were the elimination of using student assessment scores as a measure for calculating a teacher’s yearly effectiveness and the elimination of the Exemplary teacher rating (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019f). The content of the NMTEACH domains have remained the same throughout these changes (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020b).

The case study school directors and teachers had much to say about the NMTEACH. In general, interview participants had mixed opinions on the various aspects of the NMTEACH. Directors AL and CL viewed the teaching domains and observation protocols, as well as the Danielson’s Framework for Teaching (2007) that comprise the domains of the NMTEACH, in a favorable light. Both Directors AL and CL did have concerns regarding the high-stakes aspects of the NMTEACH. Director BL did not like the system at all. Both teachers CT1 and CT2 felt that the system had unrealistic expectations and was very punitive. Teacher AT1 thought that the system did not offer a fair representation of teaching skills, however Teacher AT2 thought the system was “a good thing”, especially with the newer Walk Through observation system.

Directors AL and CL both liked the teaching domains of the NMTEACH. Director AL explained his position, stating “I think they’re good. I think they are generic enough that
we can tie them to our own priorities that we’ve identified. I think they are flexible enough.”

Director AL also expressed that he liked the on-line Frontline documentation system of the NMTEACH, which he found to be user friendly. Director CL felt that the Danielson Framework for Learning (2007) was overall “a good framework.” When I asked, both Director AL and Director CL stated they would continue to use the content of the domains of the NMTEACH if given a choice.

Director AL asserted that the NMTEACH system provided opportunity for “transparent” valuable feedback to teachers and described how he has been able to make the system useful for guiding school improvements. Explaining how he utilizes the system, he stated:

It’s coaching. I’ll do a pre-walk through and talk about…here’s what I’m looking for, here’s what kind of information might come out of the Walk Through. Then we have the Walk Through – two or three at the most, actionable ‘if we did this.’ Sometimes it very simple – ‘I noticed when the students walked into the classroom, they didn’t know what they were supposed to do until you told them.’ Something like that - they should know when they walk in the door this is what they do. So, it really gets down to those little details. And then also giving sincere, not token, but sincere, praise for what is working and what’s going right. If I see larger trends, it will become a professional development topic.

Both Directors AL and CL talked about resources they had individually created for their schools to assist teachers with meeting the documentation and other requirements of the NMTEACH and to link the system to the school’s mission and learning philosophy. Director
CL noted that she “pick[s] another piece each year to unpack what the four domains are about.” Director AL described some resources that he had created, stating:

If you want resources, I have a lesson plan format with hyperlinks in it that the teachers do for their domain one and for their formal observation. It’s a lesson plan template that has hyperlinks in it for how to get out of the front of the classroom, how to let your students be more active and involved in the learning, instead of teacher talk. I do get into how long is the teacher talking; how long are you talking in front of your class, how much of this can you ask them to do and show them how to do for themselves. So, that became a school-wide push because I thought there was too much teacher talk. Passive – if your students can sit in your classroom and not be held accountable in anyway, they’re just going to check out. You’re giving them permission to check out. So, we redesigned our lesson planning template with the hyperlinks and supports to this is how you do that.

Other resources created by Director AL included a portfolio system for Domain 4 of the NMTEACH, which he described as “a Word table so you can copy and paste for each domain”, further commenting, “So, it’s as painless as possible just so that everyone has the same tool.” Director AL felt that the effort of creating innovative resources was worth it, remarking “It’s about getting good information but it’s also about fairness, because some teachers advertise more than others what they are doing. And it shouldn’t be a popularity contest for who makes the most noise.”

Director AL gave a further example of how he created resources to help make NMTEACH a fair system for the teachers at School A, stating:
They took off the exemplary and rightly so. The exemplary for classroom observations was not observable in the classroom. So, I had to create this whole portfolio that if you uploaded items to it, you could get the five because it wasn’t observable. It wasn’t fair to have a five and you can’t get it…Those teachers were the ones who did the portfolio; those teachers were the ones who got the bonus, but it was available to everyone. There was some disgruntled, ‘I’m not going to jump through these hoops’, which I understand but I explained very clearly that I can’t observe this while I’m in your classroom. You deserve the opportunity to show me this piece that I don’t see, and it has to be in an objective way.

Director CL had also created in-school systems to “help teachers really unpack the domains”, utilizing training and a variety of unique tools, which included lists of “Look Fors” in classroom practice and teacher behaviors. She described the process:

We’ll have a focused discussion as a group. I provide them various artifacts for Domain 4 to go ahead and report those things because I don’t have time to read fifteen sets of lesson plans on a weekly basis…For Domain 1, I give them several templates and they pick the one that works for them to show me their process of preparation and planning.

Another tool Director CL created was an engagement tool, which aligned a series of student engagement checklists with the teacher competencies of the domains on the NMTEACH. Recently, she created a feedback system for the now required Walk Throughs. Director CL has made numerous attempts to link the NMTEACH to the school’s mission and learning philosophy, explaining “It’s opened the door and I think brought more change more rapidly.”
Director AL and Director CL had opposing views on the protocols of the NMTEACH. Director AL complained about the recently revised type and number of observations and Walk Throughs of the NMTEACH, expressing that it had “created more work for me…so really, I’m doing four evaluations instead of two with the new system.” Suggesting the system could be streamlined, he explained, “I might not document all those Walk Throughs to the extent that they are asking us to. Because really, in Walk Throughs you want to find a couple of actionable things and work on those.” On the other hand, Director CL expressed a positive opinion of the changes for streamlining the observation system, stating “I really liked moving to the Walk Throughs this year over doing multiple high stakes evaluations, formal observations and those are the only conversations we have about their practice in the classroom.”

Regarding Director CL’s approach to the NMTEACH, Teacher CT2 stated, “The director frames it in the context of personal growth. She interprets the state requirements in terms of, ‘Well, this is what we have to do and a lot of it is based on research about what does quality teaching look like.’” Teacher CT1 also verified Director CL’s approach but offered a negative viewpoint about the NMTEACH, stating “My director says, ‘Well, I use this as a tool to try to encourage teachers to grow.’ That’s not teaching me how to be a better teacher.”

At School B, NMTEACH was not conducted by Director BL but instead by two head teachers, so he had limited direct interaction with the implementation of the system. He did discuss the protocols and requirements of the NMTEACH, stating “Can’t I communicate in the effective way that I know how to communicate, rather than writing something up in some arbitrary paragraph form to put on to the web for it to be possibly used against me if it’s not
done?” When I asked, Director BL stated he would not use any part of the NMTEACH if given a choice.

While interview participants did discuss positive aspects of the NMTEACH domains, some of the interview participants used the word “punitive” to describe the high stakes feature of the NMTEACH system. Despite the recent changes made to the NMTEACH, interview participants still viewed the system in this perspective, often referencing the high stakes components. The high stakes components mentioned by participants were the student assessment scores previously used in NMTEACH, the previous bonuses attached to the system, and the labeling of teachers as Exemplary, Effective, Not Effective.

In discussing concerns about the punitive aspect of the NMTEACH, both Directors AL and CL claimed the high-stakes of the system had caused problems for the schools’ overall functioning and culture during the past five years. As Director CL stated, the NMTEACH “was divisive between administrators and teachers…That high stakes piece really changed my relationship with my faculty.” She further remarked, “My wings felt most clipped by teacher evaluation – that high stakes score on teachers.” Expressing a similar view, Director AL commented:

What was horrible was the gaming of it that was being done before with bonuses; that really poisoned it. I had to walk a thin line with the teachers because some got bonuses and some didn’t, and it was my fault. So, I really had to walk a thin line with them, but we made it through. So, the PED once again made more problems than they made solutions.

Director BL voiced a similar opinion, claiming the NMTEACH “is a punitive system and is unhelpful to teachers in a realistic way.” He further remarked:
I mean, I understand they did a lot of work and a lot of research on it…even though they say it’s not punitive – when you have a person who has to do more work, I don’t know how that’s not punitive. We already have to do so much as educators, to add one more piece to it, it’s redundancy that doesn’t need to be there. What should happen in classes and schools across the [state], is that you look at your MAP scores every year, you look at whatever your scores are and you go, ‘OK, [teacher], I looked at your scores. They’re going down. What’s up? What’s going on? Are you having problems? How can I provide support for you? What are you doing to address this problem?’ Have the teacher think about it. Now, if you put on top of that, ‘Oh, by the way, you’re an ineffective teacher and you need to fix this.’ I don’t know how that motivates somebody to do it; that motivation in a fear-based way. Soon as you put a label on it, it becomes a fear-based system because what does that mean to you as a person to be considered ineffectual. My thought is that you provide support.

Director CL also expressed concerns with the usage of the Danielson Framework (2007) within the high-stakes system of the NMTEACH, commenting, “It’s such as typical New Mexico thing…to take something that is researched, evidenced-based, effective and tweak it into what New Mexico wants to use it for.”

Teacher interview participants AT1, CT1, and CT2 did not have positive views of the NMTEACH. Teacher AT1 thought the observation protocols were not fair, commenting:

There are so many teaching moments that I can be evaluated on and to think that my whole year is based on that one lesson. It seems unfair if it doesn’t go well and it also seems a little bit ridiculous if it’s exceptional. That was one hour of my 176 teaching days that you just saw and to say that’s how I am as a teacher; I don’t think that’s a
good representation. I understand why it happens that way. Time commitment—they can’t be coming in a million times a day or million times a year. I get it; they have so many classes and students and responsibilities to keep coming in but one hour doesn’t really tell you what kind of teacher I am.

Another issue Teacher AT1 had with the NMTEACH components, presented in Figure 1, was the Opportunity to Learn (OTL) survey given to students or parents. Teacher AT1 complained that on the OTL, parents “would evaluate me without really knowing what goes on…they don’t know the daily ins and outs.” She summarized her opinion of the system, stating, “I just don’t think it’s reflective on a teacher’s work— one hour or one survey, that’s all.”

Teacher CT1 considered the NMTEACH “very formal”, even with the new Walk Through protocol, stating it doesn’t “feel like a Walk Through.” Discussing the observation protocols, she remarked that the director is “typing the whole time, so people get a little stressed.” Teacher CT1 suggested that the stakes should be lowered to “make it a safe place to learn.” In explaining why she thought the NMTEACH system was punitive toward teachers, Teacher CT1 stated:

It does not make teachers feel good about themselves. It doesn’t. I still have to jump through the hoops and do all these evaluations and fill out all this paperwork and spend all that time to prove to you that I’m a good teacher. It doesn’t make me feel good. The stakes are too high. That’s not teaching me how to be a better teacher. I find it very irritating at this point.

Teacher CT2 complained about the NMTEACH’s use of student assessment scores to evaluate teacher effectiveness, commenting “It’s totally disconnected; it’s a big jumble.”
Teacher CT2 discussed how the NMTEACH system used “really obtuse and really opaque” assessment data in his NMTEACH evaluation. Teacher CT2 taught a subject that had a separate state mandated assessment with the subject not being tested on the PARCC. Regarding this disconnect, he commented, “It was Kafkaesque; so, I just decided to ignore it and just do my best. So, my assessments were totally disassociated from my evaluation.”

The other two interview participants from School C, Director CL and Teacher CT1, expressed similar concerns with the fairness of the NMTEACH’s scoring system. Commenting on this issue, Director CL stated, “It’s me observing them and it’s not tied to data that has some kind of trickery put to it…I really didn’t understand the statistical correctness of the growth and VAS and all those models.”

Teacher CT1 was particularly bothered by never having scored an exemplary teacher rating. She pointed out that the school, as an ‘A’ school with a nationally recognized academic award, never has had an exemplary rated teacher on the NMTEACH. She thought the system should be “overhauled” and that “there is a better way to encourage the development of good teachers.”

Teacher AT2 was the only interview participant that did not express anything negative about the NMTEACH. He liked the “oversight” of the NMTEACH system. He explained, stating:

As long as the teachers are doing their jobs effectively and we’re seeing student growth, the director does… pop in for an unofficial observation, a quick five minute view of the classroom, just to see how it’s going. I think it’s great to have oversight just to make sure that the teacher, including myself, is still within the sphere- just have a reality check once in a while to see how things are going…In general, I think
overall, observations are a good thing. I like letting teachers do their job and then having conversations with them once or twice a year.

**High Stakes Assessment.** Another standards-based reform introduced and implemented in New Mexico is the use of high-stakes assessments for measuring student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and school performance (Ingersoll et al., 2016; Knoester & Parkison, 2017; Ladd, 2017). The New Mexico state assessment was the Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Readiness (PARCC) from 2014 to 2018 (New Mexico Department of Education, 2019b). When the change in administration occurred during the 2018-19 school year, the NMPED changed the state assessment to a variation of PARCC test questions called the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment of Mathematics and English Language Arts (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019h).

The component of High Stakes Assessment emerged during the analysis of the data, fitting within the theme and framework element of Regulation Autonomy. This component is aligned to Question 8 on both the Leader and Teacher Interview Questionnaires (see Appendix B), presented in Tables 4 and 5. In addition, I included participants’ responses to other questions of the interview protocols that referenced the PARCC or other assessments in the analysis and coding of this theme component.

All charter and traditional schools in New Mexico are required to participate in the state assessments and also use interim assessments. The state assessment scores have been used to measure student academic achievement, school performance, and teacher effectiveness. In the past, schools and districts were given a letter grade of A, B, C, D, or F based on student performance measures, which included disaggregated PARCC scores, along with other components, such as graduation rate and attendance rate (New Mexico Public
School and district report cards are annually published in the local paper and are available on the NMPED Website (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019i; New Mexico Vistas, 2020). When discussing the publication of the school’s report card, Teacher CT1 said, “The fact that the schools are given a grade and it’s published, drives, I think, every director in this county. How could [it] not?”

For reporting 2018-19 school performance, the NMPED eliminated the letter grades and changed over to a new school performance reporting system through a program called New Mexico Vistas (New Mexico Vistas, 2020). In the new reporting system, “Schools that score in the top 10% for any of the…measures are awarded the Designation of Excellence…[and] the top 25% of schools in the state [are] awarded the Spotlight designation” (New Mexico Vistas, 2020, p. 4). According to the website of New Mexico Vistas (2020) schools that do not meet the criteria for these designations, are designated “In Need of Support” (p. 4).

All three of the case study schools received the letter grade of ‘A’ for the 2017-18 school year (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019i). All three schools received a designation of “Spotlight School” for the 2018-19 school year under the new rating system (New Mexico Vistas, 2020).

Despite changing the designations, all the participants expressed they still felt the pressure of having to meet high student performance targets. Regarding the school grade, Teacher CT1 remarked “We’re getting pushed constantly, so I don’t know if that is the mission, but it’s definitely the feel from the top.”

Director BL was the only interview participant to question the reliability and validity of the scores from the new state assessment, stating:
I think the problem that I have with scores as of late, is the consistently moving target with a consistent shift of values; that’s been a real issue. When I look at hard data and I know over a four-year term of looking at my data, that my school is going up in reading 12-25 points and going up in math 7 points every year. This past year they gave us the documentation because they changed the test. So, 7 points up in math, language arts went down 25 points? That can’t be, that doesn’t make any sense. We didn’t do anything that was that drastic that would have done that. There is something you are changing in the test.

Director BL also discussed his concern with the fairness of the school grading system. He asserted that the “consequences to getting an F” is a double standard for charter schools versus traditional schools, stating “They’re allowed to have an F [but] they close us.” Director BL was the only participant to discuss the lack of fairness of the system regarding school closures. State authorized charter schools may have a greater threat of closure from the state Charter School Division (CSD) and the Public Education Commission (PEC) than the district authorized charter schools. Director BL also discussed how the varying high-stakes standards for student achievement impacts the teachers stating, “Ultimately teachers know that, ‘If I do poorly, it reflects on the school, and the school doesn’t stay open, I lose my job. I don’t want that. I’m going to work on these things.’”

Student scores from the state assessments have also been used for measuring teacher effectiveness on the NMTEACH (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The statistical process for arriving at this measure was a Value Added Model (VAM) (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2017a). The NMTEACH system is no longer using these statistically calculated scores for measuring teacher effectiveness (New Mexico Public
Teacher CT2 discussed concerns he had with using PARCC assessment scores previously on his evaluation since his subject was not tested on the PARCC. He also discussed concerns regarding the lack of useful data from the alternative test he was mandated to use for testing in his subject area.

Teacher CT1 mentioned how her instruction can get totally focused on the state assessments, requiring her to provide a deep review before the test administration. She expressed concerns about the high-stakes aspect of the state assessment:

I definitely am reflecting because it’s going to show up in the paper, it’s going to show up at our PDs [professional development], it’s going to show up in our digging deep in data in September, and it’s all [grade level] and how we did.

All three school directors utilized the state assessment scores in combination with interim assessments, including the MAPS, Istation, i-Ready, and other assessments to provide data-based information for addressing student and school performance. The Istation assessment is mandatory for students in Kindergarten through third grade. School A utilized grade level teacher data teams to analyze assessment data. Director AL called the state assessment scores “our big numbers…our big markers.” Explaining how the school uses the state assessment data, Director AL told me:

I give them all the Pearson results – now it’s the In-depth, now it’s not Pearson, even though Pearson is the parent company of our current test. They’re still at the top. So, we have data teams that get the different reports. There are several reports available—there are whole class, there are reports by objective, there are individual reports, there are growth reports, there are summary reports. So, they look at all of that in their teams and then we come back together, and they share out the highlights of where
their big targets are. Within their teams, they talk about what their class level targets are because we have nine classes and if we went student by student, that would be a long meeting. The teachers can talk about in general, ‘with my class’ these objectives need improvement. Or this student group, when you look at the disaggregated data- I remember a few years back, Hispanic females were the reason we got a B, instead of an A. So, everyone got on-board with ‘OK, what messages are they getting about their abilities from their families, or from the school, or from the teacher, or from their peers? What supports aren’t they getting that they could get?’ So, it became this big thing.

Teacher AT2 asserted that the MAPS quarterly placement tests “really guide our instruction” and described how he uses the state assessment scores in combination with the quarterly MAPS test:

I can take the results from the [grade level] and see who my incoming students are. I can take the results from the [grade level] so I can really focus on the [grade level] before they leave our school. It doesn’t really help me very much with the [grade level] who are leaving our school. So, it’s taking last year’s information that they lost over the summer, and trying to apply it to this year and to use that information along with the very first MAPS test we do in August; sometimes that information aligns up very well and can be very useful.

Teacher AT1 utilized the state mandated Istation test, given monthly, to “continually monitor the students who were maybe not making progress or falling behind; targeting specific skills that they needed.” Teacher AT1 did express that she really was not “huge fan of Istation” but “that’s what the state gives us.” She preferred the previous state mandated
assessment, DIBELS. Commenting on why she thought the state had changed the assessments, she stated:

When you did the DIBELS assessment, you knew at the end of that day exactly what each student needed, where their strengths and weakness were. I thought that it was a fabulous assessment, but they felt that they were spending too much money on subs. So, they gave us Istation, and guess what – the teacher spends her own time on the side digging through each report to see what each kid needs anyway. So, I think it just saved the school money but not the teachers work.

Director BL utilized the state assessment data at School B to look for performance trends and guide instruction. Describing this system, he stated:

I look at the data in a very generalized way and try to break it down for staff in a realistic way, so we are looking at something. I look in my data trends and so if we are 35% performance and we need to move up 15%, then 15% of a population in the classroom means that we are looking at three kids in each classroom that needs to move up.

Director CL discussed how she completes a “granular analysis” of state assessment data by “going by question and looking at those data statements and looking at where are we missing the boat.” Commenting on this, she stated “I hate to call it ‘teaching to the test’…because really aren’t we just giving kids the tools because they keep getting asked these types of questions.” In explaining how she uses the trend data from state assessment, Director CL stated:

[The state assessment] gives us trend data [sic] that is more school wide…we can see this trend in our summative assessments. This is a weak zone. It usually ties right
down to those evidence-based statements which might take us back to vocabulary and the instructional piece of our curriculum that’s not so strong [sic] and we need to find another way to do that. So, that’s how we use the state assessment.

Director CL discussed a new interim assessment being used at School C, stating “We’re picking up the big holes from the standards, because of using a flexible assessment tools as opposed to a fixed one, so we can see a kid who is about or below and find their holes and actually teach it.”

Teacher CT1 expressed that the data review could be hard on the staff, declaring “And I’m like, ‘But we’re still an A school. Everybody remember that.’ We walk away from those things not feeling so great. It’s always like we are not doing enough.”

In addition to the state assessment, the schools are required by the NMPED to administer interim assessments throughout the school year to provide on-going progress monitoring of student learning. All three case study schools used the mandated Istation assessment and chose to use the MAPS assessment for monitoring progress. Teacher CT1 stated that the interim testing “drives teaching to individualize learning” and asserted that she “use[s] data as a tool more than I ever used to because I came from the school of thought that we hardly ever tested.”

Both Directors AL and CL discussed how the testing results guide instructional choices at their schools. Director AL asserted “Let’s face it, the standardized test is really going to nail this and hardly touch on that. You have to make choices.” Director CL explained that School C uses interim assessments as a “growth data model as the primary benchmark for guiding instruction and also one of several pointers for selecting changes in curriculum or changes in program.” She further commented that “Assessment does
guide…without it ruling us. It still allows for the creativity of teaching and the craft of teaching.”

Director CL also discussed how inflexible the state assessments were and commented that the state is trying to create “a one-size fits all model” versus letting charter schools “show success in a multitude of ways.” She pointed out that charters should be allowed to be innovative in the use of varied measures of performance and success, such as portfolios, because “performance-based models couldn’t necessarily represent your school.” However, she did further comment that “probably” the consequence for school that implemented an alternative accountability system would be to “get dinged for that or be an unrated school.”

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS).* The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), another standards-based reform (Mathis, 2010; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Chief State School Officers, 2010a; 2010b) were fully implemented in 2015 and are used as the New Mexico State Standards (New Mexico Department of Education, 2016). All schools in New Mexico are required to implement and align instruction to the New Mexico Common Core State Standards (NMCCSS) (New Mexico Department of Education, 2016). The PARCC assessment and now the current New Mexico state assessment are aligned to the CCSS (New Mexico Department of Education, 2019i).

On the both the Leader and Teacher Interview Questionnaires (see Appendix B), Questions 8 and 9 were aligned to elicit information regarding the CCSS, as presented in Tables 4 and 5. In addition, I included references to CCSS made by participants in response to other questions of the interview protocol in the analysis and coding of this component. Information regarding the CCSS was also collected and analyzed from document artifacts. The component of CCSS emerged during the analysis of the data collection, fitting within the
theme and framework element of Regulation Autonomy. Interview participants interchangeably used the terms Common Core and CCSS to describe the Common Core Standards used in New Mexico.

All three case study schools utilized the CCSS as mandated by the NMPED. All three directors asserted their schools used the CCSS to provide the framework for what to teach to students. Director AL described the role of the CCSS at School A as “our skeleton”, explaining:

It’s more about how you teach than what because the what is the Common Core Standards…If you need to know what it is, you’re supposed to be doing, that’s where you go. It’s not the curriculum. The curriculum is a tool and what we’ve done traditionally since ’01, since I started, is pick and choose where you are going to get a certain thing.

School A’s student handbook states, “New Mexico has adopted the Common Core State Standards, and as a public school [School A] teaches these standards through a variety of curricula.” Both teachers AT1 and AT2 were very positive about the CCSS. Teacher AT1 thought the CCSS were “rigorous”, commenting:

I do think Common Core has been a good thing for the state of New Mexico…I feel that unless you strive to get better, you’re not going to…I think if you put those expectations in front of teachers that this is what you will teach…I think that’s a really good thing. I know people [were] very up in arms about the Common Core when it first came out. I was like, ‘There’s nothing wrong with it; setting your goals high and trying to achieve them. What’s bad about that?’ Obviously, it’s a long
process here; we’re not going to get there overnight, but I do think it was a very good thing. I really do.

Teacher AT2 felt very similar about the CCSS and commented:

When it first came out, like any new thing, I was very apprehensive because I was used to what I was already doing…Now that I’ve been doing the Common Core for twelve plus years, I actually think that it does a very good job of covering all the basics and allows you to specifically dig into areas.

Director CL stated that School C has “embraced” the Common Core which “is supposed to be bridging us more to real life and going deeper in analysis and higher critical thinking skills.” Under the section entitled “Mission Glossary” on the website of School C, one of the steps “to develop the academic potential of each learner” is “through the commitment and use of [School C’s] Common Core aligned curriculum.”

Director CL was very positive about the CCSS and gave an example of how the CCSS is utilized to guide learning for the school’s gifted education students, stating:

In Common Core Standards, because of the way it aligns and it’s like your baby stepping up over the years, you can go ahead and level up the year and go on to the next level of the standard that the class is working with and take those kids to that deeper, more involved or analytical level of the model. We really keep everything standard, structured, and aligned and move that way.

When discussing School C’s usage of the NMCCSS as the school wide framework for developing student learning goals, Teacher CT1 remarked, “I can’t teach anything I want to teach. I need to make sure that it’s aligned with the Common Core Standards and the NGSS [Next Generation Science Standards].” She noted that the school’s current math
curriculum is being phased out because it is not aligned with the CCSS. In discussing the school’s curriculums, Teacher CT1 commented “We choose curriculum based on things that the data shows that it’s a good curriculum, the kids are learning, and that its aligned,” indicating that the school could not use a curriculum not aligned to the CCSS.

Teacher CT2 does not use the CCSS because the subject he teaches is not included in the CCSS. He continues to use the New Mexico State Standards for his subject area, noting “We have the state giving us the standards but beyond that we’re not just aiming for the minimum.”

School B uses the CCSS to provide a framework for student learning and instruction. Comparing the CCSS with the previous New Mexico state standards, Director BL stated:

It’s something – you have to have something to address. As long as we are consistent about it, it’s fine. I thought that the New Mexico standards that we had previously were far more specific and easy to follow rather than the Common Core standards, which seem general. The New Mexico standards seemed pretty straightforward.

Describing how the teachers at School B use the CCSS, Director BL stated that the teachers use the CCSS to provide structure for “what to teach the kids,” noting, “Now all the staff have these Common Core cards that they put down into things that they need to do and I just let them know that they need to make sure they’re hitting those areas.”

_Bureaucratic Entities._ The component Bureaucratic Entities emerged during the analysis of the data, fitting within the theme and framework element of Regulation Autonomy. The Bureaucratic Entities I identified included local and state government bodies that interacted with the schools through charter authorization and the creation and
implementation of state regulations and requirements (Berends et al., 2019; Casey et al., 2002; Wohlstetter et al, 1995).

Figure 5 presents the specific bureaucratic entities identified through participants’ responses to interview questions. I coded participants’ references to these entities as components of the theme of Regulation Autonomy (Berkovich, 2017; Flanders, 2017; Graham, 2005). Besides the targeted questions aligned with Regulation Autonomy on the Leader and Teacher Interview Questionnaires, presented in Tables 4 and 5, I included references to the five identified Bureaucratic Entities elicited in responses to other questions of the interview protocols in the analysis and coding of this component. In addition, I analyzed and coded references to bureaucratic entities from information compiled from reviews of document artifacts.

The identified entities had an influence on the case study schools and were referenced by the interview participants in response to many of the questions and discussions. The entities included the local school district, the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED), the Charter School Division (CSD) of the NMPED, the New Mexico Public Education Commission (PEC), the state Legislative Education Finance Committee (LEFC), and the New Mexico state Legislature. Participants’ references to the LEFC and state Legislature were interrelated and interchanged and therefore, I grouped them as one entity.

The identified entities have different roles within the bureaucratic system, with functions that occasionally overlap.

In general, participants expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with all of the identified bureaucratic entities (Stoddard & Corcoran, 2007). Interview participants viewed the entities with distrust and were negative about the entities’ levels of competence and
efficiency. Participants provided information about the impact that both local and state politics have on the schools (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Cohen et al., 2018; McLaren, 2007).

There was a noted difference between district-authorized Schools A and C and School B, a state authorized charter school, on the amount and type of interactions with various entities. There was also a difference between directors’ and teachers’ levels of interactions with these entities due to differing job roles and responsibilities.

**Figure 5**

*Bureaucratic Entities*

I coded the same local school district, as the authorizer of School A and School C, as a bureaucratic entity for this component. These two schools had more and different interactions with the local school district than School B, which is state authorized. For example, the district requires Schools A and C to submit monthly report worksheets which are used as a tool for oversight and to assist with information gathering for the five-year renewal process. Directors AL and CL indicated there was little direct contact with the district beyond some shared services, such as student transportation and student nutrition, and
program grants, such as a literacy grant and Title 2 funds. Every five years, Schools A and C also interacted with the district for their charter renewal (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a). In describing the relationship of School C with the district, Director CL said:

It’s not what it’s like to be an authorizer, meaning that you now get to call us a district school. We’re not. They’re the LEA [Local Education Agency] because you made the money flow through them and that’s really all it’s about and they approve our charter every five years. Otherwise, they don’t want to hear about my school.

Director AL contended that the district just saw the charter schools as a means for additional funding. Both Directors AL and CL detailed how the school district “double dips” with extra charges over allotted federal funds, such as additional charges for student transportation services and the school nutrition program. In New Mexico, the authorizing school district is designated as the Local Educational Agency (LEA) for the district authorized charter schools, which does not allow the schools to have their own transportation or nutrition programs nor directly apply for other federal grant funds. If the district agrees to provide these programs to the charter school, the district is entitled to the student reimbursement. This local district provides services and programs for Schools A and C, and then receives the full state and federal reimbursement funds generated by the schools’ student membership. However, the district also charges the charter schools an additional 2% over generated funds for, according to Director C, “indirect costs.” Both School A and C take program funds from their operating budgets to cover these added-on costs. In addition, this local school district does not share any Title 1 funds generated by the charter schools’ students but keeps all the funds for district schools’ students only. The percentage of students
that classify as economically disadvantaged for School A is 56% and 51% for School C (New Mexico Vistas, 2020).

Director CL complained about a lack of communication with the school district on school level state requirements for various programs. An example given by Director CL was the lack of communication from the district regarding the state assessment protocols, setup, and trainings. Director CL stated that only a LEA representative can be designated as the District Test Coordinator (DTC). DTCs are the only personnel allowed to attend the state trainings regarding the administration of the state assessments. The regular process is for the DTC to train and share information with the School Test Coordinators (STC) of individual schools in the district, including the district authorized charter schools. Director CL expressed frustration with the district, stating:

I don’t like that we have to use them as our test coordinator because it means I don’t get good information about setting up testing. I have to dig and research instead of just going to a training to get information I need.

School B is a state authorized charter school and is considered a stand-alone LEA and independent entity, and is therefore eligible to apply for transportation funds, the student nutrition program, and all state and federal grants and funding so Director BL does not interact with the district in the same capacity as Directors AL and CL.

Several years ago, the NM Secretary of Education’s office requested that the school district invite Schools A and C to do a presentation on how their schools are achieving continued academic success. Directors AL and CL accepted the district’s invitation and gave a full day presentation on “here’s how we do it” to district personnel. In discussing this presentation, both directors mentioned that they never received any recognition or feedback,
positive or negative, from the district and as Director AL put it, “We never heard back, but it was something.”

Teachers AT1, AT2, and CT1 did not discuss anything regarding the district other than that they were the school’s authorizers. Teacher CT2 did discuss how he would like to see some of the methods and practices of School C shared with the local school district, stating “It really could make a difference for kids around our general district. I grieve somewhat that.” Teacher CT2 told a story about a positive interaction with the district that occurred several years ago, remarking:

We’ve had some opportunities for that, that were taken that have been positive. There was a grant many years ago for our director along with other teachers, what we call EQ, Emotional Intelligence at the high school. They have kept that going and they report that it’s been a real plus...That’s great and it’s really cool to hear that they still go with that. We even had them give back to us a few years ago where some students came from the high school. They had sort of a leadership team that were focused on Emotional Intelligence who came back here and led some Emotional Intelligence workshops with our students...So that kind of thing is wonderful when it happens.

Director CL stated that at this time “there is quite a bit of animosity” between the district and the school. She stated that during the last renewal, the district superintendent requested that she not “talk about the success of your school at district meetings.” In responding to this type of request from the district, Director C declared “It’s like I have to! But...they don’t want to know.”
Although School B had limited direct interaction with the school district, Director BL claimed that, “The district has a different set of standards that they’re held to.” He gave examples of different standards that are allowed for required certifications of a bus driver and requirements for educational assistants. Director BL explained that School B can only hire bus drivers that have more certifications, than are needed to be hired as a bus driver for the local district. Also, according to Director BL, School B must have Educational Assistants with a Level 3 license versus the local district not having this requirement and being able to hire assistants with Level 2 licensure. Director BL explained that these two situations created issues for the school because people employed by the district would apply for these positions at School B but would not be eligible for hiring at School B and would interpret this as discrimination. Regarding the School B’s relationship with the district, Director BL commented:

The district at times has said all sorts of crazy things, like we get to choose who the kids are, the reason our test scores are higher is because we don’t take the same test. They get to do these lies. There is nothing that is happening that helps cross those things.

The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) was another bureaucratic entity I identified from interviewees’ responses. The NMPED is the state level department of education and is divided into divisions and offices. The NMPED is overseen by the New Mexico Secretary of Education, a position appointed by the Governor of New Mexico, with approval by the state Legislature. The NMPED was referenced by all interviewees but often the examples used by participants to support statements were about the Charter School Division (CSD), a division of the NMPED, which I coded as a separate bureaucratic entity.
By examining all possible sources of bureaucratic regulation, I was able to differentiate between the NMPED as a whole entity and the individual divisions of the NMPED. The CSD is a part of the NMPED, but for purposes of this analysis, is considered a separate bureaucratic entity. I extracted references to the functions of the CSD from the data and coded these separately. In addition, the state mandated teacher evaluation system (NMTEACH) was often the topic or example being discussed in regard to the influence of the NMPED. I extracted data concerning the NMTEACH and discussed those data separately.

Participants interchanged the use of the phrases of “the PED“ and “the state” in reference to the NMPED. References to the NMPED included the bureaus and departments of the NMPED tasked with fulfilling varying functions, such as Special Education, State Assessment, Teacher Quality, and Teacher Licensure.

The directors of all three case study schools as well as two of the teacher interview participants expressed concerns regarding the competency and intentions of the NMPED. The three school directors discussed the mandates and requirements from the NMPED as ineffective and at times, a waste of time and resources. All three school directors expressed concerns with the lack of direction and communication from the NMPED. Director CL called the NMPED “a fuzzy cloud” that continually gave out “ridiculous tasks that are [part of] bureaucratic management.” She gave the example of the proposed new proficiency “dashboard” system from the NMPED, the school rating system for the 2018-19 school year, explaining that it still had not been released. Director CL commented, “We have responsibility to use public taxpayer money ethically, responsibly, effectively, and efficiently…but I think we could do it in a more fluid and efficient way.”
Commenting on the NMPED’s ineptness, Director BL stated:

There is an inability on the state level to do any introspection on anything that they are looking at in a data way. That’s what I see as a problem. I’m not the only person that states this– states the things that are obvious. But they’re like, ‘That’s how it is.’ No, that’s not how you’re supposed to go about it.

Director AL suggested that the NMPED adds on all these bureaucratic requirements so “it’s easier to manage” instead of “letting schools be problem solvers.” Director AL suggested that having the NMPED identify “some of the problems and then ask us to create a solution would be better than deciding from a centralized location what every one solution is.”

Director AL described himself as “chief compliance officer” and when discussing the process of completing the many NMPED requirements, he stated, “You really have to give them what they want to go away so you can do what is right.” Director BL repeatedly referred to NMPED personnel as “check markers” and stated several times, “I just try to make those check markers happy.” Director CL attempted to put a positive twist to meeting the requirements of the NMPED and asserted, “That’s what I usually try to do with the bureaucratic stuff we are asked to do. How can we turn it into something that feels meaningful and worth our time?”

Regarding frustration with the requirements from the NMPED, Director AL remarked:

There have been moments like ‘Oh, you have to have your health plan.’ ‘Ok, here it is.’ ‘No, we don’t like it; redo it, redo it.’ Or safety plan or a lot of those little things that we need but we don’t always know what the person evaluating is thinking, so
we’re stabbing in the dark a little bit as to what they are looking for. Whereas, if we were told, ‘Write a safety plan and cover these bases;’ we would just do it and it would work for us. But because the state has to evaluate it, be responsible for it too, there’s that interplay of what they’re looking for versus what we need.

All three directors expressed issues with trusting the intentions of the NMPED, with Director AL stating:

I don’t want the PED’s attention. When they send me something to do, I get it done quick and I do it well, and I move on. I don’t want them second guessing us, knowing our name even. Even our good things…it attracts attention.

Director CL found the mandates redundant and did not trust the intentions of the NMPED, commenting:

It is all about kids. The rest of it just needs a system that works and I need to make sure that system—everyone’s well trained and can do their part to make the system work, while the PED throws the next curve ball or tripping hazard in our path.

Both Director BL and CL asserted that the NMPED lacked introspection on the purposes and processes of the state bureaucratic requirements, which were often not supported by data or school needs. Discussing the NMPED, Director BL stated:

I can recognize it’s a game and play the game. When they change the rules, change the rules. But truthfully is this game effective for kids? No, I think it is not at all and is a disservice. The way to make it no longer a disservice and not effective, is to get the politics out from within education. Make it less about the politics and what makes me look good or not and make it more about the actual thing.
Director BL also expressed concern with the unfair treatment of charter schools versus traditional public schools, with double standards imposed by the NMPED, remarking, “That’s what I have a problem with, is if you’re not going to standardize something for everybody, for all the schools, then you’re putting us at disadvantage.”

All three directors of the case study charter schools described part of their job responsibilities to be a buffer between the state and the staff. When discussing the demands of the NMPED, Director BL stated, “So, you act as a buffer to some of these things. It’s not to say that all of the policies are ridiculous but when I see things that are not effective to our success, I am not going to have staff be part of that; that seems completely ridiculous.” He further remarked:

There was part of me that was really upset because I saw this drop in our reading scores and it didn’t make any sense to me. But it’s going to the next five-year cycle; I have to go ahead and have a starting point, so I’ll go ahead and have that as my starting point. I think that’s where we are neglecting education because I realize there is a huge game that’s being played, and I have two choices. I can go ahead and screw the game and do what I think is right, that’s all I’m going to do. Well, I won’t have a school.

Teacher AT1 only mentioned the NMPED when discussing the replacement of the state mandated early elementary assessment from DIBELS to Istation. She expressed that the change in the assessment was to accommodate the state’s financial burdens versus prioritizing the amount of additional work for teachers with the use of the Istation. Teacher AT2 mentioned regulation changes that have occurred due to Governor and administration transitions. He also discussed the lack of adequate budgetary support from the NMPED for
charter schools, stating, “I think our school is missing out on a lot of things that traditional public schools have…that’s all budgetary…whereas the public school is a little more insulated from what I understand as far as budgetary concerns are.”

Both teachers CT1 and CT2 expressed negativity about the competence of the NMPED. Teacher CT1 stated that she felt “animosity” between the NMPED and schools and was frequently frustrated by the NMPED due to incompetence. Teacher CT1 told a story about the process for getting her Level 3 licensure as an example to support her opinion. She explained that the process was very confusing and that she had to go to Santa Fe to submit and pay cash for the licensure submission. When in Santa Fe, she could not find the office because the NMPED website had incorrect information. After giving the details of this incident, Teacher CT1 said:

It just bothered me that you ask me to do so much in a day and to prove to you, after twenty-three years of teaching, and the data to prove it, to write a dossier and clean up vomit when a child vomits in my classroom because we don’t have a janitor; they come at night. You treat me as if I am a maid and a PhD, but you can’t even get your location right on your website. They’re not doing their job. That is how I feel. How can we stand for this? We’re expected to be incredible, nurturing, over-the-top givers, incredibly gifted teachers to hit every learning style, and teach how to identify, compare, and contrast a theme in [grade level] and clean up vomit and you can’t get even get your website to tell me where you are to hand deliver your money because you cannot take a Visa.

Teacher CT2 discussed issues with the NMPED’s faulty collection and usage of student assessment data for teacher evaluations and for program evaluations, specifically for
his subject area. He described the previous state mandated assessments as “useless in terms of the data” and “it’s just to check off a bureaucratic box.” Teacher CT2 described how he and his school director approached the NMPED to suggest and present a different assessment tool that could provide more useful data. The NMPED agreed to allow School C to pilot the assessment, which was administered by Teacher CT2. It proved to be a more useful test and this school year, the NMPED department in charge of the subject area changed the mandated assessment to this new test suggested and piloted by School C.

The New Mexico Public Education Commission (PEC) was a bureaucratic entity referenced only by Director B. The PEC is composed of an elected board of members representing areas throughout the state of New Mexico (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a). The main function of the PEC is to serve as the authorizer of state charter schools (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2019a). The PEC approves or disapproves all new and renewal state charters and provides ongoing school oversight through the NMPED Charter School Division (CSD). The CSD is a separate entity from the PEC and is under the direction of the New Mexico Secretary of Education, and part of the NMPED. I discuss the CSD separately.

School B was the only case study charter school that was state authorized. Schools A and C are district authorized charter schools and do not have any contact or interaction with the PEC. Neither School Directors AL and CL, nor any of the teacher interview participants, mentioned the PEC.

Director BL shared several interactions School B had experienced with the PEC. Director BL described the charter renewal process as “a very frightening time; you could lose
your school.” In describing an incident that occurred during the school’s recent renewal hearing before the PEC, Director BL stated:

For example, when we went before them for our re-authorization, there was a comment that we didn’t do enough to make our school more reflective of the community. What do you want me to do? Kick out all the white kids? I’m not really sure; you put a cap on my school. I can’t grow anymore and when people come in and want their kid to go in 4th grade, and I say I can’t, you perpetuate the prejudices they have against charters. They go, ‘You’re just not letting me in because I’m Hispanic’, but it has nothing to do with that. It’s because I have twenty kids in the class, and I can’t extend it. So, I said, ‘That’s kind of a ridiculous piece’ and then I showed them my trend. When I first got here the school was only 20% Hispanic or 15% Hispanic and now, we’re 50-50. We’re moving in a positive direction but again I can’t kick out white kids and I can’t bring in Hispanics. I can’t change the attitude of the community which says this is a white school when people come in and can’t get in because of the system.

Another example given by Director BL was a dispute with the PEC regarding the number of hours in School B’s charter contract. Director BL said the PEC notified the school to inform them that they could potentially close the school over this dispute. Director BL further explained:

I had to go before the parents; I went before the PEC, Public Education Commission, again elected officials, and they were saying things like, ‘Well, you’re trying to do less hours.’ I actually had somebody say, ‘You’re going to reap what you sow during your renewal year.’ I have it; it’s in the minutes. That was the year I got a B and we
only won that finding by one vote. It made no sense whatsoever; it was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen. I got an A the next year. Did I reap what I sowed? Did anybody come around and say, ‘We were wrong. We apologize for what we did or how we treated you.’ So, that’s why I have a problem.

Director BL also claimed the PEC had inequitable expectations of charter schools, exclaiming, “We’re being held to a standard by the PEC, which is high, which should be for all schools, but it’s not for all schools. That’s where I draw issue.”

The Charter School Division (CSD) was another bureaucratic entity identified within the theme of Regulation Autonomy. The CSD is a department in the NMPED and responsible for the oversight of all charter schools but mainly interacts with the state authorized charter schools. Schools A and C, as district authorized schools, had little direct contact with the CSD other than some information sharing and training. As Director AL put it, “We’re not under the state, so they leave us alone indirectly.” None of the teacher interview participants mentioned the CSD.

School B, being a state authorized charter school, had a high level of interaction with the CSD. One of the responsibilities of the CSD is to conduct annual school monitoring evaluations for state charter schools and to conduct charter renewal visits and reviews, with recommendations to the PEC for charter renewals of schools. Director BL described several incidents that have occurred with the CSD, which he called petty issues. For example, he elaborated on a recent annual monitoring visit in which the CSD cited the school for not having the ELL student files in a separate folder within the student file. According to Director BL, the finding by the CSD cited the school for “not serving ELL students properly.” In discussing this incident Director BL commented:
Look at our test scores, our ELL students are one of the top performers in the state. I said, ‘You want a folder inside the folder?’ So, I went ahead and put a folder inside the folder and then they say, ‘We’re sorry we’re going to have to give you another finding this year for your ELL.’ ‘Why, because the kids did well; the kids aren’t failing? The kids are doing ok.’ ‘Well, we went into your folders and the folders didn’t have a letter sent home to the parents with the proper notification and then you need to have notification back from them that they received the letter sent home.’ Are you kidding me? ‘And you don’t have the stickers you need.’ So, now I have a folder that has stickers on it, with the letters in it, with the goal that the kid is supposed to do. What drives me insane about it is, none of that matters because the kids are still doing well in the class and it didn’t make me better. But my ability to be considered effective was all about these check markers. Are you guys serious?

In another issue with the CSD, Director BL talked about hiring a new business manager and having to appear before the PEC because he didn’t provide separate notice to the CSD. He described the situation as frustrating:

The PEC chastises me for not putting it in on time to the CSD because it’s written down that I need to do that. I go, ‘Why am I doing this in triplicate? What’s the purpose of this?’ What boggles my mind is that you are all in the same building. You literally are right there. It’s the same with – we do triplicate for grades, we do triplicate for changing our Governing Council, for a variety of things.

Describing yet another situation involving the CSD, Director BL explained:

We had a huge issue about the calendar, [I] went and got the state to approve the calendar. Then the CSD says, ‘We have a finding. You’re going to have to have to go before
the PEC to let them know that you did not follow procedure.’ I go, ‘What do you mean I didn’t? I got the thing from the PED. The PED gives me money. The CSD doesn’t give me money; you’re just an entity to make sure that I’m doing all the things I need to do.’ ‘Well, we don’t know if you did it because we don’t have it in our office.’ So, it’s that type of thing that you just go – it’s taken some time to get used to.

Schools A and C, as district authorized schools, had little direct contact with the CSD but Director AL did offer negative opinions about the intentions of the CSD based on witnessing their interactions with the state charter schools. Director AL was troubled by the actions of the CSD, explaining:

I know that the state charters really got beat up with the last administration and especially the last charter school division that really raked them over the coals. [Another charter school] is one of the top schools in the state. They were in their business and harassing them non-stop and that is wrong because it takes their resources, time, and energy to jump through hoops from the state, when that could be going to their kids and their families. I really didn’t like seeing that. The accountability needs to come with support, not just a gotcha system.

Director CL discussed the relationship between the CSD and district authorized charter schools, asserting:

I think for district charters, they’re like red-headed stepchildren and are pretty much forgotten. You have to be proactive and knowledgeable yourself to know what needs to happen because you could have a lot of deadlines pass you by and nobody’s telling you. Yet there is a consequence for missing a deadline.
Two of the case study school directors, Directors AL and CL in addition to Teacher CT1, mentioned the bureaucratic entities of the New Mexico state Legislature and/or the LEFC in reference to school funding issues. These two entities seemed to be interconnected and were repeatedly referenced together by Directors AL and CL. Both Directors AL and CL maintained that the state Legislature was strongly influenced by the LEFC, concerning education in New Mexico, for both traditional and charter schools. According to Director AL, the LEFC did not trust the finance numbers the schools reported, asserting that the LEFC has “its own numbers” because the “schools are always going to want more money.” Both Directors AL and CL claimed that the LEFC was influencing the Legislature’s views of charter funding. In discussing the plight of charters, Director CL asserted that there were forces within the NMPED and the LEFC that would like to take away the autonomy of charter schools and remarked:

I’m not convinced yet that there still isn’t a true desire and now they’re doing it mostly through money. The PED is driving that force along with the LEFC around inadequate funding for charters, thinking that we’re getting more than our fair share.

Director AL expressed concerns regarding recent Legislative funding initiatives, such as mandated increased teacher salaries. Director AL asserted that the new mandates are not being fully funded, but rather funds are being reallocated from other needed school programs to pay for the raises. Explaining his concerns, Director AL stated, “The common theme across the state is the Legislature thinks one thing about how they are funding schools and the reality on the ground is something else.” He went on to note that this is “the biggest challenge facing charters and traditionals across the state.” He expressed frustration with the Legislature, commenting “If you’re not going to fund it, don’t legislate it because we can
make do with money we have, but not with the demands that are in place, that are not funded.”

Directors AL and CL both expressed concerns regarding the impact of lack of funding on their schools. According to Director CL, “Money…constant looking for money. It’s an obsession because I can’t do things for kids that you want to do because it costs more than we have.” Director AL asserted that the Legislature’s failure to fund new mandates was adversely affecting the school A’s operating budget, explaining:

Every year it seems like, especially recently with the new administration- the democratic majority coming in – they’re saying they’re increasing funding but what they don’t talk about is that they are adding to one end of the rope but they’re cutting off at the other end of the rope. They’re cutting our grants that we were getting and then partially funding them on the other side and calling it an increase. And giving raises and not funding the benefits’ liabilities for that. So, if you talk to a legislator – I even talked to our local ones – they are so proud of themselves for what they’re doing but they’re hurting us every year, more and more. So, that’s the big challenge.

Teacher CT1 reiterated this view concerning lack of funding for Legislative mandates. Discussing newly mandated teacher raises, she stated, “The budget looks like they’re going to give the schools more money because of that whole thing of giving us raises, but they’re not giving the schools any money to pay for it.”

Director CL mentioned that she had been encouraging the members of the school’s Governance Council to become active legislative advocates for the school. Director CL felt that the school’s Governance Council had “an understand[ing]of the bigger picture of
government and that schools are political, and their money comes from politics, so they have
to stand up and speak up.”

Neither Director BL nor Teachers AT1, AT2 or CT2 referenced the LEFC or the state Legislature during their interviews.

*Summary of Regulation Autonomy.* My analysis and coding of the theme of Regulation Autonomy identified components encompassing several standards-based reforms and bureaucratic entities. The standards-based reforms components consisted of the NMTEACH, CCSS, and high-stakes assessment. The component of Bureaucratic Entities consisted of the local and state government entities that included the local school district, NMPED, PEC, CSD, and state Legislature/LEFC.

Summarizing the standards-based reform components, I found that some of the interview participants had a positive view of the content of the domains of the NMTEACH. However, interview participants expressed a negative viewpoint regarding the high-stakes aspect of the system, claiming it was “punitive.” Interview participants also expressed concerns with the high-stakes of the state assessment, citing the pressure and unfair consequences of school assessment results. However, the three case study schools did use the data derived from the state assessment to guide instruction combined with data from other interim assessment data.

In regard to the CCSS, the three case study schools all utilized the NMCCSS as the school’s structure for learning content and curriculum. Some of the participants expressed a positive view of the CCSS, while one participant voiced a preference for the previous state standards. One participant did not use the CCSS in his teaching subject area so had no opinion regarding the CCSS.
Interview participants expressed a negative opinion of the Bureaucratic Entities, claiming ineptness and inefficiency. Participants claimed that the entities caused disruptions to the schools through bureaucratic overreach and harassment, as well as lack of school funding.

**School Level Autonomy.** The middle circle of the interconnected conceptual framework (Figure 3) of charter school autonomy represents the element of School Level Autonomy. School Level Autonomy enables charter schools to create and implement unique missions and educational programs (Wohlstetter et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2018) and have the capacity to be innovative (Berends et al., 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). School Level Autonomy encompasses the distinctive dynamics of a school that includes opportunities for decision making by stakeholders at the school (Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). It involves the practice of local decision making (Sizer & Wood, 2008) as well as the commitment of stakeholders to a shared vision (Cannata, 2007).

As presented in Tables 4 and 5, Leader Interview Questions 10 and 11, and Teacher Interview Questions 11 and 12 from the Questionnaire Protocols (see Appendix B) were aligned to the element of School Level Autonomy. Through analyzing and coding interview participants’ responses to these questions and other questions on the questionnaires, I identified the theme of School Level Autonomy. In addition, I reviewed document artifacts, including school handbooks, policies and procedures, and school websites, extracting and coding references to the components of the School Level Autonomy Theme accordingly. Through this process of coding, I was able to identify several components that comprised the theme of School Level Autonomy. The identified components of the theme of School Level Autonomy are presented in Table 10 and include school mission and learning philosophy,
school governance, parental involvement, leadership practices, and democratic school practices (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Neeleman, 2019; Sizer, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015).

**Table 10**

*Components of School Level Autonomy Theme*

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*School Mission.* An important component that emerged in the School Level Autonomy theme was the unique mission and learning philosophy of the schools (Cannata, 2007; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Wright et al., 2018). The mission guides the school’s educational philosophy and pedagogy (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee, 2016). Each of the three case study charter schools have unique missions and implement unique educational programs. All participants discussed the mission and philosophy of their individual schools throughout the interviews.

Participants’ responses to Leader Interview Questions 2 and 3, and Teacher Interview Questions 2, 3, 8, and 10 (see Appendix B) were aligned to the School Mission and Learning Philosophy component for the theme of School Level Autonomy as presented in Tables 4 and
5. I analyzed and coded responses to these questions, in addition to responses to other questions from the interview protocols in which participants referenced the school’s mission and learning philosophy. I also analyzed and coded information that was collected from document artifacts.

   All the interview participants talked about their school’s mission in complimentary terms. The mission and philosophy provided the structure for what happened at the school and how decisions were made (Cannata, 2007). Describing her responsibilities, Teacher CT1 stated, “I have to work within this framework and uphold the mission and uphold the emphasis on academics and the high achieving.” Teacher CT1 also commented that the school mission “doesn’t so much shape as much as it felt like a good fit for me because it allowed me to teach to the heart, first; to make time for relationship building; and to deal with relationships within a class.”

   The three directors talked at length about their school’s mission and unique approach to learning and the school’s instructional program. Each gave examples of how the mission is implemented within the school’s academic program.

   According to the school’s website, a focus of the mission of School A is “to deliver a college readiness curriculum to students from the [town] community resulting in high levels of academic achievement for all students.” The vision of the school as stated on the school’s website is “to be a community that loves to live, learn, and launch successful students into the world.” Director AL described the school learning philosophy as “academic focus and learning as a process of inquiry.” This was reiterated by Teachers AT1 and AT2, with Teacher AT2 describing the mission as a “high school preparatory focus and therefore college focus.”
Director AL discussed maintaining the school’s “academic mission” as one of his responsibilities. Commenting on the school’s mission, he stated “We’re academic; I know that there are a lot of different ways to have a mission out there.” He described several approaches and tools that are used for maintaining the “inquiry-based approach” such as “taking a standard or an objective in a curriculum, turn it into a high-level question, then that’s what drives the teaching…Ideally, it’s a question that the students already have asked.”

The mission and learning philosophy of School B is based on an instructional model utilizing an Integrated Arts approach. The school’s handbook states the mission is to “provide K-8 students in the [school district] with the opportunity to reach their maximum potential through a standards-based, multicultural, thematic, and arts-integrated curriculum.” Director BL was enthusiastic about the integrated arts approach at his school. He discussed how he had personally taught with this approach and gave examples of how the approach is utilized within the instructional program at School B. In describing the approach, he stated “How are the kids learning something if they’re having fun and doing these things? Well, they’re engaged; we’re doing all the things that are necessary but we’re finding an engaging way to make sure that they are receiving the curriculum.”

The mission of School C briefly stated in the school’s handbook is “to develop the academic potential and emotional intelligence of each learner.” The focus of School C, according to Director CL is to “balance emotional development with academics.” Director CL talked about the school’s mission being the “overarching premise” and that “the means and methods keep evolving as we learn more.” Director CL further explained:

My latest thing right now is engagement strategies for teachers not only to facilitate good instruction and discussion amongst students but that you take the time for that
step for kids saying what they heard other kids say and active listening becoming part of the discussion. That’s the piece that we are getting, that granular and fine-tuned at this point—of not only what models and strategies cause kids to have experiences that generate learning…but keeping a kid actively engaged through a whole work session is intense and we have to have some strategies so we’re on to this thing called ’Talk Moves’, that I just found. Teachers learning to create active facilitation and partnerships as well as looking at the culturally and linguistic response to instruction components.

Teacher CT2 described the mission of School C as “teaching to the whole child with anchoring in social-emotional learning for the student” and commented on the inclusion or “seal of approval within our mission that the school make time for EQ [Emotional Intelligence], so that’s nice.” Further discussing School C, Teacher CT2 noted:

There’s a lot of mutual trust and appreciation. We don’t have a lot of movement of staff…but there’s a lot of continuity of people who have been working together.

There are three people here who were here 15 years ago when I started…There’s a lot of continuity and a lot of shared mission.

Discussing the importance of the school’s mission, Teacher CT2 commented:

Our director talks about her north star, trying to keep her eye on the north star as a school; what really matters. And it really is that it’s the whole child; it’s not just words. It’s what guides us on decision making on every level. Classroom management, sure; instructional strategies, yes; curriculum, yes; staffing, everything, scheduling. I think there is a real understanding of integrity, really just all the way through, starting super solidly with our director and among everyone.
Both Director AL and Director CL discussed the interactive role of the school mission in setting policy. As Director CL asserted:

I feel that good policy leads all of us well and policy needs to be based on the mission and philosophy of the school which means that punishment can’t lead our school as far as how make decisions about kids. It needs to always be about the learning model.

**School Governance.** School Governance is another component of the School Level Autonomy Theme. School Governance for all three case study schools consists of governing councils or “boards” that oversee the schools and set policy. Charter schools are public entities and the Governance Councils give school stakeholders an opportunity to participate in the local decision making at the school (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Neeleman, 2019; Sizer & Wood, 2008).

Participants’ responses to Leader Interview Question 11 and Teacher Interview Question 12 on the questionnaires (see Appendix B) were aligned to the component School Governance of the theme School Level Autonomy, as presented in Tables 4 and 5. I analyzed and coded responses to these questions, in addition to responses to other questions in which participants referenced the school’s governing structure. I also analyzed and coded information collected from reviews of document artifacts referencing School Governance.

Participants referred to the School Governance component in several ways, often interchangeably, using the terms: Governance Council, Governing Council, Governing Board, Board, or the Council. The New Mexico Education statutes require that a charter school be overseen by a governing board (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020a). According to the CSD website, the roles and responsibilities of charter school boards, as referenced from state regulations, are:
Charter school governing bodies uphold the vision of its charter school through effective governance. Governing bodies perform various duties including ethical and financial oversight, establishment of, review, and revision of broad organizational policies, employ and oversee the school’s head administrator, and ensure and be accountable for the academic, financial, and organizational performance of the school. (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020a, para. 1)

All three directors of the case study schools detailed the same roles and responsibilities of their school’s Governance Councils - policy, finance, and hiring or firing the administrator. In addition to policy, Director BL described the roles of the school’s Governing Council as to “make sure I’m not stealing money and that I am following our mission statement and the things that are in the mission statement.” Director AL described School A’s Governing Council, stating:

They’re well aware of their role – policy, finance, hiring and firing me. There’s not a lot of cross over...they’re also looking at school data and what priorities I set and how we’re going about meeting those – what are some simple matrixes, what are the goals, where are we going, the big picture.

On School C’s website, a list of the roles and responsibilities of the school’s Governance Council are stated as:

Include[d] but are not limited to; Finance Monitor: fiscal solvency and management, approve budgets/spending and fiscal policies; Educational Program: monitor student performance, ensure curriculum aligns with mission; Personnel: hire/fire/evaluate Director; approve personnel policies; [and] Facilities: enter into financing and building contracts; approve construction and remodeling of facilities.
Interview participants spoke positively about their school’s Governance Council. In describing the influence of the school’s Governance Council on School C’s decision making, Teacher CT1 stated “I would feel like the board is probably trying to help me do my job as best they can.”

School A has nine members on the Governing Council, six parents, one community member-at-large, and two faculty members. According to the school’s website, “Members serve two-year terms and are elected by vote of parents and teachers.” Director AL explained that the two faculty council members were able to vote except on items with conflict of interest issues, such as budget. Teacher AT2, one of the faculty members serving on the Governing Council of School A, commented, “It’s worked out pretty well [because] we don’t have a union for representation and it does give the rest of the Council an insight on what the teachers are going through.”

School B has a five-member appointed Governing Council with one member being a “non-voting” faculty member. Regarding the school’s Governance Council, the website of School B states:

[The] Governing Council consists of five community volunteers. Their responsibility is that of a regular school board. They are responsible for the school’s financial health, for monitoring student achievement, and for insuring that the school is fulfilling the mission of the charter.

Director BL, discussing the responsibilities of the Governing Council for evaluating him, cited the successes of the school which included the consistent high student achievement and having recently moved into a permanent facility, and commented “I think that they went, ‘OK, we’re just going to let you do your thing.’”
School C has an appointed seven-member Governance Council. According to the school’s website:

Our Governance Council serves as the board of directors and is governed in its operations and its action by its approved bylaws of the Charter School, which are consistent with the terms of the charter, the Charter Schools Act, and all other applicable laws. The Governance Council has final authority for all aspects of the school’s operation and educational program.

In discussing the Governance Council at School C, Director CL talked about the “accountability” of the Council, not only for the school’s finance but also the “need to safeguard” the school’s mission and goals. Director CL additionally discussed the responsibility of the Governance Council for legislative advocacy for the protection of charter school funding and other issues.

Teacher CT1 stated that she periodically attended Council meetings and gave a “leadership team report” referring to it as a “teacher voice” to “present what is happening in our classrooms.” The purpose of this was to provide a “report on the culture or temperature reading of the school” and report on “the things going on at the school.” Teacher CT1 noted that although she did have this contact with the Council, she felt that she had “little information and communication about their decisions.”

Teacher CT2 had limited interaction with the school’s Governance Council. Like Teacher CT1, he described an annual presentation he made to the Council, stating:

We basically present here is how we are doing on an annual basis. I’ll give them the data on this what we’re doing; this is the analysis of the data and these are our
strengths, this is our progress, this is where we would like to get, these are challenges. I’ll present to them and they’ll sign off on our [program name].

When discussing the school’s Governance Council, Teacher CT2 was very positive and stated:

My understanding is they’re really a useful sounding board for the director and helping to determine policy. They are also a team to which she can delegate some tasks. It’s a group think or it’s an opportunity to get many minds together to make some really- when there are tough decisions to make in particular; things like when there are curriculum decisions, when there are staffing challenges, like how are we going to do this budgetary issue…So, I’m not involved with them very much, but I know that they are involved when there are tough things to figure out – big decisions. Just the way that our director talks about her interactions with them, it’s clear that she has people who are really able to help with the tough decisions in particular.

Teacher AT1, interviewed after the COVID-19 pandemic, had a differing opinion about the Governance Council at School A, stating “So, in general, up until now I would say, yes, they do good for the school.” Teacher AT1 stated that she served on the school’s “reentry committee” and went on to explain:

Just recently we had a very big vote and a very long meeting on whether we were going to do what the district decided to come back or stay remote...And I guess it got to be a heated, long discussion. They decided to stay with the district, but they emphatically stated that we’re coming back January 19th, no matter what, unless the Governor changes things. We will be live, in school, even if the district’s not. I was a little insulted by that. So, the positivity rate can go up and you don’t really care about
my health and well-being…So, I think there was some voting that went on with parents saying, ‘I can’t do this at home anymore. I need my kid to come back to school.’ Well, that’s great for you, but what about all the people’s lives you are putting at risk. Their decisions do affect us, and I would say in general I think they’ve always been very good and very fair; this is the one that kind of caught me by surprise. ‘You’re coming back whether you like it or not’ without asking the teachers really how they felt.

*Parent Involvement.* Another component of the School Level Autonomy theme was the level and quality of parent involvement in the decision making at the schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Neeleman, 2019). Parent Involvement at the case study schools consisted of parents serving as members of the school’s Governance Council and parent volunteering and participation in their child’s education.

The Leader and Teacher Interview Questionnaires (see Appendix B) did not have specifically aligned questions to the component of Parent Involvement. So, I analyzed and coded responses to Leader Interview Questions 10 and 11, and Teacher Interview Questions 11 and 12, which were aligned to the theme School Level Autonomy, together with responses to other questions in which participants referred to parents of the school. I also analyzed and coded information collected from reviews of document artifacts that referenced parent involvement in the case study school.

All case study schools had parents serving as members on their Governance Councils, with parents and staff at School A also voting to elect the Governance Council members.
It was apparent from my review of the interviews and document artifacts that School C did the most to solicit parent involvement in the school. Director C described the role of parents and the process of how School C makes the “bigger decisions” by “involv[ing] parents or gather[ing] parent data in focus groups.” In describing an example of this, she detailed the process that School C followed to make the decision to add more grades levels, involving both staff and parents in “appreciative inquiry” and “focus groups”.

On School C’s website, it states “We strive to promote the love of learning through family and community partnerships…through the expectation of parent volunteerism and activism in their school [and the] development of relationship with parents.” The school makes these “parent statements” on the website:

[School name] believes a partnership is formed with the parents in the education of the student. The parents are a great resource for knowing and understanding the student. Parental support and collaboration is an essential ingredient for student success…at [school name] parent/guardian volunteers are an essential resource. One of the exciting aspects about the ‘charter movement’ is that these schools are truly community schools; governed and operated by the staff, parent body, and community members. [School name] is ‘our’ school and needs the support and commitment of all to operate successfully.

In order to solicit family involvement in the school, School C has a “Parents as Partners Involvement Process”, described in the school handbook as:

At the onset of each school year every family is required to complete the ‘Parents as Partners’ volunteerism form. [School name] is a community-based school and it relies on each family to make a contribution to support our community. The Parents as
Partners form is our formal method for making requests for volunteerism from our parent community. Getting involved in your child’s school models that you value your school community and provides much needed support for the school, the faculty, and the students.

According to the School A’s website information, six parents serve as members of the school’s Governance Council. Director AL spoke about the parents that were on the Governing Council, commenting “They tend to be the more active parents. You see them at the volunteer calls.”

Teacher AT1 discussed having a faculty representative on a parent organization of School A, called “Friends” and also mentioned serving on a “Family Support Team” recently started at the school “to help families navigate the on-line learning.” Discussing differences between traditional public schools and charter schools, Teacher AT2 mentioned that “The school is more approachable for parents, I believe as far a communication is concerned.”

Director BL only mentioned parents in a few responses. Parents serve as members of School B’s Governance Council. Director BL maintained that his biggest challenge was communicating with parents and staff, stating “The big thing is trying to make sure that we are on top of concerns the parents have, being able to address them in as real time as we can.”

**Leadership Practices.** Leadership practices are another component of the School Level Autonomy Theme (Steinberg, 2015; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Leadership practices include how school leaders make decisions and supervise staff. Leadership practices can be centralized, with administrators or higher-ups making all the decisions at the school or be
decentralized, with administrators including or sharing school decision making with stakeholders (Gawlik, 2008).

For the component of Leadership Practices, I analyzed and coded Questions 4, 5 and 9 on the Leader Interview Questionnaire (see Appendix B) aligned to Roles and Responsibilities, presented in Table 4. I also analyzed and coded participants responses to other questions on both the Leader and Teacher Questionnaires (see Appendix B) that related to the practices of the three case study school directors for this component.

The case study school directors revealed much information about their leadership practices. All three directors described similar leadership practices and approaches, using the word “consensus” when discussing their role in decision making at the school. The three directors all utilized a “shared” or “distributed” leadership approach. Discussing how decisions are made at School C, Director CL said, “I use consensus quite a bit. It makes things take longer but it’s worth it because they are more in support.” Director AL described consensus decision making at his school, stating “There’s a lot of talking back and forth, coming to consensus. Out-voting someone is a terrible way to make decisions because it short circuits communication and trust.”

It was clear from all three directors, that within the role of leader, they were responsible for keeping the school focused on the mission as well as creating opportunities for stakeholders to participate in decision making at the school. In describing her roles and responsibilities, Director CL stated:

It’s like an air traffic controller. You have to be above it all and be ahead of the fray and know the pacing of how things happen to make a year come together. You have
to be the keeper of the vision of the school and to me, I have to maintain 100% presence to the actions of the day- the students, the teachers, the parents.

When describing his roles and responsibilities, Director BL stated he thought his approach was “very non-traditional” and described his role “as making sure my staff feel safe and comfortable [and] that they feel that their voices are heard.” He further commented:

I try to give opportunities for teachers and for staff to discuss an issue. If it’s things that have to be made immediately, I make those decisions and ask for forgiveness afterwards. I try to give staff as much as possible. I’m lucky because [teacher name] is the founder of the school. She’s here, she teaches here, so anytime that I have a big decision to make, I try to at least bring her in to the decision because she has a big influence on the school. So, I get her buy-in; if I get her buy-in, I get everybody else’s buy-in. I try to get the power brokers. What do I need to make sure that they are being taken care of?

Describing his role as leader, Director AL asserted, “I think the biggest expectation of me is that I just communicate about what I do, in terms of my Governing Council and teachers. People just don’t like surprises; tell them what you’re doing and why you’re doing it.” Explaining his approach, he stated, “I try not to say no, first; if I have to say no, I’m going to explain why. I really see how I cannot say no first; how I can say yes.” Describing decision making at the School A, he stated:

The organizational chart for that would be a lot of lines crossing over because there really is this- you get your mandate to lead by your skill set and by your work. So, if someone is very active in a particular aspect of the school, and has some expertise,
I’m more likely to go with what they want to do than just arbitrarily deciding that I know better.

Teacher AT2 commented that at School A “there is less top-down directive[s]” indicating that he found the shared decision making “a breath of fresh air.” He discussed the ways in which Director AL solicits input and allows staff to vote on some issues.

Director CL described her approach to leadership stating, “I use a variety of models but I’m always pretty up front.” She further explained:

The things that we all have to do – day in, day out; we all have to live with that. So, I try to gather data from stake holders and then a group of us will decide or I’ll bring it forward to the staff and say, ‘Do we need to take this further?’”

In validation of Director CL’s leadership approach, Teacher CT2 stated:

The director’s been so responsive in hearing that as we grew. There were some growing pains in there for sure. We had to change the way we operated; change the way we think. She was really responsive to needing to adapt based on growth and what was going to work…This year in particular she’s got a real regular system set up for bi-weekly meetings that include reflection on teaching – what’s working, what’s not working, reflection on student progress, again what’s working, what’s not working, and how we can keep ourselves focused on leading to student success.

All three directors mentioned that some decisions are administrative. Director CL asserted, “So, there are those cut and dry decisions and usually they do involve liability, safety and protection.” Director AL, in discussing how he makes administrative decisions, stated “I’m clear on when I just need to make a decision…if it’s a legal question, especially legal, that’s a big one or finance…Then it’s my job to carry it out.” He also stated that he is
responsible for implementing policy, explaining “I don’t have wiggle room on policy because the Council sets that, and I need to carry it out. If I think policy needs to be changed, I’ll propose that.” He further elaborated on this topic, stating:

So, law, finance, policy – that’s me and I know how make a decision but if I can put a group together to answer a question on their own and make a decision, then that is better. Because it’s the process that gets the buy-in to it.

Democratic School Practices. The final component of the School Level Autonomy theme is Democratic School Practices, the decentralized structures and practices that allow for shared decision making by stakeholders of the school (Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Charter schools are expected to be more democratic and decentralized (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). This component interconnects with other components of the School Autonomy theme of School Governance and Leadership Practices (Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

Responses to Leader Interview Questions 10 and 11, and Teacher Interview Questions 11 and 12, (see Appendix B) are aligned to the theme School Level Autonomy as presented in Tables 4 and 5. I analyzed and coded responses to these aligned questions together with responses to other questions of the interview protocol in which participants referred to democratic practices of the school. I also analyzed and coded information collected from review of document artifacts referencing democratic school practices.

All three case study schools had democratic school structures and practices in place that were described and discussed by all of the interview participants. These practices were very important to the participants and were described as “positive” aspects of the school. Many of the practices interconnected with the School Level Autonomy components of
School Governance and Leadership Practices. Examples of Democratic School Practices of the case study schools included leadership teams, teacher and parent committees, data teams, and an elected Governance Council, with faculty serving as members of the Council.

Director AL described a number of democratic practices implemented at School A. These practices included: Governance Council elected by parents and staff, with two faculty members also serving as voting members of the council; teacher-led data teams; school committees consisting of teachers and parents, which included a teacher-led policy committee. Describing the influence of one of the school’s committee, Director AL stated “Budget is set by a committee and then it’s my job to carry it out so there isn’t a lot of negotiating about, ‘Are we going to do this thing; is it in the budget? Do we have the money?’”

Director AL stated, “We still have teachers who come here from the district and take the pay cut because they hear from other teachers what it’s like to work here. You’re part of the leadership and you’re heard.” Describing how the decision making process works, he explained:

So, people are problem solvers here. They’re willing to step outside their assigned duties; able to talk intelligently and productively…[and] not end up in a conflict; able to work around and solve problems and make people be heard. That’s all just a part of high functioning adults in the building.

Both Teachers AT1 and AT2 described other roles aside from their teaching responsibilities at School A. Teacher AT1 served on various committees and also helped mentor new teachers, while Teacher AT2 considered himself a “senior teacher” at the school.
and served as a faculty member on the school’s Governing Council. Describing this process from a teacher’s perspective of School A, Teacher AT2 stated:

There will be a committee—teachers, parents, and other staff [that] work on the school safety policy, fire drill, school evacuation, all that kind of thing. They’ll come up with a policy; they’ll share it with the director and the director will help look at it together and then they’ll present it to the rest of the staff…If it’s a faculty meeting where we’re talking about what kind of school policies we are going to have as far as talking to parents or playground policies, or anything; it’s usually fairly Socratic when it comes down to it. Then if it needs the director’s stamp of approval, he’ll weigh in and say, ‘Well, I really liked all of your ideas. I think we should do this.’ Then we’ll vote on it and say, ‘Ok, it sounds great’, and we’ll go from there.

As an example, Teacher AT2 described how School A makes curriculum decisions, stating:

Once we come up with a curriculum that we want to use…generally the director is open to what we want. It’s not top-down driven ideology. He usually comes to the teachers, and then the director, whether it’s [director’s name] or past directors, they usually listen to what our needs are and they help us find curriculum or they’ll let us do it and they’ll review the curriculum to make sure that it really is aligned with the goals of the school and our mission statement.

School B had democratic practices that included teacher-led data teams, which helped set learning targets and parent and non-voting faculty representatives on the school’s Governance Council. Director BL expressed his belief in “freedom” and inclusion for school-wide decision making, stating, “I think that is what is important to me, to show that we’re all
in this together; this is not a glamorous job. There is no position that is needed more than another.”

The democratic practices of School C included a faculty leadership team, that helps the director implement changes, and represents staff, teacher, and parent school committees along with parent representation on the Governance Council. Teacher CT1 was very proud to be asked to serve on the leadership team and explained how the school’s leadership team functioned, stating:

We have to meet once a month with our director and then we work with our grade bands, on professional development stuff or just general systems-wide initiatives that are going on that she needs. Sometimes she can just talk to us and get all the information that she wants to get out. We talk to our teachers. So, I feel like the communication is better than it used to be for sure and we’re able to fix issues or come up with suggestions at that level where it never even needs to go that far. I think that’s important.

Teacher CT1 explained how this leadership structure has helped school C, stating:

I think things do get addressed now and we set up committees. I think the staff feels like things are- channel of communication works better; they don’t have to set up an appointment with her directly. They can come talk to their team leader and that team leader will either try and solve the problem with them there or if it needs to be passed on, we do; we do on their behalf.

Director CL gave several examples of democratic practices used at School C in order to make school-wide decisions. One example she gave was a recent process used by the school to make a decision for switching to a new interim assessment. Director CL explained:
I looked at it first with a teacher who was interested in it. Then I took it to my leadership team. They liked it. Then we provided a webinar for as many teachers that wanted to learn about it. And then it became a consensus decision.

Teacher CT2 was very positive about School C’s democratic practices, stating: I would describe the process as holistic, as inclusive; it’s based on curiosity and care.

I think there is a real openness – a real commitment to doing what’s best for the students in every case and curiosity about what is best for the kid; some openness there. And commitment to that foundation of the whole child.

**Summary of School Level Autonomy.** Through analysis and coding of information compiled through interviews and reviews of document artifacts, I identified five components that comprised the theme of School Autonomy. The theme components I identified and extracted from the data were School Mission, School Governance, Parent Involvement, Leadership Practices, and Democratic School Practices.

In summary, the interview participants had a positive view of the components comprising the theme of the School Level Autonomy. The directors of Schools A, B, and C and teachers from Schools A and C were dedicated to the mission and learning philosophy of their schools. Interview participants from all the case study schools indicated that their school’s mission served to guide school level and classroom decision making. In order to implement the mission, the interview participants conveyed that there were practices and structures in place to provide opportunity for shared decision making at the schools. All three case study school directors utilized a “shared” or “distributed” leadership approach to school management and decision making. By using this approach, the directors were able to guide
the schools to implement other opportunities for stakeholder groups to participate in school-wide decision making.

For the component of Parent Involvement, although all three case study schools involved parents in some part of school decision making, School C did the most to solicit parent participation in the processes.

The Governance Councils of the three case study schools adhered to mandated boundaries for decision making, with Councils’ decisions mainly entailing policy, finance, and hiring/firing the school administrator. The interview participants viewed the Governance Councils as supportive to the school missions.

The three case study schools utilized a number of democratic school practices that provided opportunities for stakeholders, mainly teachers and parents to participate in school decision making.

**Teacher Autonomy.** Teacher autonomy is the third element of autonomy and the inner circle in the conceptual Framework of Charter School Autonomy, presented in Figure 3. Teacher autonomy is based on the premise that teachers are the decision-makers in their classrooms (Mavrogordata, 2019; Oberfield, 2016). Through giving teachers autonomy, schools strengthen the implementation of the school mission and increase student success (Honig, 2009).

The theme of Teacher Autonomy was extracted and coded from the data collected through interviews and reviews of document artifacts. Question 10 on the Leader Interview Questionnaire and Questions 4, 6, 7, and 13 on the Teacher Interview Questionnaire (see Appendix B) were aligned with the element of Teacher Autonomy as presented in Tables 4 and 5. In addition to these questions, I also analyzed and coded interview participants’
Based on my analysis and coding of the theme of Teacher Autonomy, I did not discover any smaller components that comprised the theme.

It was evident in all three case study schools that teachers were granted autonomy in classroom and instructional decision making. Both director and teacher interview participants discussed the freedoms given to teachers for classroom decision making. Director AL stated, “When it comes to things that are squarely in the realm of the classroom, it’s better that the teachers make those decisions.”

Discussing teacher decision-making, Director BL stated:

My job is giving teachers as much freedom as I possibly can and still have them be held accountable… You have to have confidence in the staff that you have hired and allow them the curtesy of being treated as professionals. And if they’re not, hold them accountable… It’s autonomy across the board. Staff has autonomy to do what they need to do.

Regarding teacher autonomy at School B, Director BL further stated, “They have the ability to utilize as much creativity as they can into their classes. I often tell staff that I am open to everything and anything- any idea that they have, anything they want to do.” Giving an example of his approach to instructional supervision, he stated:

I do not require teachers to give me lesson plans on a weekly basis that I’m supposed to look over and see that they do it with fidelity. Instead I transfer that to- teachers have to keep a blog and they have to submit pictures of activities that they are doing during the week to our Facebook coordinator- the person that does Facebook. The
reason why I do those two things— if all you see is kids working on a worksheet— that’s a really bad thing for an integrated school. So, I’m always encouraging staff to figure out something that you’re doing during the week, that looks like a cool thing; you’re going to share it with the community. It’s been very effective for our scores…My approach is always, ‘I don’t care if you do what I say, but you have to do something different than what you’re doing now.’

Both Teachers AT1 and AT2 from School A expressed they had autonomy to make instructional decisions. Teacher AT1 commented “So, in my case, being able to teach…what I want and how I want. Now of course, I’m expected to teach the standards, but I get to do it in a way that works for me.” She further elaborated, stating:

If it’s teaching in your classroom, I mean full autonomy…You just do whatever you want, however you want. Nobody really checks up on you. At the end of the year, your kids all make great progress. Everybody’s happy…and I love that! I love letting me do things the way I want to do it. I mean, eventually I’m going to give them all the standards. They’re going to be exposed to everything, but I get to teach it with the material I find interesting so that I’m excited about teaching, because if I’m not excited about it, then they’re certainly not going to be excited by it. So, I love the fact that I can pick and choose the stories and the units.

Describing his classroom autonomy, Teacher AT2 stated:

I do have autonomy as the [grade level] and [subject] teacher…in general since I’m the only one teaching in this position in my department, I do a lot of research on my own to see what trends there are in education for my age groups and I usually look at those in order to try to keep my curriculum fresh and engaging…I pretty much call
the shots in the classroom and only have to worry about guidelines as far as state standards and past results or past experience working with my director.

Both Teacher CT1 and Teacher CT2 felt they had autonomy in their classrooms at School C. CT1 claimed she had a “teacher voice” and flexibility in her instruction. Discussing classroom decision making, Teacher CT1 stated she had:

freedom to make decisions- curricular or otherwise- how I’m going to compose the year, compose my year…But I have, I feel like, great autonomy to do it the way I think it’s going to be successful for the kids…I teach it, how do I respond to the students, how do I hold the students accountable, how do I assess them. The assessments aren’t necessarily done but in terms of how am I going to hit that target? How am I going to address that standard? How am I going to weave it all into these projects that I love to do? That’s the autonomy I have.

Teacher CT1 discussed how the director allows teachers at School C to be decision makers in their classrooms, explaining:

What’s nice is my director is always trying to push us to be different, to tweak our own teaching- how do you deliver it, how are you engaging the kids, how are you hitting all these different modalities. She’s encouraging us to read or giving us PD’s on different things, so I feel like I have a wealth of resources.

Teacher CT1 noted that her classroom decision making was limited by having to align instruction and curriculum to the CCSS but that she did have decision making for how to teach the content, explaining:

I have autonomy within a framework. I just can’t teach anything I want to teach. I need to make sure that it’s aligned with the Common Core Standards and the NGSS;
that any good teacher would do. But I have autonomy in how do I teach that, how long I teach it, how short.

Teacher CT1 also noted that there was also some flexibility at School C on the content taught using the CCSS framework, stating:

But if it was something that was really not working for me or I saw a gap, I could go and talk to my director and say, ‘Here’s what I’d like to do. Here it is aligned to what I’m supposed to be doing but this is the different topic or here’s how I’d like to teach it.’ I’ve always felt that she’s been very receptive to how I wanted to pull it off.

Teacher CT1 explained that although she makes her own classroom decisions, she is also duty-bound to the other teachers in the school that often make decisions together as group, stating:

I can’t just teach whatever I want; shut my door and say this is what I’m doing. I would inherit a curriculum matrix and be expected to teach; use the math curriculum, use what materials are for reading and writing.

Teacher CT2 described similar autonomy for making classroom and instructional decisions at School C, asserting:

Me as a teacher, I get autonomy; I’m glad you’re asking about that. That means so much to me as a teacher and look what it’s leading to- fantastic results, for kids, feeling good, learning well; for me as a teacher- feeling good, learning, right?

Based on the subject area he taught, Teacher CT2 did not use the CCSS which he felt gave him more flexibility and autonomy, stating “We are really blessed in the [subject] program with a great deal of autonomy with that. It feels great as a teacher to have the
opportunity and responsibility to determine how are we going to meet the goals.” He
described how the content and curriculum in his subject area is determined, stating:

The curriculum is defined by me in consultation with our director and my colleague
in the [subject] department. As the senior member and the one with the applied
linguistics background, I’m sort of the lead with that. We have regular meetings with
my colleague. We’ve got a fantastic relationship and we keep on point what we’re
aiming for as far as to really guide proficiency.

Teacher CT2 described how important teacher autonomy is to him, stating “It really is
critical in feeling good because I’m not a ‘here’s the book; here’s the plan; do the plan’ sort
of a person. I think for myself. I’m constantly reinventing stuff.”

**Summary of Teacher Autonomy.** Unlike the themes of Regulation Autonomy and
School Level Autonomy, I did not discover any components that could be isolated and
extracted from the theme of Teacher Autonomy. Based on the compiled information, teachers
within the three case study schools had a high level of Teacher Autonomy. Statements from
the three school directors indicated their attitudes and practices permitted teachers to be the
main decision makers in their classrooms. This was verified for Schools A and C by
statements from the teacher interview participants.

Teacher interview participants made affirmative statements regarding having the
freedom and autonomy to make classroom decisions in a variety of areas at their schools.
Some aspects of Teacher Autonomy were limited due to the impositions that some of the
standards-based reforms forced on the classrooms and teachers. One example of this
interference in Teacher Autonomy is the CCSS which dictates the content and pacing of
classroom instruction.
**Innovation and Autonomy.** One of the key concepts of charter school theory is the interconnection between school autonomy and innovation (Berends et al., 2019). Having autonomy facilitates the creation and implementation of innovative practices of charter schools seeking to enhance student learning and improve education in general (Gawlik, 2018; Miron, 2017). Innovation should be the guiding principle in charter school missions and visions (Oberfield, 2016). Autonomy, an essential characteristic of charter schools (Wohlstetter et al., 2015) is multidimensional and closely related to increased student achievement (Cheng et al., 2016). Charter school autonomy enables schools to develop innovative practices (Foreman & Maranto, 2018) and create alternatives to traditional educational systems (Honig, 2009).

I discovered this theme within the data compiled through the director and teacher interviews and reviews of document artifacts. The theme of Innovation and Autonomy is comprised of the two components of innovation and autonomy. As presented in Tables 4 and 5, Question 14 on the Leader Interview Questionnaire and Question 13 on the Teacher Interview Questionnaire are aligned with Autonomy. I conducted an analysis and coding of interview participants’ responses to these questions along with responses to other questions of the interview protocol in which participants referenced autonomy or innovation. The two concepts were repeatedly interconnected in the responses of the interview participants as posited in school charter theory (Berends et al., 2019). I combined the two concepts into one theme after identifying the connections made by the interview participants, labeling the theme Innovation and Autonomy (Berends et al., 2019; Gawlik, 2018; Miron, 2017).

Analysis also shows the two components of the theme of innovation and autonomy are interconnected with the other identified themes and components of Regulation
Autonomy, School Level Autonomy, and Teacher Autonomy. Interview participants used the term “autonomy” when discussing matters within the contexts of the three elements of the conceptual framework of autonomy, presented in Table 3. An example of this interconnection is the lack of school innovation due to lack of school funding, which is connected to the component of bureaucratic entities (local school district and state Legislature/LEFC) of Regulation Autonomy.

Defining autonomy, as asked in Question 8 of the Teacher Interview Questionnaire (see Appendix B), Teacher AT1 stated “being able to do what you want.” Teacher AT2 defined it as “the ability to make decisions based on one’s own judgment and experience and if necessary, ask for peer review but don’t have to necessarily ask for peer review to make decisions.” Both Teachers AT1 and AT2 gave several examples of innovative instructional and curricular activities that they had used in their classrooms.

Teachers CT1 and CT2 gave similar responses to Question 8. Teacher CT2 described autonomy as “self-direction”, stating:

It’s the opportunity to think for yourself; to evaluate your individual situation and decide what are your strengths and challenges and how you are going to meet them. Autonomy is the opposite of authority; not exactly. It’s the opposite of direction from above; it’s the opportunity and responsibility to determine how you’re going to address your challenges.

Teacher CT1 described autonomy as “being able to make my own decisions; that maybe my superiors will trust my professional opinion on things. They are not constantly second guessing my opinion. It’s autonomy to be able to work, at least as how I see it in the school.”
All the directors claimed their schools had some autonomy and were innovative. Director BL asserted that School B had “autonomy across the board.” Both Directors AL and CL asserted that autonomy is the opposite of “a one-size fits all” model of accountability. Explaining her concept of applied autonomy at School C, Director CL stated:

Autonomy is the standards of performance and getting kids to a place, not necessarily by being graded on the test, but that here’s what students have to achieve, here’s what teachers have to have in certification to be allowed to be qualified to do their job. Those are sort of the skeleton framework. How we go about achieving our path to get there, is the autonomy piece.

The three case study schools all have innovative structures and practices that are continually evolving. All of interview participants described numerous innovations implemented at their schools and claimed the unique structures and practices led to increased school efficacy and improvement or simply stated, school success. The examples provided by the participants of these innovations included instructional practices, integration of social emotional programs, and intervention strategies.

Each of the case study schools have also created unique structures of decentralized school practices that are innovative. Examples of these practices include School C’s leadership team, School A’s teacher-led committees, and school faculty members serving on School A’s and School B’s Governing Councils. Comparing traditional schools with charter schools, Director AL stated, “Charters were supposed to innovate, but centralized control doesn’t allow for that innovation.”

Director CL, commenting on her view of the role of charter school innovation in facilitating improved education, stated:
Charters get to be little tugboats that say, ‘Education really needs to move a little over here and we’re willing to go out on a limb and pilot this and try it out. We’re going to do that and show you the effectiveness of our model and if it doesn’t work fully, even while we’re in it, we’ll work on tweaking it so that it remains true to its purpose which was- we have this target and we choose a methodology to get there.’

The instructional program elements of the three case study schools were grounded in the schools’ unique missions and learning philosophies. Within the framework of a unique school mission, the three schools created and implemented curricular and instructional innovations. Director CL, after describing several instructional innovations of School C, remarked:

As children change because of the environment that our world is, and their attention span and exposures [change], we have to keep evolving what we do. We can’t keep the same. The things that stay the same is that children still develop, and their brains develop in a similar way…So, bringing them back to being children and having an exploration and experience that then leads to understanding still is the core.

Discussing program and curricular innovations created and implemented at School C, Teacher CT2 commented, “Finding better ways to do things and ideally, that’s the ‘can’. The ‘should’, I think, is sharing them back because some of the innovations that make us succeed, are scalable; is broadly applicable.”

An interesting type of innovation implemented by all three case study schools, was the creation of tools to help navigate and utilize the NMTEACH. Examples of these innovative tools include web linked lesson plan templates, created by Director AL; teacher blogs for lesson plan documentation utilized by Director BL; and Walk Through “Look Fors”
lists created by Director CL. The three directors worked to connect the requirements and content of the NMTEACH to their school’s unique mission and learning philosophy. These innovations were ongoing and part of the schools’ operations.

The three directors of the case study schools claimed the lack of autonomy, specifically Regulation Autonomy was an issue for the schools. An example of this assertion, given by both Directors AL and CL, regarded the lack of funding, which was impacting their school’s ability to meet students’ programming needs and create unique educational services. On this issue, Director CL asserted “The limited amount of funding limits your innovation ability.”

Director AL also discussed the high level of regulatory oversight from the NMPED that interfered with School A’s opportunities to create unique “solutions” that are “right for our school” in addressing issues and problems. Director CL expressed that the NMPED has “a desire to create a one-size fits all model still more than allowing for innovation.”

Director BL described numerous issues with the overreaching and unfair demands placed on School B by the NMPED, PEC, and CSD. He commented, “That’s where I have my difficulties as far as autonomy. I just try to get those check markers happy. They go on their way; they leave us the hell alone and we go from there.” However, despite these issues with the bureaucratic entities, he stated “Yeah, I think we have far more autonomy here as a state charter than we would in the public school system.” Director CL commented on the importance of autonomy for School C and the fear of the PED “taking” away our autonomy”, asserting, “I’m not convinced yet that there still isn’t a true desire and now they’re doing it mostly through money.”
The opportunity for autonomy and innovation was important to all the interview participants. Director CL expressed this importance for her and School C, remarking “For me, I can still do this 19 years in because I’m super excited. How can we do this better? How can we do this another way? That’s what keeps me still wanting to be here.”

Explaining how autonomy benefitted School C, Director CL remarked:

Because we’re small and svelte, we can actually make decisions faster and our investments smaller to innovate and change. That is the exciting piece of being part of a charter to me. So, I believe that’s the autonomy I want, and I’ve always been able to figure out how to maintain that.

*Summary of Innovation and Autonomy.* My analysis and coding identified the two components comprising the theme of Innovation and Autonomy. These concepts are interconnected, with schools needing autonomy to be innovative (Berends et al., 2019). I analyzed and coded the interconnection of these two concepts within the setting of the three case study schools. The interview participants discussed the interconnection of innovation and autonomy and how this connection helped the schools be successful and have the capacity to implement their missions.

Interview participants discussed the importance of innovation and autonomy for them personally and professionally, and to the success of their schools. Participants shared numerous innovations at their schools, which included instructional practices and democratic school practices, among other examples. Participants did express concerns with the overreaching regulation from the bureaucratic entities, which inhibited innovation.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the impacts of standards-based reforms on the autonomy and innovation of charter schools and the capacity to fulfill their school missions. I used qualitative research case study methodology to help me answer the research questions of: How are prescriptive reform measures impacting the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico? How are these reforms impacting the capacity of charter schools in New Mexico to fulfill their individual missions and goals?

Using a purposeful sampling method, I selected three case study charter schools located in northern New Mexico (Creswell, 2013). I conducted interviews with the three directors of the case study charter schools and four teachers from two of the case study schools. I analyzed and coded the compiled information from the interviews and from analyses of document artifacts, into themes (Miles et al., 2014). For this study, I developed a unique conceptual framework of three interconnected elements of autonomy as presented in Figure 3 (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Budde, 1998; Cannata, 2007; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; Mavrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Oberfield, 2016; Prichard & Moore, 2016; Wei, Patel, & Young, 2014; Wright et al., 2018), which served as a focus for my data analysis and coding (Miles et al., 2014). The three elements of autonomy – Regulation Autonomy, School Level Autonomy, and Teacher Autonomy were coded as themes, in addition to a fourth coded theme of Innovation and Autonomy (Berends et al., 2019; Cannata, 2007; Honig, 2009; Ross et al., 2015; Wells, 2002; Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Wohlstetter et al., 2015).
This chapter presents a discussion of the findings and interconnections of the compiled data analyses in the form of assumptions that helped provide answers to my research questions (see Appendix C). In this chapter, I also include a discussion of the study’s limitations and offer implications for practice and future research.

After analyzing and coding the collected data into themes and patterns, I then began the process of understanding the meaning of the complied and organized data that I presented in Chapter 4 Results. I chose a social constructivism paradigm as my lens to help interpret the compiled data. Using the social constructivism paradigm gave me a method to organize and interpret the connections and meanings of the analyzed and coded information (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Social constructivism “starts with the presupposition that social reality is relative to the individuals involved and to the particular context in which they find themselves” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 39). For this study, the individuals were the director and teacher interview participants within the context of three case study charter schools.

By interpreting individuals’ “meanings and intentions” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 7) through the lens of social constructivism, I was able to give voice to issues of importance to interview participants and add to the knowledge of how schools function. Describing the use of this paradigm as a system for interpretation of data compiled through inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (2013) state:

>Social Constructivism] is a conscious, systematic, and disciplined sense-making effort intended to develop, and [is] expected to lead to, a more informed (inclusive of more and perhaps different meanings) and/or more sophisticated (more complex,
higher level and/or larger scale) construction that is currently available of some focus-something on which we may need or wish to make sense. (p. 62)

A function of the social constructivism paradigm then is to provide a means for “sense-making” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 79). Lincoln and Guba (2013) describe this process of sense-making of the complied data as:

organizing it and rendering it into apparently comprehensible, understandable and explainable form (giving it form and substance) so that it is possible to cope with it, turning it from a random congeries of sense impressions into something that can be ordered and fitted into a larger conceptual structure, theory, discipline or philosophy. (p. 45)

By using the lens of social constructivism to interpret the data, I was able to organize the information and attempt to make sense about the interconnections of the complex issues raised in this inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). My first step in attempting to make sense of the complied data was to identify constructs from the themes and components I identified through the coding process (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). A construct is the “mental realization - ‘a making real’ – an apparently singular, unitary entity or relationship” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 47). After I identified the constructs, I then created constructions – “coherent, articulated set[s] of constructs – a pattern or web of constructs and their interconnections” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 47). The creation of the constructions, integrated with the usage of case study methodology, served as:

a credible representation of the various local constructions encountered and of any conscientious construction (if such can be attained) that has emerged; that can adequately identify and reflect the voice or voices that influence the outcome; that
can enlarge the understanding of respondents while at the same time serving the purposes of the inquiry; and that can stimulate and sustain local action by respondents (for which the inquirer acts as orchestrator and facilitator). (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 80)

**Assumptions.** Following the creation of the constructions, I then looked for interconnections that would provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the compiled data (Lincoln and Guba, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Constructions can be:

- manipulated in qualitative research case study methodology and modified (by interrelating, interpolating, extrapolating, or metaphoric leap) into new and unexpected configurations, resulting in possibilities not directly encountered in experience; they can give rise to creative and innovative formulations that extend human thought and appreciation. (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 48)

By manipulating and exploring interconnections among the constructions, I was able to formulate assumptions in an attempt to give meaning to the compiled information (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). These assumptions or suppositions provided a structure to help answer my research questions and also hopefully add to the knowledge and understanding of charter schools.

Table 11 presents the assumptions I formed using the paradigm of social constructivism. Also listed in Table 11 are the references and citations of research from the literature that support my assumptions.
### Table 11

**Assumptions Constructed Utilizing Social Constructivism Paradigm**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption #1</th>
<th>The three case study charter schools had a low degree of Regulation Autonomy.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Barghaus &amp; Boe, 2011; Brinson &amp; Rosch, 2010; Chubb &amp; Moe, 2011; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 1995)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Assumption #2</th>
<th>The case study schools experienced a high degree of School Level Autonomy.</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Flanders, 2017; Foreman &amp; Maranto, 2018; Kahlenberg &amp; Potter, 2014; Lubienski &amp; Lee, 2016; Sizer, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Assumption #3</th>
<th>The case study schools had a moderate degree of Teacher Autonomy.</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Barghaus &amp; Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Kahlenberg &amp; Potter, 2015; Mavrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Wright et al., 2018)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Assumption #4</th>
<th>The case study schools worked to maintain the degree of School Level and Teacher Autonomy but lacked control over the degree of Regulation Autonomy.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>(Chubb &amp; Moe, 2011; Flanders, 2017; Foreman &amp; Maranto, 2018; Mavrogordato, 2019; McLaren, 2007; Oberfield, 2016; Wohlstetter et al., 1995)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Assumption #5</th>
<th>The lack of Regulation Autonomy created issues within the schools and impacted the other two elements of autonomy.</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Chubb &amp; Moe, 2011; Flanders, 2017; Foreman &amp; Maranto, 2018; Mavrogordato, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995)</td>
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<th>Assumption #6</th>
<th>The lack of Regulation Autonomy did not impact the case study schools’ ability to meet their school mission but did interfere with the schools’ capacity for innovation.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>(Berends, 2015; 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman &amp; Maranto, 2018; Hassel, 1999; Keddie, 2016; Miron, 2017; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 1995)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Assumption #1.** The first assumption I made is that the case study charter schools experienced a low degree of Regulation Autonomy (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Chubb & Moe, 2011; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). After creating constructs from the components of the theme of Regulation Autonomy, I combined these constructs to create the construction of Regulation Autonomy. I discovered several interconnections among the identified constructs of Regulation Autonomy.

Participants voiced both positive and negative perspectives on the amount and type of Regulation Autonomy. The standards-based reforms of NMTEACH, CCSS, and High Stakes Assessment had an influence on all the schools (Alderman, 2017; Heise, 2017; Howell & Magazinnik, 2017; Wrabel et al., 2018). From a positive perspective, the contents of the reforms of the NMTEACH, the CCSS, and the state assessment were not viewed negatively by all of the participants but seen as viable tools for improving student and school performance (Cheng et al., 2019; Coburn et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Tuma et al., 2018). Schools A and C used innovation in an attempt to adapt aspects of the reforms to fit in with their schools’ missions (Cannata, 2007). Directors AL and CL believed the content of the NMTEACH domains and the CCSS provided a solid framework for teacher evaluation and teaching standards (Coburn et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2013; McDuffie et al., 2017; Porter et al., 2011). Directors AL, BL, and CL had incorporated aspects of the NMTEACH, CCSS, and state assessments into the overall structure and practices of their schools, which included creating tools to make the reforms more effective (Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Rapa et al., 2018).

However, Director BL did not think the specific reform programs were especially effective (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Finnigan, 2007; Flanders, 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 1995), but
School B did attempt to implement all the reforms in ways that were beneficial to the school (Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Rapa et al., 2018). Director BL indicated he would not choose to use the NMTEACH, CCSS, or the state assessment if given a choice.

The negative perspective of the standards-based reforms expressed by several of the interview participants concerned the high-stakes aspects, which were viewed as “punitive” (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). For Schools A and C, the high-stakes aspects of the reforms had created issues between the administrator and faculty relationships, which in turn had an effect on the overall climate and functioning of the schools.

Director and teacher interview participants viewed all of the five Bureaucratic Entities that comprised this component of the Regulation Autonomy theme as inept and distrusted the motivations of the entities (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; McLaren, 2007; Prichard & Moore, 2016). Based on stories shared by the interview participants, it would seem that the bureaucratic entities had a negative impact on the functioning and efficiency of the case study schools in a variety of ways regarding the amount of Regulation Autonomy, School Level Autonomy, and Teacher Autonomy (Finnigan, 2007). One identified impact was the lack of funding for the schools, particularly for Schools A and C. Directors AL and CL and Teacher CT1 discussed how the state Legislature, influenced by the LEFC, was not providing enough school funding, which then was impacting the schools’ autonomy and “innovation ability” (Barghaus & Boe, 2011, Finnigan, 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). In addition, the local district took additional funds from Schools A and C, impacting the schools’ operating budgets and ability to fund instructional programs.
Director BL provided a number of stories regarding negative interactions with the bureaucratic entities of the CSD and the PEC. All the directors indicated that the state entities were ineffectual regulatory organizations (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Finnigan, 2007), especially the CSD, which the directors accused of “harassing” the state charter schools, taking valuable time, energy and resources from schools that could rather be applied to creating and implementing innovative services and practices that could benefit students.

Although the case study schools were able to adapt elements of the standards-based reforms to their schools’ missions, the intrusion in the schools’ overall functioning through the high-stakes of the state mandated standards-based reforms as well as the inefficiency and overreach of the centralized bureaucratic entities caused difficulties for the schools, reducing the amount and type of Regulation Autonomy (Berkman & Plutzer, 2011; Graham, 2005; Keddie, 2016; McGuinn, 2017; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

**Assumption #2.** Examining interconnections between the constructs and the construction of School Level Autonomy led me to my second assumption that all the case study schools had a high degree of School Level Autonomy (Flanders, 2017; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Lubienski & Lee. 2016; Sizer, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). This assumption is based on the interconnections of the amount and type of local decision-making practices found in the case study schools (Flanders, 2017; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee. 2016; Sizer, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015).

There were many interconnections regarding the constructs of School Autonomy. All the interview participants professed a strong commitment to the mission and learning philosophy of their school (Cannata, 2007; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). The shared school visions guided most of the decisions at the school (Cannata, 2007;
Flanders, 2017; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Sizer, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). Interview participants discussed and described numerous school autonomy practices at their schools (Steinberg, 2014; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). All three case study school directors described their leadership style and practices as shared or distributed, with each describing how they utilized consensus among school stakeholders to facilitate school level decision-making (Heise, 2017; Sizer & Wood, 2008; Steinberg, 2014). All of the case study schools implemented established democratic and decentralized decision making practices (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Movrogordato, 2019). The Governance Councils of the case study schools adhered to the boundaries of the mandated roles and responsibilities for decision making and included parents as members, with Schools A and B also having staff serve as members on the Governance Council (Heise, 2017; Honig, 2009).

Teacher AT1 did express that she felt the Governing Council of School A had not followed the usual commitment to doing what was best for all the school stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. She did express that this commitment had been obvious prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further studies on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and schools will be needed when the pandemic is over.

**Assumption #3.** Analyzing the interconnections among the constructs of Teacher Autonomy led me to my third assumption that all three of the case study charter schools had moderate degrees of Teacher Autonomy (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends et al., 2019; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; Movrogordato, 2019; Miron, 2017; Wright et al., 2018). The interconnections between the director and teacher interview participants’ responses made it evident that teachers at the case study schools were the main decision makers in their classrooms. The three directors all made positive statements on the competency of the
teachers to make instructional decisions, both in the classroom and within the school, such as setting learning targets for the school. The four teachers were very confirmatory about their autonomy in decision making within their classrooms.

The hinderance for Teacher Autonomy was the mandatory alignment of curriculum and instruction to the CCSS that was referenced by the interview participants. Teacher AT1 also mentioned she had concerns with the required use of the state mandated Istation assessment (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; McLaren, 2007; Wright et al., 2018). However, the case study schools all implemented unique learning philosophies that were used for instructional decision making and followed the CCSS as the “skeleton” for the content of instruction. Teachers were given autonomy to make instructional decisions regarding the instructional strategies and methods for how to teach the content of the CCSS (Miron, 2017). It was clear from the analysis of the interconnections of the constructs that Teacher Autonomy was valued and evident at all the case study schools.

I then developed three more assumptions regarding how the three elements of autonomy interconnected across the case study schools.

**Assumption #4.** The fourth assumption I made was that the case study schools worked to maintain School Level Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy but lacked control over the components of Regulation Autonomy (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Flanders, 2017; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Mavrogordato, 2019; McLaren, 2007; Oberfield, 2016). The case study schools showed evidence of the creation and implementation of practices to help the schools maintain shared stake holder decision making and teacher decision making in the classroom (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Knoester & Parkinson, 2017; Mavrogordato, 2019). In attempts to control the components of Regulation Autonomy, the schools tried to thwart the interference
through a variety of ways, such as directors serving as “buffers” between the bureaucratic entities and staff and creating adapted materials for the required NMTEACH to be compatible with the schools’ missions. Interview participants gave positive responses when referencing School Level Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy but when discussing some of the components of Regulation Autonomy, participants used negative words to describe events and opinions, such as harassing, incompetence, unfair, and punitive (Oberfield, 2016; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

**Assumption #5.** My fifth assumption was that the lack of Regulation Autonomy impacted the other two elements of autonomy - School Level and Teacher Autonomy (Chubb & Moe, 2011; Flanders, 2017; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Movrogordato, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Examples to validate this assumption includes the impact of mandatory standards that effected teacher autonomy, and the use by the NMPED of assessment performance that could possibly “close” the school. The standards-based reforms imposed structure not only on instructional decision-making, but also interfered with the capacity of the schools to make decisions in matters such as administrative resources, stake holder relationships, and funding to support the development of innovative practices (Flanders, 2017; Movrogordato, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

**Assumption #6.** My sixth and final assumption was the lack of Regulation Autonomy did not impact the case study schools’ ability to meet their school missions but did interfere with the schools’ capacity for innovation (Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Keddie, 2016; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). The first part of this assumption was based on the importance placed on the schools’ missions and educational philosophies by all of the interview participants (Cannata, 2007; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Wohlstetter et al.,
As evidenced in all three case study schools as well as within the three themes of autonomy, the commitment to the school mission guided most of the decisions made at the schools (Cannata, 2007; Flanders, 2017; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Sizer, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). The school directors made efforts to connect the school mission to the mandated standards-based reforms. For example, all of the three case study schools used the CCSS as the “skeleton” for instructional content but the schools’ specific educational philosophy guided the implementation of this standards-based reform. Despite the degrees of the three elements of autonomy, the case study schools were able to meet their schools’ mission.

The second part of this assumption was that the case study schools did not have the full capacity to be innovative. This assumption was based on interconnections of autonomy and innovation within the three elements of autonomy. My first three assumptions proposed that the case study schools did not have a high degree of Regulation Autonomy but did have higher degrees of School Level and Teacher Autonomy. My other assumptions concerned how the lack of Regulation Autonomy impacted the other elements of autonomy in the case study schools. These assumptions led me to make the assumption that the impacts interfered with the capacity of the case study schools to implement innovative practices. The concepts of autonomy and innovation are interrelated; autonomy facilitates innovation (Berends, 2015; Hassel, 1999; Miron, 2017; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Autonomy was an important concept for all of the interview participants. Participants saw autonomy as desirable and all expressed the opinion that they had some autonomy within their school and position. Participants also expressed opinions that autonomy was a major factor in their school’s success (Berends,
2015; Miron, 2017). When discussing innovation, the participants referenced the need for autonomy, as claimed in charter school theory (Hassel, 1999; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

The case schools were innovative in a variety of areas that included unique missions and learning philosophies, democratic school practices, and adapting standards-based reforms to fit the schools’ missions (Cannata, 2007; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Wright et al., 2018). The three case study charter schools demonstrated innovation in pedagogical practices and student services. However, these innovations were constrained by the imposition of the standards-based reforms (Berend, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Keddie, 2016; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

Some examples of limitations related to the low degrees of Regulation Autonomy is the mandatory alignment of the curriculum to the CCSS, which dictated classroom instructional content, and the lack of funding experienced by the schools due to paying additional charges to the school district.

It should be noted that the directors of Schools A and C did develop innovative tools and systems to help navigate the standards-based reforms. It seemed that innovation was key to all the schools in developing and implementing practices and structures to meet school missions however the schools were not able to be innovative in all areas, such as developing innovative accountability methods (Cohen et al., 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Keddie, 2016; Stillings, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

**Research Questions.** Through the analysis and interpretation of the data collected in this study, I was able to gain answers to my research questions. Assumptions #1, #3, #4, and #5, presented in Table 11, provide answers to the first question of “How are prescriptive reform measures impacting the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico?” The reform
measures had an impact on the autonomy of the three case study schools. Although the case study schools were able to moderate aspects of the standards-based reforms, the reforms did negatively impact and intrude into the schools’ overall autonomy. This was especially highlighted with the high-stakes features of the reforms.

The second research question of “How are these reforms impacting the capacity of charter schools in New Mexico to fulfill their individual missions and goals?” can be answered by Assumption #6, presented in Table 11. The three case study charter schools were all able to fulfill their individual missions and goals despite the intrusion of the standards-based reforms on their school autonomy. The schools adapted aspects of the reforms to match their unique missions. The three schools, through these adaptations, gained the capacity to continue implementing their individual missions.

Limitations

Limitations of generalization of research findings to other populations are inherent in all studies (Creswell, 2013). There are several possible identified limitations of this study. The interpretations and assumptions of this study may not generalize to charter schools in general due to these limitations (Creswell, 2013). Caution should be taken before generalizing the results of this study to any other charter school.

Charter schools are unique educational contexts, both collectively and individually. One possible limitation of the study is the variable characteristics of the charter schools selected as the case study schools (Archibald et al., 2017; Cannata, 2007, Torres, 2018). The three case study charter schools in this study had unique missions and approaches to pedagogy. The case study schools may not be reflective of the variety of missions and learning approaches that may exist in other charter schools. For instance, none of the three
case study schools had school missions that were based on a specific curricular or standards approach. Charter schools with this type of mission may find the CCSS much more invasive in the overall functioning of the school than did the case study schools.

Although the similarities of the case study schools helped to validate the information collected from the responses of the interview participants in the study, the schools’ similarities may not be reflective of charter schools with higher or lower student enrollment numbers, or differing student grade levels and demographics. The case study schools were also unique due to people, place, and history.

Another limitation may be the size of the sample selected for the study. Results and conclusions from the utilization of multiple case study methodology can be diluted due to having more than one case and make it challenging to perform in-depth analyses of all the cases (Creswell, 2013).

On the other hand, I interviewed a small number of participants for a total of seven, which may in turn, not provide enough complied data to support my assumptions (Miles et al., 2014).

Limitations of this study should also be considered due to my utilization of the social constructivism paradigm to interpret meanings of the data. Lincoln and Guba (2013) warn that the researcher utilizing this approach for “sense-making” may incur subjectivity in crafting and interpreting constructions. Also, the constructions and assumptions that I identified through the lens of social constructivism are “based on local circumstances and experiences [which may affect the] applicability [beyond] the local situation (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 71).
Implications for Practice

Implications for practice derived from this study are related to charter schools, charter school policies, and charter school leaders and teachers (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends, 2015; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2018; Lawton, 2009, Neeleman, 2019; Wohlstetter et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2018). Based on the limitations of this study, specifically related to the research methodology and paradigm of interpretation, caution should be taken regarding any implications beyond this study’s context.

With this caution in mind, this study contributes to the research on charter schools, specifically on the topic of autonomy, adding some information to the knowledge base of how charter schools function. The three case study charter schools in this study were all successful schools, with high student performance. The study’s focus on autonomy can inform on the amount and types of autonomy found in charter schools and provide insight into more effective uses of autonomy to help create successful charter schools (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Neeleman, 2019). The detailed information from the study’s analyses of the topics and the cases can also offer insight into other conditions that contribute to successful charter schools (Berends, 2015; Gleason, 2017; Lawton, 2009). The information obtained through the study could be used to assist other schools, both charter and traditional public schools, in identifying and replicating some of the same conditions that could possibly lead to increased student achievement (Berends, 2015; Gleason, 2017; Lawton, 2009).

The analyses and descriptions of the study also provides an examination of the leadership skills and practices of leaders of three successful charter schools, offering another implication for practice (Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2018). This study offers information about the skills charter leaders exhibited while running successful schools (Gawlik, 2018).
Although the case study charter school directors led schools with differing missions and philosophies, the directors implemented many practices in common, such as serving as a buffer between the state and the staff. The information from the study could be useful for leadership training of charter school leaders and traditional public school leaders (Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2018; Gleason, 2017).

Some of the identified leadership skills of the three directors of the case study schools may transfer to traditional public schools. One shared aspect of the three directors was the focus on the unique mission of their school. The directors took responsibility for keeping this shared vision, which guided all decisions at the schools. This shared vision provided a foundation for collaborative and successful implementation of the schools’ unique missions by all the stakeholders.

Another aspect of the three case study school directors that would benefit traditional public school leaders was the utilization of a decentralized decision making approach. The directors were continually developing and implementing structures and practices within their schools to seek consensus on school-wide decisions. Through this evolving process, the directors were able to get stakeholder buy-in, which facilitated the schools’ capacities to quickly implement improvements to benefit students.

Another possible implication for practice that could be derived from this study is related to the structures and procedures in place in all three case study schools that enabled and encouraged teacher decision-making, allowing teachers more influence in school-wide and classroom decisions (Barghaus & Boe, 2011). The level of teacher autonomy as well as teacher participation in school wide decision making was a common factor in the three case study schools, possibly contributing to the overall school success and could therefore be
beneficial to other charter and traditional public schools. Also, information collected from the teacher interview participants in the study offered insight into how beneficial or helpful the NMTEACH teacher evaluation was to these teachers (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Wright et al., 2018). This information provided a critique of the current teacher evaluation system and could provide guidance in future changes to the system (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Wright et al., 2018).

A final implication for practice is to use the information obtained through this study to inform charter school policy and possibly charter school legislation (Abowitz, 2001; Brinson & Rosch, 2010; DeAngelis & Erikson, 2018; Gawlik, 2016; Gleason, 2017; Lawton, 2009; Eratas, 2015; Finnigan, 2007; Renzuilli & Roscigno, 2005; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). The information collected and analyzed offers insight into the need for decentralization and deregulation of charter schools in New Mexico. Interview participants discussed several issues regarding unfair funding and centralized control issues that were affecting the functioning of the case study schools (DeAngelis & Erikson, 2018; Gawlik, 2016; Gleason, 2017; Lawton, 2009; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). Brinson and Rosch (2010) suggest those in the charter school movement must “remain vigilant in protecting charters from creeping regulations” (p. 33). This study can help inform the current status of charter schools in New Mexico and the associated charter funding and laws (Abowitz, 2001; Eratas, 2015; Renzuilli and Roscigno, 2005).

**Implications for Future Research**

There is a limited amount of research conducted regarding the variant aspects of charter schools (Barghaus & Boe, 2011; Berends, 2015; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2018; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lawton, 2009; Vergari, 2007). Most studies focus on charter
school student achievement with comparisons to traditional public schools (Gawlik, 2018; Gleason, 2017; Lawton, 2009). Studies of this kind, although adding to the research on charter schools, do not fully examine all the nuances that encompass the charter school movement (Gleason, 2017; Lawton, 2009). Rather, perhaps future research should focus on how charter schools can improve versus on how they compare with traditional public schools (Gleason, 2017). Future research on charter schools should examine:

What characteristics distinguish good charter schools from bad ones? Under what conditions are charter schools most likely to be successful? Can we identify the policies and practices that make a charter school successful? Can these policies and practices of successful charter schools be replicated in other– charter or traditional public school- equally successfully? (Gleason, 2017, p. 187)

This study attempted to examine one aspect of charter schools – the amount and type of autonomy in three case study charter schools, and the impact of current standards-based reforms. There is a need for further research on the topic of charter school autonomy (Barghuas & Boe, 2011; Cohen et al., 2018; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2018; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). Future research could include examination of the relationship and influence of autonomy on student achievement in charter schools (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Gawlik, 2016; Vergari, 2007), as well as the conditions or institutional differences regarding autonomy that effect student achievement in charter schools (Berends, 2015; Lawton, 2009). Another suggestion for future research on this topic is for the creation of more valid tools for measuring and examining autonomy in charter schools (Finnigan, 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 2015).
In addition to autonomy, other suggested areas for future research include studies to examine instructional leadership styles of charter school leaders, with perhaps a focus on the skills of leaders within school settings with greater autonomy versus within school settings with lesser autonomy (Gawlik 2018; Prichard & Moore, 2016).
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Appendix A

IRB Approval and Informed Consent Forms

DATE: October 9, 2019

IRB #: 17319
IRBNet ID & TITLE: [1501777-1] Charter School Autonomy in an Era of Standards-Based Reforms
PI OF RECORD: Allison Borden
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

BOARD DECISION: APPROVED
EFFECTIVE DATE: October 4, 2019
EXPIRATION DATE: N/A
RISK LEVEL: MINIMAL RISK
PROJECT STATUS: ACTIVE - OPEN TO ENROLLMENT

DOCUMENTS:
• Advertisement - Email for Directors (UPDATED: 10/3/2019)
• Advertisement - Email for Teachers (UPDATED: 10/3/2019)
• Advertisement - Recruitment Script (UPDATED: 09/24/2019)
• Application Form - Project Information Form (UPDATED: 09/24/2019)
• Consent Form - Consent Interview Directors (UPDATED: 10/3/2019)
• Consent Form - Consent Interview Teachers (UPDATED: 10/3/2019)
• Other - Scientific Review Form (UPDATED: 09/24/2019)
• Other - Project Team Form (UPDATED: 09/24/2019)
• Protocol - Protocol 10032019 (UPDATED: 10/3/2019)
• Questionnaire/Survey - Interview Questions (UPDATED: 09/24/2019)
• Training/Certification - CITI Phillips (UPDATED: 09/24/2019)
• Training/Certification - CITI Borden (UPDATED: 09/24/2019)

Thank you for your New Project submission. The UNM IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an acceptable risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks to participants have been minimized. This project is not covered by UNM’s Federalwide Assurance (FWA) and will not receive federal funding.

The IRB has determined the following:

• Informed consent must be obtained and documentation is required for this project. To obtain and document consent, use only approved consent document(s).
This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission and does not apply should any changes be made to this research. If changes are being considered, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to submit an amendment to this project and receive IRB approval prior to implementing the changes. A change in the research may disqualify this research from the current review category. If federal funding will be sought for this project, an amendment must be submitted so that the project can be reviewed under relevant federal regulations.

All reportable events must be promptly reported to the UNM IRB, including: UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to participants or others, SERIOUS or UNEXPECTED adverse events, NONCOMPLIANCE issues, and participant COMPLAINTS.

If an expiration date is noted above, a continuing review or closure submission is due no later than 30 days before the expiration date. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to apply for continuing review or closure and receive approval for the duration of this project. If the IRB approval for this project expires, all research related activities must stop and further action will be required by the IRB.

Please use the appropriate reporting forms and procedures to request amendments, continuing review, closure, and reporting of events for this project. Refer to the OIRB website for forms and guidance on submissions.

Please note that all IRB records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the closure of this project.

The Office of the IRB can be contacted through: mail at MSC02 1665, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001; phone at 505.277.2644; email at irbmaincampus@unm.edu; or in-person at 1805 Sigma Chi Rd. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87106. You can also visit the OIRB website at irb.unm.edu.
Charter School Autonomy in an Era of Standards-based Reforms

Informed Consent for Interview of Charter School Director

Karen M. Phillips, doctoral candidate, under the direction of Dr. Allison Borden, from the Educational Leadership Department is conducting a research project for completion of a doctoral dissertation. The purpose of the research is to describe the interactive effects of standards-based reforms on the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico. You are being asked to participate because your charter school meets the study criteria of having been in existence for five or more years and you have been director at the school for three or more years.

Your participation will involve responding to oral questions in one-on-one interviews. The interview should take about 60 minutes to complete. The interview includes questions regarding the topics of standards-based educational practices and school autonomy. Your involvement in the research is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate. You can refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses. Interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcription to review and be given an opportunity to discuss the transcription with the researcher for accuracy. There are no known risks in this research, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when answering questions. All identifiable information (e.g., your name, school) will be removed from the information collected in this project. After we remove all identifiers, the information may be used for future research or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

The findings from this project will provide information on the interactive effects of standards-based reforms on the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico. If published, results will be presented in summary form only. You will not directly benefit from participating in this study. It is possible that other charter school directors will benefit from the research findings.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please feel free to call Karen Phillips at [cell phone number]. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or about what you should do in case of any harm to you, or if you want to obtain information or offer input, please contact the UNM Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (505) 277-2644 or irb.unm.edu.

By signing below you will be agreeing to participate in the above described research.

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<tr>
<th>Name of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Adult Participant</th>
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<th>Name of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Signature of Research Team Member</th>
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Consent Form for Teacher Interview Participants

Charter School Autonomy in an Era of Standards-based Reforms

Informed Consent for Interview of Classroom Teacher

Karen M. Phillips, doctoral candidate, under the direction of Dr. Allison Borden, from the Educational Leadership Department is conducting a research project for completion of a doctoral dissertation. The purpose of the research is to describe the interactive effects of standards-based reforms on the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico. You are being asked to participate because your charter school meets the study criteria of having been in existence for five or more years and you have been a classroom teacher at the school for three or more years.

Your participation will involve responding to oral questions in one-on-one interviews. The interview should take about 60 minutes to complete. The interview includes questions regarding the topics of standards-based educational practices and school autonomy. Your involvement in the research is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate. You can refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses. Interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcription to review and be given an opportunity to discuss the transcription with the researcher for accuracy. There are no known risks in this research, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when answering questions. All identifiable information (e.g., your name, school) will be removed from the information collected in this project. After we remove all identifiers, the information may be used for future research or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

The findings from this project will provide information on the interactive effects of standards-based reforms on the autonomy of charter schools in New Mexico. If published, results will be presented in summary form only. You will not directly benefit from participating in this study. It is possible that other charter school teachers will benefit from the research findings.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please feel free to call Karen Phillips at [cell phone number]. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or about what you should do in case of any harm to you, or if you want to obtain information or offer input, please contact the UNM Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (505) 277-2644 or irb.unm.edu.

By signing below you will be agreeing to participate in the above described research.

Name of Adult Participant __________________________ Signature of Adult Participant __________________________ Date ____________

Name of Research Team Member __________________________ Signature of Research Team Member __________________________ Date ____________
Appendix B
Interview Protocols

Leader Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Abstract: The interviewees will be the school leaders of the three case study charter schools. Participants will have been principal or director of the case study school for three or more years. The purpose of the interviews is to elicit information on the types of autonomy charter schools have and use to meet their missions and goals and be innovative. I will conduct one-on-one interviews at the school sites. The interview questions will be semi-structured with targeted questions on the focused topics. The content of the responses to the targeted questions may lead to other questions or further solicitation of information during the interviews. The interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. The leader interviewees will be given a copy of the transcription to review and be given an opportunity to discuss the transcription with me for accuracy.

Introductory Script

Thank you for volunteering to help me with this study. The purpose of this interview is to get your perceptions of your experiences as the leader at this school. My research study focuses on the types of autonomy charter schools have and use to meet their missions and goals. This study will help provide insights into charter schools and charter school policy in New Mexico. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you really think and how you really feel.

To assist with my note taking, I will be audio recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can fully attend to our conversation and at the same time get all the details. The conversation on the audio recording will be transcribed and I will give you a
copy of the transcription for your review. Your comments will remain anonymous. I will be compiling information from the interviews which will contain comments without any reference to individuals.

Please take a few minutes to read and then sign this consent form.

**School Leader Questions:**

*Background*

1. Tell me about your professional experience. How long have you been the principal/director at this school?

*School Information*

2. Please describe the school in terms of the mission, grade levels, student demographic, and the staff. How would you describe the teaching and learning philosophy at this school?

3. How similar or different is this school from a traditional public school? Why do you think that?

*Leader Roles*

4. Please describe your core responsibilities in your current role. What do you consider to be the most essential? Why?

5. What are the biggest challenges for you in this position? Why?

*Teacher Evaluation*

6. Who conducts the teacher evaluations at the school? How often? What are the components of that evaluation?

7. How do you, as the instructional leader of the school, use the teacher evaluation system to help teachers improve and increase student achievement? Please share examples of how you do this.
Instruction and Curriculum

8. How is students’ learning assessed/evaluated? How often? How are those results used?

9. What standards and curriculum does the school use to design instruction? Why do you use these?

Decision making

10. How would you describe the way in which decisions are made at this school? How would you describe your role in making decisions at this school?

11. What is the role of the Governance Council at this school? How do their decisions affect the school?

12. How would you describe the influence of the authorizer (district or PEC) in decision making at the school? Please provide examples.

13. How would you describe the influence of the NMPED in decision making at the school? Please provide examples.

14. How would you define autonomy? Do you have autonomy in your position? If so, please describe that autonomy and provide some examples. If you don’t, please describe how that lack of autonomy impacts your position and provide some examples?

15. Please share any other thoughts you have about your school and the topics we have discussed today.

Closing Script: Thank you so much for sharing your opinions and expertise with me and for taking time to help. I will transcribe the audio recording within a week or so and email you a
copy for your review. This information will be used to provide valuable information on charter schools in New Mexico.
Teacher Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Abstract: The interviewees will be classroom teachers with three or more years teaching at the case study charter schools. Two teachers from each of the case study schools will be asked to voluntarily participate as interviewees. The purpose of the interviews is to elicit information on the types of autonomy charter schools have and use to meet their missions and goals and be innovative. I will conduct one-on-one interviews at the school sites. The interview questions will be semi-structured with targeted questions on the focused topics. The content of the responses to the targeted questions may lead to other questions or further solicitation of information during the interviews. The interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. The teacher interviewees will be given a copy of the transcription to review and be given an opportunity to discuss the transcription with me for accuracy.

Introductory Script

Thank you for volunteering to help me with this study. The purpose of this interview is to get your perceptions from your experiences as a teacher at this school. My research study focuses on the types of autonomy charter schools have and use to meet their missions and goals. This study will help provide insights into charter schools and charter school policy in New Mexico. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you really think and how you really feel.

To assist with my note taking, I will be audio recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can fully attend to our conversation and at the same time get all the details. The conversation on the audio recording will be transcribed and I will give you a copy of the transcription for your review. Your comments will remain anonymous. I will be
compiling information from the interviews which will contain comments without any reference to individuals.

Please take a few minutes to read and then sign this consent form.

**Teacher Interview Questions:**

*Background*

1. Tell me about your teaching experience. How long have you been teaching at this school?

*School Information*

2. How would you describe the school’s mission and learning philosophy?

3. In your opinion, what would you say is the highest priority at the school? Please provide me with some examples of how you see this implemented at the school.

*Teacher Roles and Teacher Evaluation*

4. How would you describe your role at this school?

5. Who conducts the teacher evaluations at the school? How often? What are the components of that evaluation?

*Instruction and Curriculum*

6. How are curricular goals and specific instructional content determined? Who decides what you teach and when you teach it?

7. What standards and curriculums do you use in your classroom to design instruction? Why do you use these?

8. How does the school’s mission shape your curriculum and your instruction? Please give me some examples.
9. How do you evaluate your students’ learning? How often? How are those results used?

10. How similar or different is this school from a traditional public school in terms of curriculum and instruction?

**Decision Making**

11. How would you describe the way in which decisions are made at this school?

12. What is the role of the Governance Council at this school? How do their decisions affect the school?

13. How would you define autonomy? Do you have autonomy in your position? If so, please describe that autonomy and provide some examples. If you don’t, please describe how that lack of autonomy impacts your position and provide some examples?

14. What else would you like to share with me about the school and the topics we have discussed today?

**Closing Script:** Thank you so much for sharing your opinions and expertise with me and for taking time to help. I will transcribe the audio recording within a week or so and will email a copy for your review. This information will be used to provide valuable information on charter schools in New Mexico.
## Appendix C

### Table of Findings

<table>
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<th>Theme/Component</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
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<td><strong>Regulation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
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<td>NMTEACH</td>
<td>Director AL liked framework content of the NMTEACH and had created resources to help teachers navigate system. He expressed issues with the observation stating that it “created more work for me.” He did feel that the high-stakes aspect of the system was punitive and had caused problems with the staff. He would continue to use the system without the high-stakes aspects. Teacher AT1 thought the NMTEACH was an unfair representation of teachers’ skills, stating “One hour doesn’t really tell you what kind of teacher I am.” Teacher AT2 liked the “oversight” of NMTEACH.</td>
<td>Director BL did not like the NMTEACH and would not use the system if not required by the NMPED. He thought it was “punitive” and “unhelpful to teachers.”</td>
<td>Director CL liked the NMTEACH including the framework content and protocols but had issues with the high-stakes aspect of the system being punitive and which had “really changed my relationship with my faculty.” She had created resources for implementation of the system attempting to link it to the school’s mission and learning philosophy. Teacher CT1 did not like the NMTEACH and thought it was very punitive and “doesn’t make teachers feel good about themselves” and doesn’t help “me be a better teacher.” Teacher CT2 thought the NMTEACH and the...</td>
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<td>High-Stakes Assessment</td>
<td>the NMTEACH. He thought the observation system was useful to teachers. Director AL utilized scores as “our big markers.” Teacher AT1 preferred a previous state mandated assessment, “I think it just saved the school money but not the teachers work.” Teacher AT2 used the state assessments in combination with the school’s interim assessment but stated the interim assessment “really guide[s] our instruction.”</td>
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<td>CCSS</td>
<td>Director AL described the CCSS as “our skeleton” of what to teach but “it’s not our curriculum.” School B used the CCSS to provide a framework for student learning and instruction. Director BL thought the previous NM standards “were far more specific and use of student assessment scores was “totally disconnected; it’s a big jumble.” Director CL used the state assessment test scores to complete a “granular analysis”, for school-wide trends. She did comment on the inflexibility of the state assessments with “a one-size fits all model” versus letting charter schools “show success in a multitude of ways.” Teacher CT1 expressed that the data review could be hard on the staff; “It’s always like we are not doing enough.” The subject taught by Teacher CT2 did require the state assessments. Director CL was very positive about the CCSS. Teacher CT1 described the CCSS as the school’s “framework” for learning goals. She</td>
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<td>Bureaucratic Entities</td>
<td>Local School District</td>
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<td><strong>Teacher AT1</strong> was very enthusiastic about the CCSS. <strong>Teacher AT2</strong> liked the CCSS, “I actually think that it does a very good job of covering all of the basics and allows you to specifically dig into areas.”</td>
<td><strong>School A</strong> is district authorized. <strong>School A</strong> had little direct interaction with the school district but described it as a “quagmire”. <strong>Director AL</strong> completes a monthly report for the superintendent. <strong>Director AL</strong> felt the district saw the school as a means for additional funding, which over charged for reimbursed services and did not share Title 1 funds. <strong>School B</strong> is state authorized. <strong>Director BL</strong> had limited interaction with the district but complained that “the district has a different set of standards that they’re held to”, giving examples of differing state hiring standards for School B versus the district. <strong>He commented</strong> “The district at times has said all sorts of crazy things, like we get to choose who the kids are…They get to do these lies. There is nothing that is happening that helps cross those things.” <strong>Teacher CT2</strong> did not use the CCSS because the subject he taught was not included in the CCSS. <strong>School C</strong> is district authorized. <strong>School C</strong> had little direct contact with the district. <strong>Director CL</strong> felt there was “animosity” between the school and the district and that they “don’t want to hear about my school’s successes.” <strong>She complained</strong> about the lack of communication with the district which interfered with meeting requirements and deadlines. An example was that the district’s test coordinator failed to share mandatory requirements and due dates. <strong>She completed a monthly report for</strong></td>
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Director AL described himself as “chief compliant officer” and a buffer between the staff and the NMPED. Regarding the NMPED he stated, “You really have to give them what they want to go away so you can do what is right.” He indicated that he did not trust the motivations of the NMPED, stating “I don’t want the PED’s attention. When they send me something to do, I get it done quick and I do it well and I move on. I don’t want them second guessing us, knowing our name even. Even our good Director BL thought the NMPED was inept and had unfair double standards for charter schools versus traditional public schools. He stated, “I can recognize it’s a game and play the game.” He repeatedly referred to NMPED personnel as “check markers”. He described one of his job responsibilities as being “a buffer” between the staff and the state. Director CL called the NMPED “a fuzzy cloud” that continually gave out “ridiculous tasks that are [part of] bureaucratic management.” She did express that she tries to turn the bureaucratic demands “into something that feels meaningful and worth our time.” She complained about the redundancy of NMPED requirements. “It is all about kids. The rest of it just needs a system that works and I need to make sure that system—everyone’s well trained and can do
The PEC is the authorizer of School B. Director BL described the charter renewal process as “a very frightening time; you could lose your school.” He felt the PEC had unrealistic expectations and double standards for charter schools versus regular public

Teacher AT1 took issue with the NMPED’s mandated change in assessments that benefitted the state but made more work for the teachers.

Teacher CT2 discussed the NMPED’s faulty collection and usage of student assessment data.

Teacher CT1 was very negative, indicating she felt animosity between the charter schools and the NMPED. She expressed frustration with the incompetence of the NMPED, giving an example of the complicated process of getting her Level 3 license.

things… It attracts attention.”

Public Education Commission (PEC)
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<th><strong>Charter School Division (CSD) of the NMPED</strong></th>
<th><strong>State Legislature and LEFC</strong></th>
<th><strong>School C</strong></th>
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<td>Although School A had little interaction with the CSD. However, Director BL was troubled by their actions, stating “I know that the state charters really got beat up with the [CSD]… and that is wrong because it takes their resources, time and energy to jump through hoops from the state, when that could be going to their kids and their families, I really didn’t like seeing that. The accountability needs to come with support, not just a gotcha system.”</td>
<td>Director AL felt the state Legislature was strongly influenced by the LEFC in regard to funding for charter schools. He also asserted that recent Legislature funding initiatives are not being fully funded but instead other schools. He gave several examples of negative disputes the school has had with the PEC.</td>
<td>School C did not have much direct interaction with the CSD. Director CL did comment on the CSD stating, “I think for district charters, they’re like red-headed stepchildren and are pretty much forgotten.”</td>
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<td>School B had a high degree of interaction with the CSD due to being a state authorized school. He presented several examples of negative interactions and disputes with the CSD.</td>
<td>Director BL did not mention the Legislature or LEFC.</td>
<td>Director BL commented on the LEFC’s desire to take autonomy away from charter schools, stating “I’m not convinced yet that there still isn’t a true desire and now they’re doing it mostly through money.”</td>
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needed funds are being reallocated to pay for the initiatives. He described the lack of funding as “the biggest challenge facing charters.”

Commenting on the lack of funding for charter schools, she stated “Money… constant looking for money. It’s an obsession because [we] can’t do things for kids that you want to do because it costs more than we have.”

Teacher CT1 discussed the lack of funding from the Legislature for recent initiatives.

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<th>School Level Autonomy</th>
<th>School Mission</th>
<th>Vision</th>
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<td>According to School A’s website, the mission is “to deliver a college readiness curriculum to students from the [town] community resulting in high levels of academic achievement for all students.” The vision is “to be a community that loves to live, learn, and launch successful students into the world.” Director AL described the school learning philosophy as “academic focus.”</td>
<td>The mission and learning philosophy of School B is based on an instructional model utilizing an Integrated Arts approach. The school’s handbook states the mission is to “provide K-8 students in the [school district] with the opportunity to reach their maximum potential through a standards-based, multicultural, thematic, and arts-integrated curriculum.” Director BL was enthusiastic about</td>
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<td>Director CL described the mission of School C, stating that it “balances emotional development with academics- high interventions, high student-centered learning, to lead to super high academic achievement and curiosity, just lifelong learning coupled with having the social emotional skills to be a communicator, a problem solver, and an innovator. And that’s really the</td>
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<td>School Governance</td>
<td>and learning as a process of inquiry” and this was reiterated by both Teachers AT1 and AT2. Teacher AT2 describing the mission as a “high school preparatory focus and therefore college focus.” Director AL stated that the school’s mission guiding all decision making at the school. School A elects their Governing Council and has two voting faculty members on the council. Regarding the School’s Governance Council, Director AL stated “They’re well aware of their role- policy, finance, hiring and firing me. There’s not a lot of cross over…they’re also looking at school data and what priorities I set and how we’re going</td>
<td>the integrated arts approach at his school. Regarding the school’s Governance Council, the website of School B states “[The] Governing Council consists of five community volunteers. Their responsibility is that of a regular school board. They are responsible for the school’s financial health, for monitoring student achievement, and for insuring that the school is fulfilling the mission of the charter.” On School C’s website, a list of the roles and responsibilities of the school’s Governance Council are Finance, Educational Program, Personnel-hire/fire/evaluate Director, and facilities. Teacher CT1 stated “I would feel like the board is probably trying to help me do my job as best they can”.</td>
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Parent Involvement

| Parent Involvement | According to School A’s website, six parents serve as members of the school’s Governance Council. In order to solicit family involvement in the school, School C has a “Parents as Partners Involvement Process”, Teacher AT1 discussed having a faculty representative on a parent organization.  | Director BL only mentioned parents in a few responses. Parents serve as members of School B’s Governance Council. School C did the most to solicit parent involvement in the school. Director C described the role of parents and the process of how School C makes the “bigger decisions” by “involv[ing] parents or gather[ing] parent data in focus groups”, giving an example of the process for adding grade levels to the school. |
Leadership Practices

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<th>of School A, called “Friends” and also mentioned serving on a “Family Support Team” recently started at the school “to help families navigate the on-line learning.”</th>
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<td>Teacher AT2 served as one of the faculty members of the school’s Governing Council.</td>
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<td>Director AL described consensus decision making at his school, stating “There’s a lot of talking back and forth, coming to consensus. Out-voting someone is a terrible way to make decisions because it short circuits communication and trust.” Director AL stated, “The organizational chart for that would be a lot of lines crossing over because there really is this- you get your mandate to lead by your skill set and by your work. So, if someone is very active in a particular aspect of the school,</td>
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<td>Director BL stated he thought his approach was “very non-traditional” and described his role “as making sure my staff feel safe and comfortable [and] that they feel that their voices are heard.” He further commented, “I try to give opportunities for teachers and for staff to discuss an issue.”</td>
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<td>Director CL said, “I use consensus quite a bit.” In describing her roles and responsibilities, Director CL stated: “It’s like an air traffic controller. You have to be above it all and be ahead of the fray and know the pacing of how things happen to make a year come together. You have to be the keeper of the vision of the school and to me, I have to maintain 100% presence to the actions of the day- the students, the teachers, the parents.”</td>
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Democratic School Practices

and has some expertise, I’m more likely to go with what they want to do than just arbitrarily deciding that I know better.”

Teacher AT2 commented that at School A “there is less top-down directive[s]” indicating that he found the shared decision making “a breath of fresh air.” He discussed the ways in which Director AL solicits input and allows staff to vote on some issues.

Director AL described a number of democratic practices implemented at School A. These practices included: a Governance Council elected by parents and staff, with two faculty members also serving as voting members of the council; teacher-led data teams; school committees consisting of teachers and parents, which included a teacher-

School B had democratic practices that included teacher-led data teams, which helped set learning targets and parent and non-voting faculty representatives on the school’s Governance Council. Director B expressed his belief in “freedom” and inclusion for school-wide decision making. Director BL stated “I think that is what is important to me, to show that

The democratic practices of School C included a faculty leadership team, that helps the director implement changes, and represents staff, teacher, and parent school committees along with parent representation on the Governance Council.

Teacher CT1 was very proud to be asked to serve on the school leadership team.
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<th>Teacher Autonomy</th>
<th>Director AL stated, “When it comes to things that are squarely in the realm of the classroom, it’s better that the</th>
<th>Director BL discussed teacher decision-making, stating, “My job is giving teachers as much freedom as I possibly can and still have them be held</th>
<th>CT1 claimed she had a “teacher voice” and flexibility in her instruction. Teacher CT1 noted that her classroom decision making was limited</th>
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<td>led policy committee. Director AL explained the decision making process, “So, people are problem solvers here. They’re willing to step outside their assigned duties; able to talk intelligently and productively… [and] not end up in a conflict; able to work around and solve problems and make people be heard. That’s all just a part of high functioning adults in the building.”</td>
<td>we’re all in this together; this is not a glamorous job. There is no position that is needed more than another.”</td>
<td>Teacher CT2 was very positive about School C’s democratic practices, stating, “I would describe the process as holistic, as inclusive; it’s based on curiosity and care. I think there is a real openness- a real commitment to doing what’s best for the students in every case and curiosity about what is best for the kid; some openness there. And commitment to that foundation of the whole child.”</td>
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teachers make those decisions.”

Teacher AT1 commented, “So, in my case, being able to teach...what I want and how I want. Now of course, I’m expected to teach the standards, but I get to do it in a way that works for me.”

Describing his classroom autonomy, Teacher AT2 stated “I do have autonomy as the [grade level] and [subject] teacher...I pretty much call the shots in the classroom and only have to worry about guidelines as far as state standards and past results or past experience working with my director.”

accountable...You have to have confidence in the staff that you have hired and allow them the courtesy of being treated as professionals. And if they’re not, hold them accountable...It’s autonomy across the board. Staff has autonomy to do what they need to do.”

by having to align instruction and curriculum to the CCSS and stated, “I have autonomy within a framework. I just can’t teach anything I want to teach. I need to make sure that it’s aligned with the Common Core Standards and the NGSS.”

Regarding teacher autonomy, CT2 stated, “Me as a teacher, I get autonomy; I’m glad you’re asking about that. That means so much to me as a teacher and look what it’s leading to—fantastic results, for kids, feeling good, learning well; for me as a teacher- feeling good, learning, right?”

Based on the subject area he taught, Teacher CT2 did not use the CCSS which he felt gave him more flexibility and autonomy.

| Innovation and Autonomy | Example of innovations at School A were innovative tools include web linked | Director BL asserted that School B had “autonomy across the board.” | An example of innovation at School C was Walk Through “Look |
Director AL stated, “Charters were supposed to innovate but centralized control doesn’t allow for that innovation.” Director AL discussed the high level of regulatory oversight from the NMPED that interfered with School A’s opportunities to create unique “solutions” that are “right for our school” in addressing issues and problems. Director AL claimed that the lack of funding was impacting School A’s ability to meet students’ programing needs and create unique educational services.

Example of innovation at School B was teacher blogs for lesson plan documentation utilized by Director BL. Director BL described numerous issues with the overreaching and unfair demands placed on School B by the NMPED, PEC, and CSD. He commented, “That’s where I have my difficulties as far as autonomy. I just try to get those check markers happy. They go on their way; they leave us the hell alone and we go from there.”

Fors” lists created by Director CL. Explaining her concept of applied autonomy at School C, Director CL stated. “Autonomy is the standards of performance and getting kids to a place, not necessarily by being graded on the test, but that here’s what students have to achieve, here’s what teachers have to have in certification to be allowed to be qualified to do their job. Those are sort of the skeleton framework. How we go about achieving our path to get there, is the autonomy piece.”

Director CL, commenting on her view of the role of charter school innovation in facilitating improved education, stated, “Charters get to be little tugboats that say, ‘Education really needs to move a little over here and we’re willing to go out on a limb and pilot this and try it out. We’re going to
do that and show you the effectiveness of our model and if it doesn’t work fully, even while we’re in it, we’ll work on tweaking it so that it remains true to its purpose which was-\text{-}we have this target and we choose a methodology to get there.”

On the issue of charter school funding, Director C asserted “The limited amount of funding limits your innovation ability.”

Director CL expressed that the NMPED has “a desire to create a one-size fits all model still more than allowing for innovation.” She also commented on importance of autonomy for School C and the fear of the PED “tak[ing] away our autonomy”, asserting, “I’m not convinced yet that there still isn’t a true desire and now they’re doing it
mostly through money.”

Discussing program and curricular innovations created and implemented at School C, Teacher CT2 commented, “Finding better ways to do things and ideally, that’s the ‘can’. The ‘should’, I think, is sharing them back because some of the innovations that make us succeed, are scalable; is broadly applicable.”