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# Examining the Landscape of Leadership of Charter School Executives in Low-Performing or Priority Schools in North Carolina

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Focus of the Study

Charter Schools in North Carolina have been serving students since 1997 in grades K-12. From their inception, charter schools in North Carolina have operated as their own Local Education Agency (LEA) and were created to serve the fundamental purpose of providing opportunities for teachers, parents, students, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently of existing schools, as a method to accomplish the following:

- Improve student learning;
- Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are identified as at-risk of academic failure or academically-gifted;
- Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods;
- Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunities to be responsible for the learning program at the school site;
- Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system; and
- Hold the schools established accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results, and provide schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems (North Carolina General Statute 115C-238.29A).

The ABCs of Public Education began in the 1996-97 school year as North Carolina's primary school improvement program and with three primary goals: 1.) to strengthen local school accountability, 2.) to emphasize mastery of basic subjects, and 3.) to provide as much local decision-making as possible. The ABCs model was one of the first in the nation to focus attention on the academic growth of students from year-to-year. The school designation categories remain stable in scope and in definition. School designations are listed in Figure 1.

Designation	Performance	Growth:		
		Learning Achieved in One Year		
		High	Expected	Expected Growth Not Achieved
Honor School of Excellence	At least 90% of students at grade level and school made adequate yearly progress (AYP)			
School of Excellence	At least 90% of students at grade level			
School of Distinction	At least 80% of students at grade level			
School of Progress	At least 60% of students at grade level			
No Recognition	60% to 100% of students at grade level			
Priority School	50% to 60% of students at grade level, OR Less than 50% of students at grade level			

Figure 1. School designations.

Each year, schools in North Carolina may receive several designations based on their performance on the state’s ABCs tests. These designations are awarded on the basis of the percentage of students performing at grade level and on whether students have learned as much as they are expected to learn in one year (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requires schools to focus on the proficiency of groups of students within each school with a goal of closing achievement gaps and bringing proficiency rates to 100 percent for every student group by 2013-2014 ([www.abcs.ncpublicschools.org/abcs](http://www.abcs.ncpublicschools.org/abcs)). AYP sets the criteria for school performance by groups of students, and schools either make AYP or not, there is no partial credit. In order to make AYP, schools need to meet all the performance targets set for them. Targets are set for performance on ABCs test, as well as student attendance. Schools work towards the goals set for them in each area as a whole and for student groups when they contain 40 or more students in defined target populations. The target populations are white, black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, multiracial, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students with disabilities (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

Except for an Annual Charter Schools Conference sponsored and coordinated by the Office of Charter Schools, within the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), the state has not established a vehicle by which the traditional public schools can examine charter schools innovations and consider them for adoption. Some stakeholders in the traditional public schools may not feel there is much to be learned from charter schools, which contributes to a disconnection between charter schools and traditional public schools. In a Fordham Institute Report, North Carolina’s charter law received an overall grade of B. However, in the same report, North Carolina received a D for its support of charter schools (Palmer and Gau, 2003).

As researchers, we need to begin examining the landscape for charter school executives in order to pose possibilities for further exploration and improvements in their professional development as they provide leadership in creating cultures that embraces change and promotes dynamic continuous improvement for a global and technological society.

### Methodology and Findings

In 2007 – 2008, there were 95 charter schools in the State, serving over 32,000 students. In Figure 2, below, the chart identifies the 95 charter schools, the grade span of the population of students they

serve, the school's performance composite in reading and math, the ABCs status of the school, and whether or not the charter school made AYP.

School Name	Grade Span	Expected Growth	High Growth	Performance Composite	ABC Status	AYP
Alpha Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	41.2	Priority High Growth	No
American Renaissance School	K-8	No	No	62.8	No Recognition	No
Arapahoe Charter School	K-8	Yes	No	71.5	Progress Expected Growth	No
Arts Based Elementary	K-5	No	No	55.9	Priority	No
ArtSpace Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	70.7	Progress High Growth	No
Bethany Community Middle	6-8	No	No	66.1	No Recognition	No
Bethel Hill Charter	K-6	Yes	Yes	74.6	Progress High Growth	No
Brevard Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	73.5	Progress High Growth	Yes
Bridges Charter School	K-8	No	No	59.2	Priority	Yes
C G Woodson Sch of Challenge	K-12	Yes	Yes	43.5	Priority High Growth	No
Cape Fear Center for Inquiry	K-8	Yes	No	78.8	Progress Expected Growth	Yes
Cape Lookout Marine Sci High	9-12	No	No	50.0	Priority	No
Carolina International School	K-10	Yes	No	81.8	School of Distinction Expected	Yes
Carter Community Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	46.9	Priority High Growth	Yes
Casa Esperanza Montessori	PK-6	No	No	73.5	No Recognition	Yes
Central Park School For Child	K-5	Yes	No	69.2	Progress Expected Growth	Yes
Charlotte Secondary School	6-6	No	No	58.1	Priority	No
Charter Day School	K-8	Yes	Yes	72.9	Progress High Growth	Yes
Chatham Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	70.4	Progress High Growth	No
Children's Community School	K-6	Yes	Yes	86.4	School of Distinction High Growth	Yes
Children's Village Academy	K-6	Yes	Yes	60.7	Progress High Growth	Yes
CIS Academy	6-8	Yes	Yes	31.7	Priority High Growth	No
Clover Garden	K-12	Yes	Yes	73.8	Progress High Growth	Yes
Community Charter School	K-5	Yes	No	51.2	Priority Expected Growth	Yes
Crosscreek Charter School	K-8	Yes	No	47.3	Priority Expected Growth	No
Crossnore Academy	K-12	Yes	No	48.1	Expected Growth	No
Crossroads Charter High	9-12	Yes	Yes	23.2	High Growth	No
Dillard Academy	K-4	Yes	Yes	49.1	Priority High Growth	No
Downtown Middle	5-8	Yes	No	44.0	Priority Expected Growth	No
East Wake Academy	K-12	No	No	67.7	No Recognition	No
Evergreen Community Charter	K-8	Yes	No	76.4	Progress Expected Growth	No
Exploris	6-8	Yes	Yes	91.6	Honor Excellence High	Yes
Forsyth Academy	K-8	No	No	60.7	No Recognition	No
Francine Delany New School	K-8	Yes	Yes	80.6	School of Distinction High Growth	Yes
Franklin Academy	K-12	No	No	83.8	No Recognition	No
Gaston College Preparatory	5-11	Yes	Yes	77.2	Progress High Growth	Yes
Grandfather Academy	1-12	Yes	No	28.4	Expected Growth	No
Gray Stone Day	9-12	No	No	94.1	No Recognition	No
Greensboro Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	92.1	Honor Excellence High	Yes
Guilford Preparatory	K-8	Yes	No	52.1	Priority Expected Growth	No
Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School	K-12	No	No	43.0	Low Performing	No
Healthy Start Academy	K-8	No	No	28.3	Low Performing	No
Hope Elementary	K-5	Yes	No	44.4	Priority Expected Growth	Yes
Kennedy Charter	6-12	Yes	No	10.4	Expected Growth	No
Kestrel Heights Sch	6-12	No	No	58.6	Priority	Yes
Kinston Charter Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	45.8	Priority High Growth	No
KIPP: Charlotte	5-5	Yes	Yes	56.2	Priority High Growth	No
Lake Norman Charter	5-9	Yes	No	87.8	School of Distinction Expected	Yes
Lincoln Charter	K-12	Yes	No	75.5	Progress Expected Growth	Yes
Magellan Charter	3-8	Yes	Yes	97.7	Honor Excellence High	Yes
Maureen Joy Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	47.8	Priority High Growth	Yes
Metrolina Reg Scholars Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	98.6	Honor Excellence High	Yes
Millennium Charter Academy	K-8	Yes	No	73.4	Progress Expected Growth	Yes
Mountain Discovery Charter	K-8	Yes	No	68.6	Progress Expected Growth	No
Neuse Charter School	K-5	No	No	70.9	No Recognition	Yes
Omuteko Gwamaziima	K-8	N/A	N/A	28.4	ID NS	No
Orange Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	73.9	Progress High Growth	Yes
PACE Academy	7-12	N/A	N/A	72.3	ID NS	Yes
Phoenix Academy Inc	K-5	No	No	73.9	No Recognition	Yes
Piedmont Community Charter	K-12	Yes	Yes	68.5	Progress High Growth	No
PreEminent Charter	K-8	No	No	33.0	Low Performing	No
Provisions Academy	6-12	Yes	No	31.0	Expected Growth	No
Quality Education Academy	K-10	Yes	Yes	54.8	Priority High Growth	No
Queen's Grant Community	K-10	Yes	Yes	76.4	Progress High Growth	No
Quest Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	98.7	Honor Excellence High	Yes

Kateigh Charter High	9-12	Yes	Yes	91.2	Honor Excellence High	Yes
Research Triangle Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	47.2	Priority High Growth	No
River Mill Academy	K-12	Yes	No	71.5	Progress Expected Growth	No
Rocky Mount Preparatory	K-12	Yes	Yes	52.9	Priority High Growth	No
Roxboro Community School	7-11	Yes	No	74.1	Progress Expected Growth	No
Sallie B Howard School	K-8	Yes	Yes	42.6	Priority High Growth	No
Sandhills Theatre Arts Renaiss	K-8	No	No	50.0	Priority	No
Socrates Academy	K-3	Yes	Yes	87.8	School of Distinction High Growth	Yes
Southern Wake Academy	9-12	Yes	Yes	43.0	Priority High Growth	No
SPARC Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	41.3	Priority High Growth	No
Sterling Montessori Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	81.1	School of Distinction High Growth	Yes
Success Charter	K-8	Yes	No	45.2	Priority Expected Growth	No
Sugar Creek Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	46.8	Priority High Growth	No
Summit Charter	K-8	No	No	78.1	No Recognition	Yes
The Academy of Moore County	K-8	No	No	35.8	Low Performing	No
The Hawbridge School	9-12	No	No	71.6	No Recognition	Yes
The Laurinburg Homework Ctr	8-12	Yes	Yes	27.1	High Growth	No
The Learning Center	K-8	Yes	Yes	78.0	Progress High Growth	Yes
The Mountain Community Sch	K-8	Yes	No	80.1	School of Distinction Expected	Yes
The New Dimensions School	K-5	N/A	N/A	38.1	ID NS	No
Thomas Jefferson Class Academy	K-12	Yes	No	82.7	School of Distinction Expected	Yes
Tiller School	K-5	Yes	Yes	70.5	Progress High Growth	Yes
Torchlight Academy	K-5	Yes	Yes	37.4	Priority High Growth	No
Two Rivers Community School	K-8	No	No	65.1	No Recognition	No
Union Academy	K-11	No	No	75.6	No Recognition	No
Vance Charter School	K-8	Yes	Yes	84.0	School of Distinction High Growth	Yes
Voyager Academy	4-7	No	No	74.7	No Recognition	Yes
Washington Montessori	K-8	No	No	56.0	Priority	No
Wilmington Preparatory Academy	K-4	N/A	N/A	30.4	ID NS	No
Woods Charter	1-12	Yes	No	86.8	School of Distinction Expected	Yes

Figure 2. 2007 – 2008 Charter schools in North Carolina.

From the chart in Figure 2, approximately thirty-five percent (35%) of North Carolina's charter schools were either designated low-performing or priority. Out of the nearly 100 charter schools, almost fifty-eight percent (58%) did not make adequate yearly progress.

A consistent theme in North Carolina's charter school landscape is the extremes of academic performance among its charter schools; a large number of charter schools either rank among the bottom performers or the top performers. According to the Blue Ribbon Commission on Charter Schools (2008), thirty percent of North Carolina's charter schools are in the bottom two deciles of charter school performers, 50% of the nearly 100 schools scored at or below the median performance in 2006-2007, and 45% of the charter schools do not perform at or above the average performance of traditional public schools in their counties. Of the 33 schools designated as low-performing or priority, in Figure 3, twenty-one (21) schools had Performance Composite Scores, from the state mandated assessment, of less than 50%.

School Name	Grade Span	Expected Growth	High Growth	Performance Composite	ABC Status	AYP	Student Population	Source of Funds (Amount per Student)	Percentage Difference from State Average
Alpha Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	41.2	Priority High Growth	No	162	7007	-17.8
Arts Based Elementary	K-5	No	No	55.9	Priority	No	274	7799	-8.5
Bridges Charter School	K-8	No	No	59.2	Priority	Yes	141	9746	14.4
C G Woodson Sch of Challenge	K-12	Yes	Yes	43.5	Priority High Growth	No	406	10444	22.6
Cape Lookout Marine Sci High	9-12	No	No	50.0	Priority	No	110	8985	5.4
Carter Community Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	46.9	Priority High Growth	Yes	172	9790	14.9
Charlotte Secondary School	6-6	No	No	58.1	Priority	No	76	10834	27.1
CIS Academy	6-8	Yes	Yes	31.7	Priority High Growth	No	98	9296	9.1
Community Charter School	K-5	Yes	No	51.2	Priority Expected	Yes	149	9008	5.7
Crosscreek Charter School	K-8	Yes	No	47.3	Priority Expected	No	141	8429	-1.1
Dillard Academy	K-4	Yes	Yes	49.1	Priority High Growth	No	129	12023	41.1
Downtown Middle	5-8	Yes	No	44.0	Priority Expected	No	347	9183	7.8
Guilford Preparatory	K-8	Yes	No	52.1	Priority Expected	No	262	7834	-8.1
Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School	K-12	No	No	43.0	Low Performing	No	150	9146	7.3
Healthy Start Academy	K-8	No	No	28.3	Low Performing	No	341	9657	13.3
Hope Elementary	K-5	Yes	No	44.4	Priority Expected	Yes	104	8755	2.7
Kestrel Heights Sch	6-12	No	No	58.6	Priority	Yes	398	9121	7.0
Kinston Charter Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	45.8	Priority High Growth	No	307	8498	-0.3
KIPP: Charlotte	5-5	Yes	Yes	56.2	Priority High Growth	No	93	15528	82.2
Maureen Joy Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	47.8	Priority High Growth	Yes	254	9095	6.7
PreEminent Charter	K-8	No	No	33.0	Low Performing	No	509	7734	-9.2
Quality Education Academy	K-10	Yes	Yes	54.8	Priority High Growth	No	231	9836	15.4
Research Triangle Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	47.2	Priority High Growth	No	625	6766	-20.6
Rocky Mount Preparatory	K-12	Yes	Yes	52.9	Priority High Growth	No	908	14496	70.1
Sallie B Howard School	K-8	Yes	Yes	42.6	Priority High Growth	No	709	8262	-3.0
Sandhills Theatre Arts Renaiss	K-8	No	No	50.0	Priority	No	273	17234	102.3
Southern Wake Academy	9-12	Yes	Yes	43.0	Priority High Growth	No	97	8367	-1.8
SPARC Academy	K-8	Yes	Yes	41.3	Priority High Growth	No	131	9369	10.0
Success Charter	K-8	Yes	No	45.2	Priority Expected	No	94	8555	0.4
Sugar Creek Charter	K-8	Yes	Yes	46.8	Priority High Growth	No	569	8711	2.2
The Academy of Moore County	K-8	No	No	35.8	Low Performing	No	146	7028	-17.5
Torchlight Academy	K-5	Yes	Yes	37.4	Priority High Growth	No	296	8982	5.4
Washington Montessori	K-8	No	No	56.0	Priority High Growth	No	262	9658	13.3

Figure 3. Low-performing and priority charter schools in North Carolina.

Based on demographics of the 33 schools labeled low-performing or priority, two schools span only one grade level, five schools have an elementary focus (K-4 or K-5), and the majority of the schools (17) span grades K-8. Of the four schools designated as low-performing, three of them have a K-8 grade span and the fourth has a K-12 grade span.

In North Carolina, charter schools in need of school improvement and identified as low-performing or priority schools do not receive curricular technical support from State Assistance Teams/Turn Around Teams/Intensive Support Teams by the NCDPI. When traditional public schools fall into the category of low-performing, technical support from state teams is offered to the LEA. When charter schools are identified as low performing schools, they are at risk of closure. Nationwide, charter schools' academic performance meets or exceeds the performance of district schools, but critics charge that in North Carolina the academic quality of charter schools lags behind other schools (Stoops, 2007).

While charter schools participate in state and federal schools programs, the overwhelming number of school closures has been for fiscal or management issues rather than for academic performance. In briefly examining the financial support of charter schools in North Carolina, it should be noted that many of the schools' per student funding amounts are higher than the state average. These operating funds come from local, state, and federal sources. The financial support includes all expenses concerned with operating a charter school. The 2007 – 2008 state average per student funding about was \$8521 for NC. Of the 33 schools in Figure 3, twenty-three (23) charter schools had per student funding amounts higher than that of the state. Of the ten low-performing or priority schools that did not exceed a source of funds per student greater than the state average, seven (7) were less than 10% away from the average and one (1) was over 20% away from the state average in source of funds per student. Twelve charter schools had financial support, per student, that was 10% or greater than the state average, and 6 of these were larger than 20%, while one charter school was over 100% or twice the state average in

funding per student.

In addition to looking at Performance Composite Scores and funding, two other sources of data have been instrumental in examining the landscape in educational leadership of North Carolina charter school executives. The two sources of data were a 2008 survey (Figure 4) administered to explore the possible professional development needs of these school executives and a review conducted by the NCDPI on the credentials of the nearly 100 charter school executives.

Figure 4. Results as of 04/11/2008 from survey.

The survey was developed and administered through Zoomerang. All of North Carolina's charter school executives were invited to participate in the survey. The response rate from those invited to participate was approximately 28.4%.

Question	Response	Percentage
Are you a licensed principal in the State of North Carolina?	YES	48
	NO	52
Does your faculty currently meet the 75% state licensure requirement for grades K-5?	YES	83
	NO	17
Does your faculty currently meet the 50% state licensure requirement for grades 6 through 8?	YES	96
	NO	4
Do you have 3 or more years experience as a licensed school principal in North Carolina?	YES	48
	NO	52
Do you feel you were adequately trained to be a Charter School principal?	YES	33
	NO	67
Do you plan to continue as a charter school principal/leader over the next five years?	YES	67
	NO	33
If a leadership program was offered that would enhance your effectiveness as a Charter School Principal, would you participate?	YES	93
	NO	7

Data from the survey indicates that fifty-two percent (52%) of the respondents had less than 3 years of experience in school administration. Charter school principals are responsible for maintaining the LEA/charter school, as a traditional principal with the expectation of leading the LEA/charter school as a traditional public school superintendent, without the support of a central office staff. Data from the 2008 survey revealed that 67% of the respondents said they were not adequately trained to lead a charter school. The 2008 survey also confirmed data received from the NCDPI stating that only 50% of the nearly 100 charter school principals were licensed in school administration (M. Cash, personal correspondence, April 11, 2008).

### Implications

The research suggests that we need to seek ways to increase the number of licensed school executives in low-performing or priority charter schools. The research shows that we need to design programs that will provide charter school leaders with the knowledge and skills to improve their current practice. Leadership programs should ensure the development of relationships for systems of change, in order for these charter school executives to lead competitive schools designed for student success in a 21st Century global economy. We need to develop programs that will give charter school executives the skills that will effect high academic student achievement and increase the sustainability of leaders in charter schools.

We need to design leadership programs for charter school executives that will build partnerships with community stakeholders, university school administration licensure programs, school leader-practitioners in the school district, and professional leadership organizations. We should help school executives integrate the use of data, build capacity and incorporate ethical and principled, goal-



oriented actions that lead to high academic performance, while emphasizing research-based best practices. Educational leaders must have in depth and research-based theory and practice to lead in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005).

Lastly, there seems to be a need for leadership programs for charter school executives that will train them and a school leadership team to transform the school program, for sustainable and continuous improvement. Charter school executives need to learn and effectively model the newly adopted seven (7) North Carolina Standards for School Executives. The seven (7) standards are:

1. Strategic Leadership: School executives will create conditions that result in strategically reimagining the school's vision, mission, and goals in the 21st Century.
2. Instructional Leadership: School executives set high standards for the professional practice of 21st Century instruction and assessment that result in a no nonsense accountable environment.
3. Cultural Leadership: School executives will understand and act on the understanding of the important role a school's culture plays in contributing the exemplary performance of the school.
4. Human Resource Leadership: School executives will ensure that the school is a professional learning community.
5. Managerial Leadership: School executives that the school has processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem-solving, communicating expectations, and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building.
6. External Development Leadership: School executives will design structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership.
7. Micro-Political Leadership: School executives will build systems and relationships that utilize the staff's diversity, encourage constructive ideological conflict in order leverage staff expertise.

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