

ADVERTISING AND CHARTER SCHOOL FAMILIES

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Master of Arts in Professional Communication

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**APPROVAL PAGE**

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entitled

Advertising and Charter School Families

Presented by Kara Finley

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Communication  
and hereby that, in our opinion, is worthy of acceptance.

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**Abstract**

Utah is steadily approving new charter schools and those charters are seeing increased enrollment numbers. One factor of student enrollment is how charter schools reach prospective families to alert them to application opportunities. This study examined the advertising impressions recorded by a Utah charter school and the corresponding survey to determine advertising's effect on the currently enrolled families. Correlations were found between the impressions and survey, yielding results between enrollments and advertising impact. There are benefits to charter school advertising including increased enrollment, family beliefs regarding the school system, and future word of mouth promotion.

*Keywords: charter school, enrollment, advertising*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Advertisements may have the ability to shape perceptions and motivate individuals into action. Advertising is a powerful force that may influence people's behavior and impact society (Schudson, 1993). If advertising can have an impact commercially, perhaps it can be useful in influencing local prospective families decisions to enroll their students in a charter school or another academic institution (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004).

Since charter schools emerged in Utah over a decade ago they have continually been in the spotlight of both the legislature and the media based on growth. This study will focus primarily on charter schools and advertising based on the charter school models increasing popularity and emergence into altering traditional public school education. Charter schools are public schools that are publicly funded and open to all students. In the state of Utah there are no boundaries for charter schools as long as the students are Utah residents or military based (Evans, 2014).

Charter schools offer parents and students a choice in location and curricular emphasis while allowing educators the opportunity to try new strategies and innovative methods to inspire and educate students. Charter schools also generally receive less per pupil funding than public schools and must allocate their money differently to accommodate for renting or purchasing of facilities (normally bonded in school districts), start-up costs, specified curriculum and professional development training, and advertising (Batdorff, 2014). "Consistent with the Prince report (1999), there appears to be a significant difference in spending patterns between the charter schools and the local public schools" (Horn & Miron, 2000, p. 23).

Charter schools are often confused with private schools, but are classified as public schools due to the receipt of state and federal funds. Since charter schools are government funded, and receive a charter based on academic agreements, they can be designated as non-profit entities (501(c)(3) status), they are open to all students and must be committed to finding and implementing innovative practices in public education. Each charter school is a unique educational environment governed by an independent Board of Directors with a specific vision for its school and curricular focus. "The goal of charter schools is to

provide additional educational options with quality outcomes for students and parents” (Utah State Office of Education, 2011).

While not all charter schools fit the needs for all students, there is a great push in educational reform to endorse future charter schools (Rofes, 2004). “Student enrollment in Utah charter schools grew 11 percent since last fall, and those schools are accounting for a greater population” (Jacobsen, 2014). Utah is not the only region to see charter school growth; nationally there has been a continual boom in charter school enrollment. “Today in the U.S. there are 2.9 million students being served by over 6,700 charter schools across 42 states and the District of Columbia” (Zgainer & Kerwin, 2015).

Utah has become increasingly supportive of charter schools and the State Board of Education has added a charter school committee to ensure charter representation on key issues. Another consideration is that not all charter schools are on par with their local district public schools. In order to maintain enrollment and educational excellence in comparison with other public schools, charter schools are required to consistently prove themselves, they have charter applications and agreements that must be followed as well as periodic reviews from the Utah State Charter School Board, such as the Charter Fidelity Survey (Utah State Office of Education, 2015). Periodically, reports are released containing enrollment figures, retention rates, school scores, graduation rates, and governance standards. These rigid standards have led to “KIPP and other “no excuses” charter models boast[ing] 80 percent graduation rates in America’s roughest neighborhoods, nearly twice the norm” (Jackson, 2009, p. 14).

Nationally, a variety of studies have been conducted to determine whether charter schools or traditional public schools are better able to serve students. One study was completed by Adam Ozimek, an economic analyst, and his findings are discussed below.

How are charter schools doing compared to public schools? Among wonks, the conventional wisdom has congealed: on average, not much better. This is technically true, but as the economic analyst Adam Ozimek points out, this is misleading, as averages so often are. The most widely cited studies concerning charter schools actually paint a much more complicated, and much more encouraging, picture: Charter schools

that cater principally to poor students — and especially those that primarily serve black students — do much, much better than public schools (Gobry, 2015).

The Center for Educational Reform releases annual rankings and scorecards reports. Based on the report, Utah has the tenth strongest charter school laws and received a B grade. The excerpt from the report by Zgainer and Kerwin (2015) is exhibited in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**

**UTAH**  
(Law passed in 1998; 10th strongest of the nation's 43 charter laws)

**B**

Utah's charter school law is considered strong because it provides nearly equitable funding to charter schools, facilities funding, and a strong authorizing system that includes capable independent bodies such as universities and the semi-independent state charter board. However, enrollment caps imposed by the state board threaten true parent power.

INDEPENDENT OR MULTIPLE AUTHORIZERS - YES (3)	
APPROVAL	School boards and the Utah State Charter School Board, which is semi-independent but derives its authority from the State Board of Education can serve as authorizers. Designated universities and technical schools can authorize charters subject to the approval by the state board.
APPEAL	Yes. Applications denied by the school board or the Utah State Charter School Board may be appealed to the State Board of Education. The state board's decision is final.
OPERATIONAL AUTONOMY	
STATE	Limited. Automatic exemptions for a small number of rules and regulations exist, but in most cases, waiver requests are considered on a case-by-case basis. Virtual schools are allowed. Management contracts with education service providers are not restricted in any way. The state charter board can impose additional restrictions, rules and regulations as it sees fit.
LOCAL	Limited. Waiver requests considered on a case-by-case basis. Employment and personnel decisions are left up to the charter school. Charter schools are LEAs for the purpose of special education.
TEACHER FREEDOM	Yes. Teachers are exempt from district collective bargaining agreements. Charter schools may opt in or opt out of the state's retirement system.
NUMBER OF SCHOOLS ALLOWED	
CAP	No cap on the number of schools in the state. The state charter school enrollment cap is regulated by the state board and is subject to legislative appropriation of funds. For the 2015-16 school year, an additional 8,450 students were allowed to attend charters over the 2014-15 enrollment of 66,578.

The push for educational reform has afforded parents and students options for school choice. Prospective families are being defined as a parent with a school-age child. Prospective parents are

considered legal adults who have one or more school-aged children. Parents have a choice in which form of public or private educational institution they can enroll their students in, such as traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and home school.

In comparing the four main educational choices in Utah, as outlined by the Utah State Office of Education, private schools are not required to be accredited, are not required to use student standardized tests, and are not required to hire licensed teachers. Home school parents are not required to follow a traditional calendar or meet a specific number of school days, may be provided curriculum but can choose to educate from any curriculum source, are not accredited institutions, have the option to participate in standardized testing, and the home school teacher is not required to have any educational certification or background. Traditional public schools are accredited, use standardized testing, and hire licensed teachers; similarly, charter schools must become accredited through AdvancED Accreditation starting their inaugural year, have students perform at or above level on state standardized tests, and teachers are required to be authorized by licensure, ARL (Alternative Routes to Licensure authorization), District Authorized, or be termed as eminently qualified to teach (Utah State Office of Education, 2015).

Table 2 provides an overview of the main differences between the four main educational choices in Utah (Utah State Office of Education, 2012).

**TABLE 2**

	<b>Charter School</b>	<b>Public School</b>	<b>Private School</b>	<b>Home School</b>
<b>Acceptance of Students</b>	Must accept all students up to enrollment cap.	Must accept all students.	Can establish standards for student acceptance.	Not applicable.
<b>Accreditation</b>	Required.	Required.	Optional.	Not applicable.
<b>Assessments</b>	Required standardized testing.	Required standardized testing.	Not applicable.	Optional participation in standardized testing.
<b>Costs of Attendance</b>	Tuition free.	Tuition free.	Tuition applicable.	Not applicable.
<b>Core Curriculum</b>	Required.	Required.	Not applicable.	Optional.
<b>Funding</b>	State and federal based on October 1 student enrollment count	State and federal based on student average daily membership (ADM)	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
<b>Mission &amp; Operational Flexibility</b>	Required educational emphasis and	District level oversight.	Optional.	Not applicable.

	school-level flexibility.			
<b>Provisional Boundaries</b>	Not applicable.	Required – waivers allowed.	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
<b>Teacher Certifications</b>	Required.	Required.	Optional.	Not applicable.

The options for educational facilities in Utah, such as traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools, lead to variation in education along with a charter schools ability to incorporate strategic curricular missions to attract students and parents. The variety of options lends itself to a competitive educational market with parent school choice at the forefront and schools contending for students. This project focused primarily on advertising recall and whether advertising was a factor in student enrollment but also allowed respondents to rank each type of educational option.

Students in the state of Utah are enrolled in charter schools through the use of a randomized lottery process for the enrollment and registration of students (Burns, 2010). The lottery process ensures all students have an equal opportunity to enroll in the charter school regardless of race, national origin, or gender (Utah Administrative Code, 2015). Once a school reaches its approved enrollment numbers, any new students must be randomly selected to enter the school, not forgoing students with preference. Preference is an optional specific order of enrollment that may be awarded to students based on the charter application submitted and approved by the Utah State Board of Education (Utah State Board of Education, 2015). Preference for the three schools that are included in this project have opted to first give preference to currently enrolled students, second to students of founding members, third to students of current teachers, and finally to siblings of currently enrolled students. After the preference students are accepted and if there are still openings in the school, the lottery will randomly select applicants from the lottery pool.

Advertising is used to notify prospective parents and students of an opening charter school or existing charter school with available seats and to create awareness of enrollment periods. Charter schools advertise because they aren't restricted by district or neighborhood boundaries and, "don't have any kind of built-in student body" (Niederberger, 2010, p. S-3).

When a new traditional public school opens in Utah, the district in which the new school is opening usually revises the school enrollment boundaries and opens with full enrollment. In comparison, when a new charter school opens in Utah, there are no currently enrolled students to allocate to the new campus. Instead, new charter schools utilize advertising to construct an entire student body in order to reach the necessary student enrollment. Charter schools in Utah have been known to budget between \$5,000-\$100,000 to use in advertising efforts for enrolling students (Utah State Auditor, 2014). Charter school advertising may include billboards, direct mail, property signs, yard signs, television commercials, and a variety of other tactics.

This project sought to determine whether parents recalled exposed to charter school advertising and if it contributed to a prospective parents willingness to enroll their student(s) at a charter school. In addition, the study sought to gain data on if respondents recalled viewing an advertisement, the recollection of the advertisement, and if it influenced their enrollment behavior. The project was necessary in order to gain a greater understanding of advertisings impact on educational choice as well as evaluate advertisement comprehension. Research on charter school advertising impact is scarce and conversations with charter school administrators also yield little understanding of the results of advertising, despite how much money is spent annually on such efforts.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The advertising study followed prominent theorist, Harold Lasswell's model. "Even though this model has been criticized for the assumed media effects and other models have been proposed... Lasswell's 1948 model still stands as a classic in the field of communication" (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000, p. 17).

The model poses the five following questions: Who? Says what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect? The survey instrument will focus on the Lasswell's models questions to determine the effects of advertising, effectiveness, and what should continue to be included in a charter schools advertising toolkit. To what degree was a parent, family, or student persuaded? How has the information that was disseminated affected the receiver?

In this study, the who is the advertiser, a local education agency (LEA) or charter school. The local charter school is saying that they provide an innovative method for students to learn and that a prospective parent should enroll his or her children in the school. The charter school is using a variety of advertising channels for delivery to prospective parents and students and the overall desired effect is to encourage parents to enroll his or her students.

This study considered the five questions based on Lasswell's model in addition to advertisement recall and enrollment decisions. Based on what is known about advertising exposure through manifest effects, the following questions were latently posed through the survey and focus groups:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How were parents exposed to charter school advertising?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What form(s) of advertising did the parents see?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How did the advertising impact the parent's decision to attend the charter school?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What is the relationship between parent's exposure to advertising and enrollment?

The intent of applying Lasswell's model is to test the knowledge and recall of the formula questions. "We each like to think we can resist advertising and it has no impact on us. This notion...makes light of the power of advertising and helps us preserve our sense of autonomy and individuality...Thus, we play into the hands of advertisers who use our illusion that we are not affected

by advertising” (Berger, 2007, p. 3-4). Based on previous parent interactions, many parents feel as though they sought out the educational opportunity and were not influenced by outside factors (Dohrer, 2015). However, sometimes if individuals are questioned further as to how they learned about the school initially they pinpoint an advertisement that helped direct them to the charter school. For instance, at a recent informational meeting a parent discussed the search for educational options. The parent was adamant that they initiated the search, but ended up discussing how the spark to research educational options was based on a social media advertisement (Dohrer, 2015). The parent was participating in behaviors that engaged them on social media and may cause the parent to partake of additional behaviors in regards to researching, such as may be displayed through manifest functions.

Robert Merton, developer of manifest functions, was a theorist who suggested that people observe or expect consequences when partaking in behaviors. For example, when reading an advertisement, the manifest function exists that reinforces intentional activities and an effect based upon the content to which the reader is exposed. If Lasswell’s model is used properly to frame the advertisements, then there is an expected positive consequence/outcome from those receiving the advertisement based upon the theory of manifest effect. “The manifest functions of an activity, entity, or institution are those that are obvious or intended...the manifest function of advertising is to sell products and services” (Berger, 2007, p. 192).

Manifest function in education can be defined as the intended outcomes of education, which when aligned with the charter schools teaching may influence desire to enroll. Just as Berger (2007) stated above, the manifest function is to sell a product, service, intended outcome, or influence an activity.

The manifest functions of education can be enumerated quite readily. Education, in the view of some, is concerned with the transmission of knowledge for its own sake. In the view of others, it is concerned with the transmission of knowledge that will have practical use for life. In either case, the functions of education are viewed as relating to individuals by themselves and their individual careers in life. Furthermore, education is supposed to transmit values or, as many parents put it when asked what they expect of the schools

which their children attend, to teach children the difference between right and wrong (Campbell, 1982, p. 33-34).

Charter school advertisements vary, but generally highlight the following selling points: schools grades served, educational focus, college readiness, and career training. “The most basic manifest function of education then is the transmission of knowledge.” (Aydogan, 2009, p. 425).

One of the manifest functions Aydogan (2009) discusses is the raising of innovative change. While charter schools are traditional in their core teachings, each embodies a curricular emphasis and uses innovative teaching methods. The school’s advertisements feature these innovative strategies by discussing the personalized education available within the charter school focused on business. A charter school may try to enroll students using a variety of advertising methods while hoping for the manifest effect to take place using forward framing. “Research has investigated how advertising can influence experience has assessed "forward framing," where the advertising is presented before the experience” (Braun-LaTour, LaTour, Pickrell, & Loftus, 2004, p. 7).

By no means will all prospective parents be persuaded to enroll in a charter school after seeing an advertisement. Some charter schools are using a smattering of advertising options, basically like throwing spaghetti against the wall to see what sticks. This study will test the marketing strategy and framing experiences of prospective families since the school doesn’t have historical data to track effective recruitment methods. Prospective parents may hold preconceived notions regarding charter schools and rely heavily on personal experiences in the traditional public or private school system instead of advertising based knowledge. “Media effects are limited by aspects of the audience’s personal and social lives.” (West & Turner, 2010, p. 393).

While the Laswell Formula and manifest functions are complementary theories, the limited effects theory showcases the impact of media being influenced by an individual’s personal life. Some of the arguments against charter schools include that they may extract students and funding from traditional public schools. On the flip side, charter schools also offer a choice in education and relieve school districts from overcrowding in areas where they are not able to keep up with the local population growth.

The charter school that will be focused on has faced multiple administrative changes, a grade configuration change, and a name change. Due to the changes at the charter school, the community has struggled with commitment and hence the school has had to use a variety of advertising methods to fill enrollment annually. The charter school has overcome the series of setbacks to enact foundational changes, which have created a solid educational foundation. However, enrollment is still a primary focus to once again brand the charter school as an academically achieving educational option.

Individuals may have a negative or positive perspective of charter schools that will not change due to media based on their beliefs about the previously noted situations or for other personal reasons. People are affected by their personal experiences and are recognized as such through the limited effects theory. Granted, the theory does occasionally tend to remove credibility from the receivers because, “When the media do play a role, we still need to discover how much effect belongs to the messages and how much to the way the messengers package the messages, and which they omit” (Gans, 1993, p. 32-33).

Some mass communication theorists argue that the mass media have relatively minor effects on the scheme of things. They cite research that shows, for example, that media effects don't tend to be long lasting and argue that mass media's strong effects have not been demonstrated. When they testify before governmental agencies, advertisers argue that advertisements and commercials have limited effects, and when dealing with clients they argue that they have powerful effects (Berger, 2007, p. 192).

Advertisers are playing both sides of the field when it comes to selling advertising. There are in some cases manifest functions and in others limited effects. This study will follow the belief of manifest functions but recognize drawbacks based on limited effects. “The focus on manifest communication content is essential to producing scientifically valid results. By analyzing the obvious meaning, the researcher can produce objective results” (Pointdexter & McCombs, 2000, p. 188).

When relating media effects and limitations to charter schools, the study researcher understood that parents have to learn about the educational opportunity through some channel. However, the

effectiveness of the media toward persuasion of enrollment can be based on the limited effects of the advertisement, or the parents' beliefs on whether or not they were influenced.

With the first charter schools cropping up in Utah a little more than a decade ago, advertising has become an integral part of creating a functioning and viable student body. In the 2009-2010 school year, seventy-two charter schools had been approved by the Utah State Charter Board to serve 34,166 students (Utah State Office of Education, 2011). "From 1999–2000 to 2007–08, the number of students enrolled in charter schools in the United States more than tripled, from 340,000 to 1.3 million students" (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

From the charter applications submitted over the last three years, roughly half have been approved. It is a tedious, time-consuming endeavor to write a charter and receive the initial grading. Should the charter pass the initial grading, the charter would enter into a six-month revision period before approaching the Utah State Charter Board for consideration – with this process starting two and a half years before the school would be scheduled to open if approved, unless a waiver is sought. The State Charter Board, the residential school district, or an institute of higher education can approve charter schools. The charter schools Board of Directors consists of three to nine members governing the school and the charter limits state regulations, which provides an alternative to the public school system (Berko, 1995).

Nationwide, the charter application process, approval process, and authorization period vary. Utah provides charter schools with lifetime authorizations, whereas other authorizers require strict oversight and require charters to return for re-authorization.

The original charter idea was to open the public school monopoly to competition from new schools, operated on contract by other organizations: nonprofits, teacher cooperatives, universities, even for-profit businesses. The charter was usually a five-year performance contract, laying out the results expected from the school. Charter authorizers – typically school districts or state boards of education – would reject charter applications

from groups that did not appear equipped to succeed, and they would close schools if students did not learn as promised (Osborne, 2015).

The arduous charter approval process allows for extended advertising time periods before the charter school opens its doors. Charter school advertising too far in advance may yield limited results, such as building familiarity. For example, a charter school looking to open in 2014-2015 had to apply by April 1, 2012, present to the State Charter School Board in January 2013, and then become approved in February 2013 (Utah State Office of Education, 2014). This timeline affords the school a full planning year to prepare, build, and advertise. Typically, new charter schools tend to start advertising eight to ten months before opening and will open their lottery simultaneously. The long advertising period may integrate the school into the lives of those who enroll as a commonplace educational option, thereby alleviating unfamiliarity and influencing personal beliefs.

A study performed in 2006, under the direction of the Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah, asked why parents enroll their children in charter schools. The researchers surveyed parents regarding their decision to enroll students in charter schools and found the following items.

The reasons for selecting charter schools clustered into five categories, including safe and inviting climates, academics, dissatisfaction with previous school, individualized attention, and convenience...Parents reported a number of ways in which they are satisfied with charter schools, including (1) the ability to exercise choice, (2) the perceived benefits to their child reflected by the individualization and advancement of their child, (3) the engagement of parents in the school and in decision making, (4) the perceived unique or “innovative” features of charter schools, (5) school discipline and safety, and, (6) the belief that teachers are held to a higher standard and are more accountable for their teaching (Rorrer, Hausman, & Groth, 2006, p. vi-vii).

If charter school advertising follows the findings of this study focusing on the charter schools particular curricular emphasis and teaching style, they can probably influence additional parents to enroll.

Advertising is a great avenue for informing prospective students of the charter schools focus, theme, or mission and may allow for a great connection to the prospective parent and student. Questions similar to the Utah Educational Policy Center may be used in order to determine if the study's results are longitudinally accurate and apply to this local charter school.

### **Chapter 3: Method**

The survey was designed to evaluate if advertising is an influencing factor in gaining enrollment. A pilot study of the survey was performed to test the survey instrument as well as to identify if the survey questions were understandable, well defined, and written concisely. One coder was used for the convenience sample pilot study as well as twenty-four respondents.

After the pilot study was completed and reviewed, changes were made to the testing instruments; namely, correcting the categories so there were no overlapping values as well as a better coding key for open-ended responses. In addition, some question categories were combined to make it a user-friendly survey that would seem less daunting to the respondent.

The populations of respondents were of legal guardians of students at the charter school. Since the total population of the primary survey site is roughly 225 families, study participants were recruited to create a convenience sample. Two additional schools were surveyed to act as comparison locations. All guardians at the charter schools were invited to participate in an online survey.

The survey participants were notified of their rights before taking the survey and asked to verify they received the university-approved disclosure and were willing participants. Survey respondents that did not consent were disqualified from the survey. Individuals who consented were able to proceed through the survey. The survey was available for a two-week time period and each family was only able to complete one survey.

Participants were asked to recall the advertisements they had seen and the effectiveness of the ads. They were also asked basic enrollment questions to determine their main advertising impressions for student enrollment. The questions were not offensive to any protected classes or religious groups, nor should they have put any protected class at-risk.

The primary charter school where the study took place has a very limited advertising budget. The school allocated \$5,000-\$7,500 for all advertising expenditures in the first year of opening and have allocated approximately \$3,000-\$7,500 annually thereafter. This includes all events and open houses, print materials and collateral, swag, and local advertisements. This budget is similar to most brick-and-

mortar charter schools in the first year, as they receive no monies until July 1 (Utah State Auditor, 2014). Schools may apply for a Start-Up Grant, which may be used to cover costs in the start-up year including salaries, training, and advertising.

After all the participants completed the survey, the data was collected and compared to test relationships and suggest results, “moreover, experimental research and some forms of survey research and comparative content analysis come pretty close to meeting mainstream positivist standards and strongly suggest (not prove) significant (not vast) media effects” (Entman, 1994, p. 314).

The primary survey site received a 56% response rate, which was over the initial goal of a 50% response rate and was on par with previous school-sponsored surveys conducted. The surveys were collected through SurveyMonkey, then were evaluated using the program-created data trends, response categories across the survey, imported into IBM SPSS Statistics software for analysis, and graphed using Microsoft Excel.

The results of the primary site survey, as well as the two comparison locations, were analyzed to view trends in comparison to school-kept data on advertising impressions as well as to the budget. The analysis of each site was then turned into a report for each schools review. The report included historical data on advertising impressions, budget analysis, the survey completed for this study, and future recommendations. The report was then bound and provided to each school sites administration. The primary site report is attached as Appendix II. The two comparison locations reports are attached as Appendix III and Appendix IV.

### Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

As a companion tool to the survey project, the data from the school gathered advertising impressions and the budgets for the 2014-2015 recruiting season were collected. These two data collections were used to provide additional comparative data to the study.

The full results of the survey can be found in Appendix II under the *Advertising Specific Survey* section. There were 126 respondents at the primary location as well as 280 additional respondents at two comparison locations. The demographics of the primary location were that the respondents were 94% female, 87% between the ages of 26 and 45, 93% married, and 92% white. Respondents had an average of 3.23 children but only had an average of 1.64 children in the school (Appendix II). The comparison locations yielded similar demographics. The location of the respondents are that the majority live within two miles of the charter school, which matches the comparison surveys, and provides a good distance for the charter school to target for future advertisements.

The research questions provided a good structure for the survey and result interpretation. The questions were centered on advertising, specific forms of advertising, and their relationship to the attitudes regarding the school system. The results and discussion section will be focused around answering the research questions.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How were parents exposed to charter school advertising?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What form(s) of advertising did the parents see?

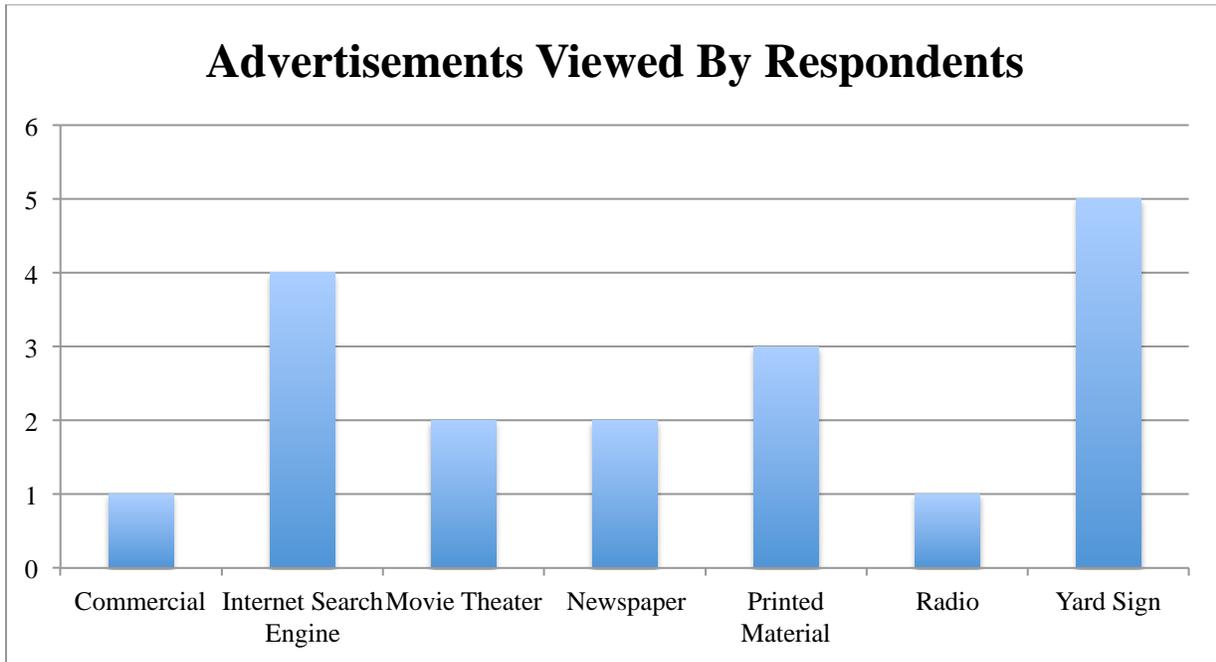
RQ<sub>3</sub>: How did the advertising impact the parent's decision to attend the charter school?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What is the relationship between parent's exposure to advertising and enrollment?

Out of the primary site respondents, only 15.1% cited that they had seen an advertisement for the charter school. While this number was much lower than anticipated, it does correlate with results discussed later regarding word of mouth advertising. Additional questions and a reflection on the advertising impressions also show that this number may be skewed according to the population's interpretation of the question. The rate of respondents seeing advertisements was almost double at the other two comparison survey sites.

The respondents cited seven different advertising mediums and the school had utilized all of the mediums in the past six years. Chart 1 illustrates the forms of advertising described by the respondents in a free-response question.

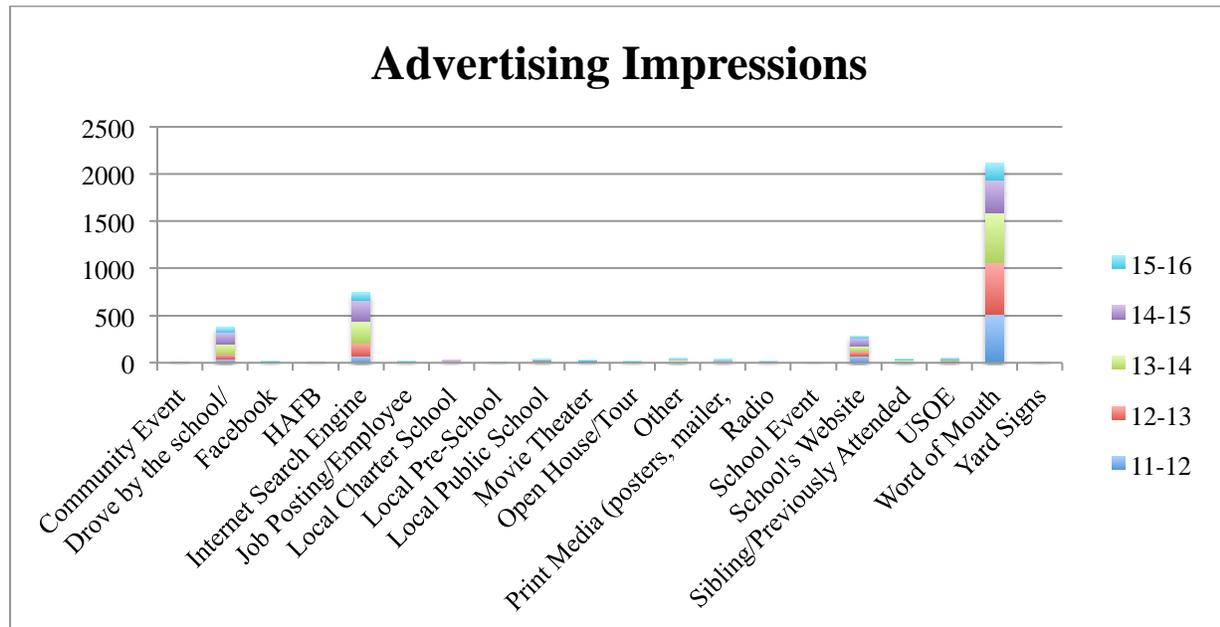
**CHART 1**



The free response question regarding the advertisements viewed by the respondents can also be found on the data included in the school-gathered advertising impressions report, minus the commercial which could have been attributed to another advertising category, such as the movie theater advertising. The school-gathered advertising impressions are illustrated in Chart 2.

According to the school-gathered advertising impressions, the top ways that families are citing they heard about the school are through word of mouth, internet search engines and the school website, and driving by the school and seeing school signage. These three advertising areas made an appearance through the advertising surveys.

**CHART 2**



When respondents were asked if the advertisement they saw influenced them to learn more or to enroll their student, 47.4% answered that it was an influencing factor. Some respondents only claimed that the advertisement was only partially responsible for their enrollment (21.1%), while only 31.6% said that it was not an influencing factor.

The two comparison survey sites showed interesting information when asked about charter school information. One site had 37.9% of respondents indicating they saw an advertisement with the majority being on Facebook (the others matched the primary site) and 74.5% of those respondents indicated the advertisement was influential. The other comparison site had 37.4% of respondents cite they saw an advertisement. Of those that saw an advertisement at the second comparison site, 77.8% of the respondents said that the advertisement was influential.

The two comparison sites have results that are very comparable to one another. One limitation of the survey was that only three sites, with one of them acting as the primary, were surveyed. If additional sites could be surveyed then the results of the advertising questions at the primary site could be evaluated further to determine if it is an outlier or the standard, especially considering that the two comparison sites are showing such similar results on the survey.

A more specific form of advertising used by the school was to host informational meetings and open houses. Out of the respondents, 47.9% indicated attendance at an informational meeting, open house, or tour. Providing these types of events is an advertisement tool for the school to get families on-site, meeting with administration to discuss their needs, and to encourage enrollment. While parents may not interpret attendance at an open house as an advertising tool, it is definitely a method used to engage families and help them visualize their child’s education in the charter school setting.

It is interesting to note that the primary study site has increased availability of open houses and tour in the last two recruitment cycles. With 60% of respondents citing that attending an informational meeting, open house, or tour was an influencing factor to encourage student enrollment, that number is reflected in the recent jump of open house based enrollment, as illustrated by Chart 3.

**CHART 3**

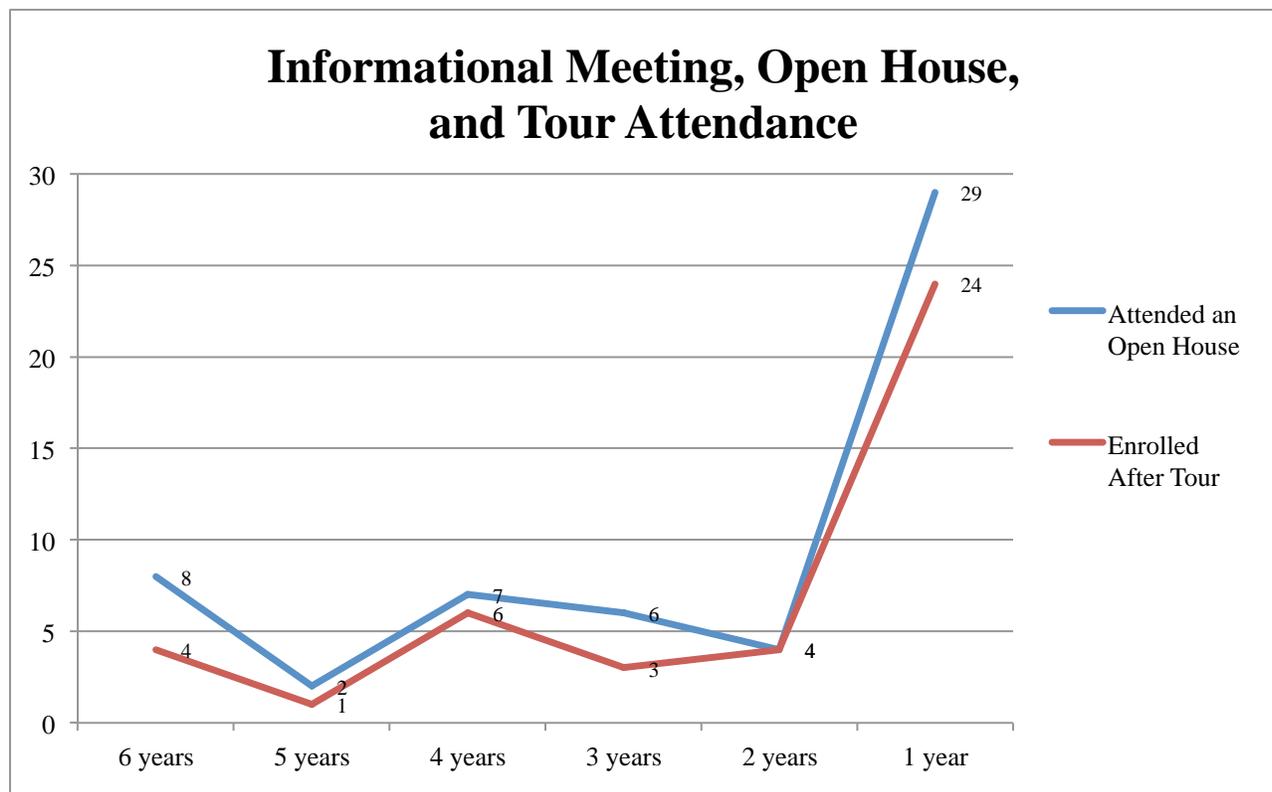
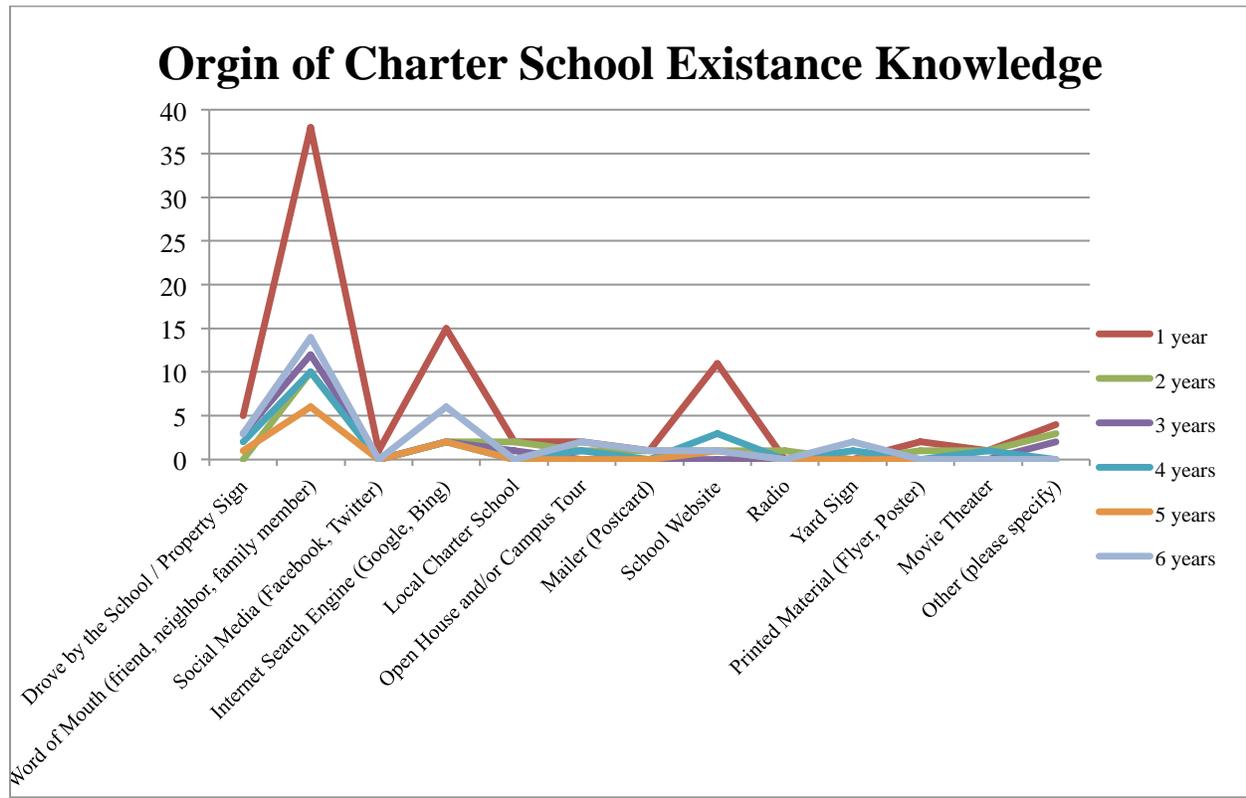


Chart 4 outlines the respondents free-response answers when they asked how they heard about the charter school, broken down by years of attendance.

**CHART 4**



The answers to the question of how the respondents heard about the charter school were varied. However, the top three responses included word of mouth (75.6%), Internet search engines and the school website (39%), and property signage/school building (13%). These three categories match the top three advertising impressions recorded by the charter school as displayed in Chart 2. The three categories are being highlighted throughout the survey due to their latent advertising effects, effectiveness, and minimal costs.

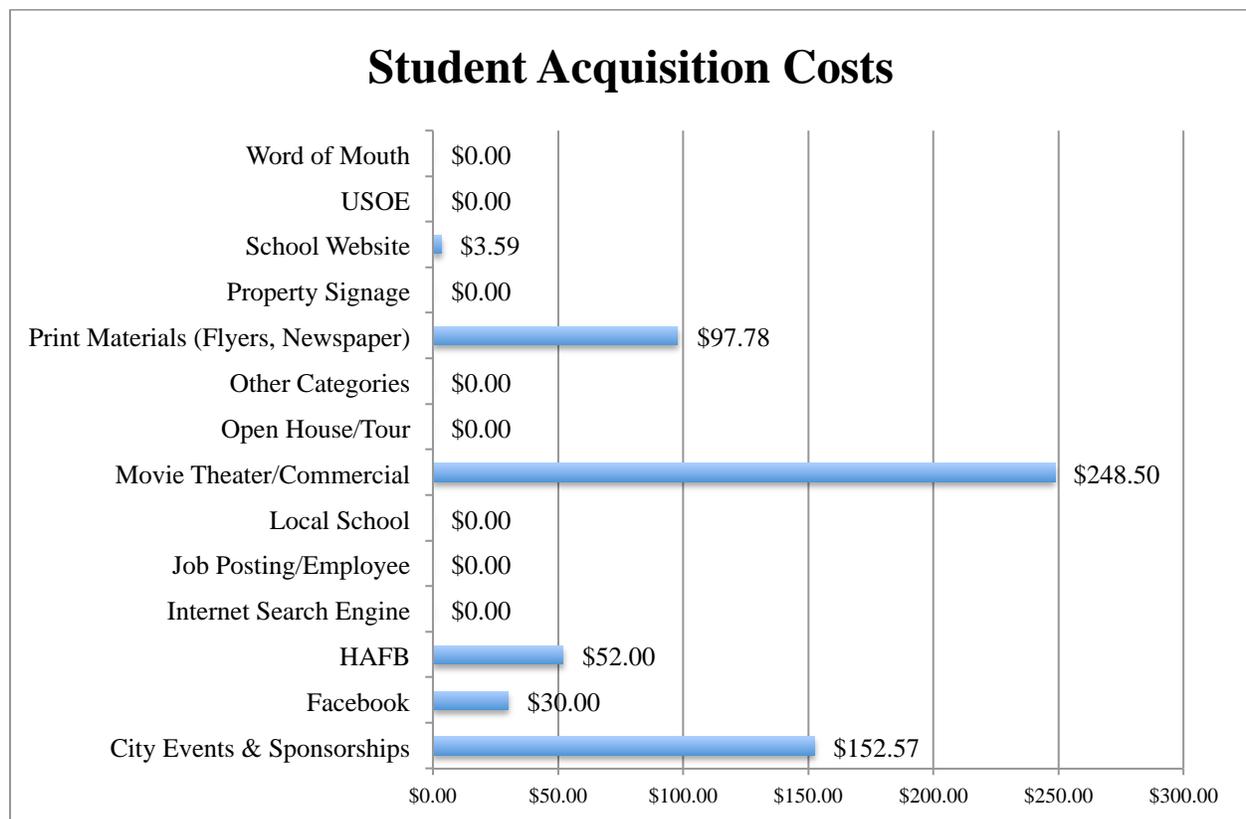
Approximately half of the respondents that cited seeing an advertisement or attended an open house answered that it was an influencing factor to enroll their child in the charter school. By using manifest effect as a predictive tool, the anticipated results strongly suggest a correlation between increased desire to enroll students and exposure to advertising. Informing prospective parents using advertising through a variety of mediums could provide clarity in deciding if they would consider

enrolling their children. The results also pinpoint what advertising streams were the most productive and had the best recall and response.

Chart 5 shows the areas of advertising used by the school for the 2014-2015 recruitment season and the Student Acquisition Cost. Taking the advertising expenses from October 1, 2013 to October 1, 2014, and evaluating it against the school-gathered advertising impressions determined the Student Acquisition Cost (SAC). In the 2014-2015 school year recruitment, no updates to school signage were required and word of mouth was a free advertising source.

The average primary survey site SAC was \$5.46 per impression when the advertising budget was considered against the advertising impressions. A comparison site yielded a SAC of \$3.06.

**CHART 5**



Based on the survey results, the *who* is the charter school saying that parents have educational options available and that enrollment is open. The channels being used by the school include city events and sponsorships, social media, Hill Air Force Base (HAFB), Internet search engines, job postings, local

traditional public schools, movie theater and commercial advertising, open houses and tours, print materials including newspapers, property signage, school website, and word of mouth. All the channels used were directed towards prospective families to encourage enrollment.

While the survey only showed about a fifty percent indicator from respondents that advertising was the encouraging source of enrollment, advertising has a clear effect on prospective families. The top most effective way to recruit families was through word of mouth advertising.

Word of mouth advertising is free to the school and is the unpaid spread of a positive message about the school to prospective families. The school is not able to regulate word of mouth advertising, but in speaking with school administration they have tried to strategically manage and encourage it through efforts such as referral contests, pass-along cards, social media information, and publishing testimonials.

The second most effective way to recruit is through the Internet, consisting of search engines and the school website. These two are linked because one leads to the other. In discussions with the administration, the school has worked diligently to bolster their online presence by fixing their search engine profiles, location listings, and search engine optimization. The school has also been vigilant about keeping the website up-to-date with relevant information to both prospective and current students.

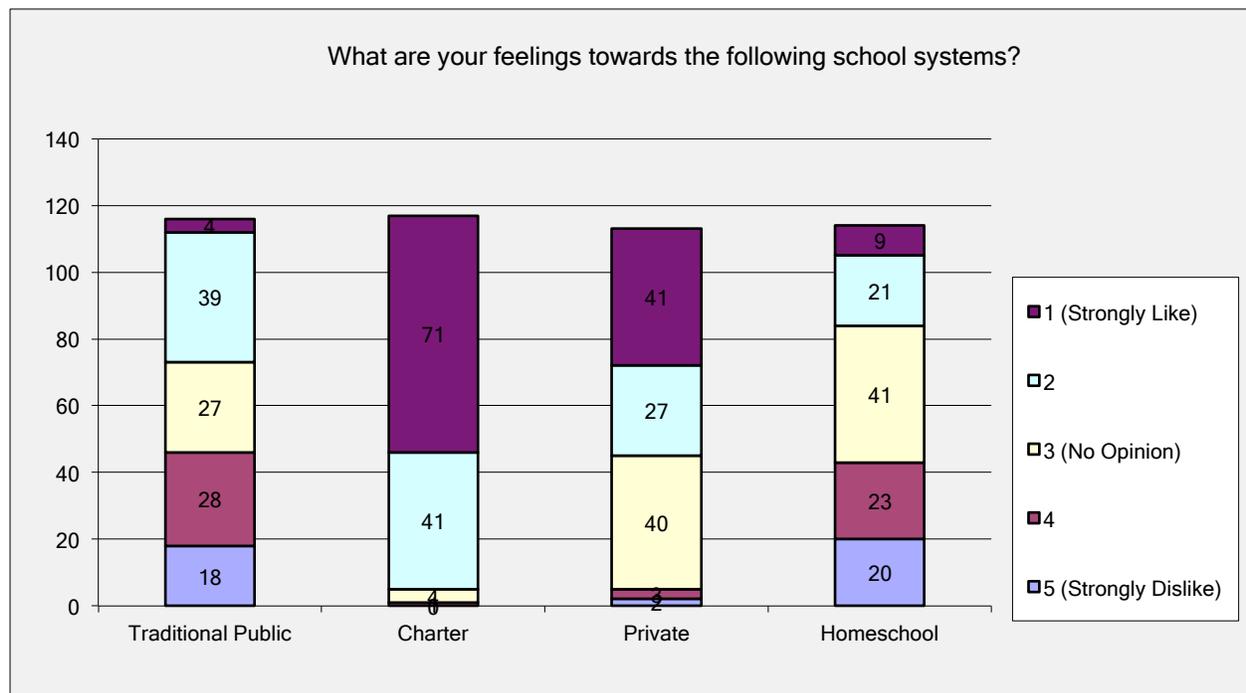
The school sign and people driving by the school is the third most effective way to recruit families. This form of latent advertising has increased in recent years with new school signage being installed. Charter schools would be wise to ensure that these three base forms of advertising are being handled carefully and are present in order to encourage as many prospective families as possible to learn more or to enroll.

Other advertising tools should continue to be used in order to maintain a presence in the community and reach additional populations. The paid advertising areas that were recommended most by the primary site survey respondents included mailers, internet search engines, and print materials. Charter schools should also continue to use social media and social media advertising to reach targeted segments and engrain themselves in the community through strategic partnership and sponsorships.

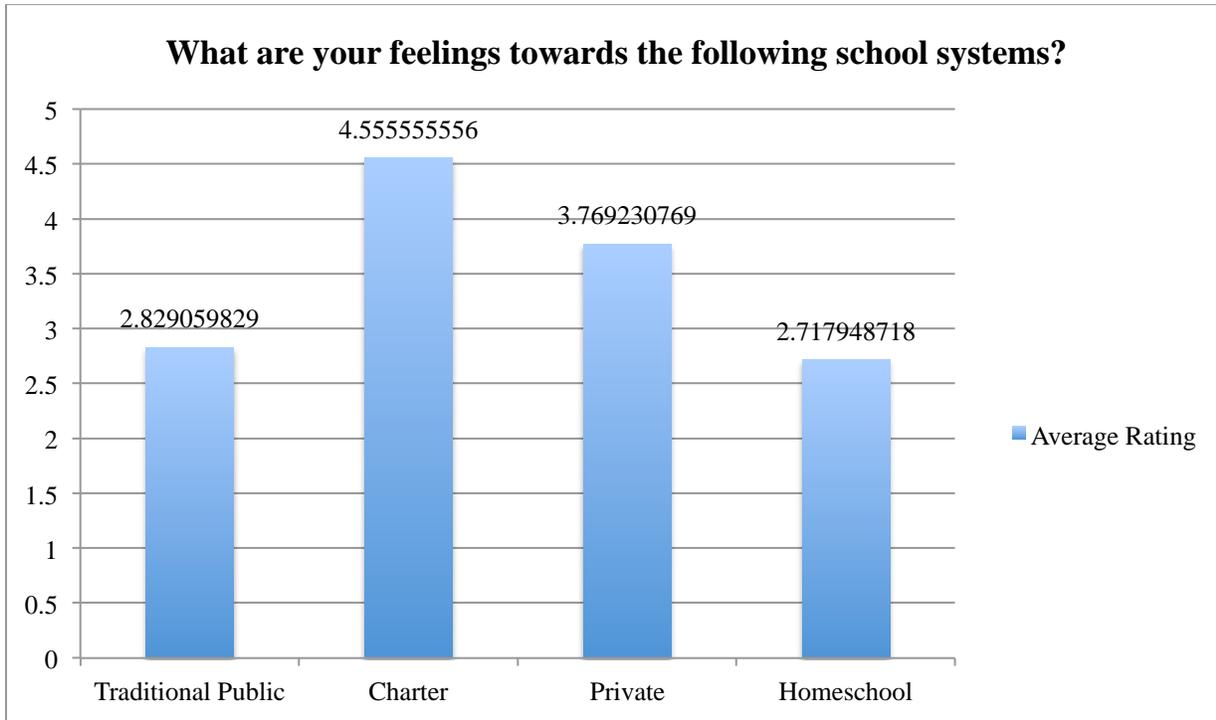
The primary site survey results also measured current families belief systems toward the various charter school systems. Charter Schools received the highest-ranking on providing an equitable education with Private schools close behind. Homeschooling and traditional public schools were ranked as mediocre. When it comes to providing individual learning opportunities, the respondents indicated that charter schools and private schools had similar rankings while traditional public schools ranked poorly. Respondents ranked charter schools highest when it came to their feelings towards the different school systems (see Chart 6 and Chart 7). Homeschooling was the most disliked system out of the four options.

Based on the questions regarding school system beliefs, the overall rankings indicated Charter Schools ranked highest with an average ranking of 4.55 (based on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 being strongly dislike and 5 being strongly like), Private Schools ranked second with an average ranking of 3.76, Traditional District Public Schools ranked third with an average ranking of 2.82, while Homeschooling ranked last with an average ranking of 2.71 (see Chart 7). This may indicate that the respondents who currently have children enrolled at the school are satisfied with the education and have positive feelings towards the charter school system.

**CHART 6**



**CHART 7**



The results reveal what advertisements parents were exposed to and how many they were exposed. The limited recall by only 15.1% of respondents shows that while they may not have known they were being shown an advertisement, but the majority of those who did recognize they were being shown an ad thought it influenced them and they decided to attend the charter school. “[Limited effects] suggests that people have relatively little personal choice in interpreting the meaning of the messages they consume and in determining the level of impact those messages will have on them” (West & Turner, 2010, p. 393).

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

Every year the Utah State Charter Board approves additional charter schools and educational choice and competition becomes more prevalent. “What is new is the vast wealth and power of the dominant voices pushing...their sharp focus on publicly funded and privately run charter schools, which currently educate about three percent of the nation’s students” (Hancock, 2011, p. 28). This push leads to additional students being recruited through the use of advertising tactics.

One limitation of the survey included the population. Only 56% of the school population responded to the survey. The other 44% of the non-respondents could have had varied experiences regarding advertising that were not shared. Perhaps if the survey had been extended for a longer period of time more respondents might have had the opportunity to complete the survey. Other factors that could have influenced greater turnout include if the survey had fallen at a different time of the school year, or if it had been sent to the population in physical form versus an online link, or if additional reminders were emailed out, then perhaps a larger sample size could have been achieved.

A drawback of the Lasswell model is its simplicity, that it may overemphasize the effect of communication and, “has some intention of influencing the receiver and, hence, that communication should be treated mainly as a persuasive process. It also assumes that messages always have effects” (Berger, 2007, p. 55).

Luckily, the study tests advertising persuasiveness and recall and assumes the effects of the model will work to influence the receiver. The second contribution is whether it is persuasive in swaying the participant to enroll their children in a charter school if they would not have already done so.

The study doesn’t just simply imply that charter school advertisements are somewhat persuasive; it notes that without advertising schools would achieve a limited enrollment. The advertising dollars spent should be used wisely according to the cost of the impression and the medium to ensure the funds will not be wasted. The study also shows a positive response to charter schools, which means the respondents could be used to help provide additional word of mouth advertising and provide additional ideas to advertise through a variety of mediums.

The strongest advertising tool the school can utilize is word of mouth. The population of families that are already committed to the school can act as ambassadors to other families. If the charter school can harness positive parent interactions and supply their current families with resources and events that are shareable to their friend, family, and neighbors then word of mouth can serve as a free and trustworthy advertising source. The school can implement strategies such as posting testimonials to the website, creating promotional materials including student experiences, and creating word-of-mouth campaigns through social media. The school could also create digital resources available for individuals to share through word of mouth.

Another strong advertising tool a charter school should ensure is in place is a form of signage on the property. The signage could include a marquee, a freestanding property sign, or lettering placed directly on the building. The school website should also be kept current with valuable information for the current families and resources for prospective families. The website should be easily found through online search engines through, which are also kept current with contact information, and linked by multiple locations such as educational rating sites, the Utah State Office of Education, local housing complexes, and the city website.

Other advertising methods that have been fruitful for the secondary site charter schools include Facebook, city newsletters, and print materials. Facebook should have frequent posts geared toward both prospective and current families and the paid advertising should be targeted to the target segment and evaluated regularly. If the charter school resides in a city where a newsletter is issued and are able to either advertise or have a feature, the charter school should consider the opportunity because it may be low-cost solution to reaching every home in the surrounding area without creating a mailer. Print materials may be outdated due to online resource availability, but providing tangible materials to prospective families created credibility and an immediate resource.

It is recommended the charter schools continue to collect advertising impression data upon receipt of a student application. It is also recommend the charter schools consider having their patrons complete a survey similar to the one found in this study every year or every two years in order to track

data trends and parent perceptions. By collecting longitudinal data the charter schools will be able to see if any categories warrant school intervention or if there are any other advertising areas the school could focus on to recruit additional students.

Another limitation of the survey is the sample, which consisted of only families currently enrolled at charter schools. A future study could be broader and include families from traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and homeschoolers. The study could help create a baseline for feelings towards the different educational options as well as test the advertising limitations across the educational options.

Even with the limitations of this project and survey, the results are beneficial to future research and to the school locations. The data can provide valuable information for them to determine past advertising results as well as to create future advertising plans. Since the reports were disseminated to the charter schools, each site is taking action to recruit students for next fall. For example, at the primary location a testimonial video is being created, events are being planned to promote current student retention and allow for prospective families to ingratiate themselves into the community, and yard signs will be added throughout the community to increase signage. At the secondary comparison survey locations, photo testimonials are being created for the social media platforms, open houses are being scheduled, an onboarding process is being enacted, and designs and quotes are being collected for mailers and yard signs.

Charter schools are responsible for building their student base through advertising and word-of-mouth. This study showcased examples where charter schools advertising campaigns can help lead to effective enrollment. If advertising to prospective parents is used properly, it can stimulate the communities awareness regarding the school and as Berger describes below, encourage families to *act* on enrolling their students in a charter school

Adverting can attract attention to, create the desire for, and stimulate action that leads to the purchase of products and services advertised on part of those reading print advertisements, listening to radio commercials, or watching and listening to television

commercials. That is, advertisers hope to convince, to persuade, to motivate, and most importantly, to get people to act, to do something” (Berger, 2007, p. 5).

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## Appendix I

### Online Survey

The purpose of this study is to research school choice. This is going to be used as part of a master's research project. If you would like additional information or have any questions you may contact Kara Finley, a student of Southern Utah University, at (435) 590-5263.

The amount of time required to complete the questionnaire is estimated to be around five minutes. As a respondent, participation is voluntary and there are no perceived potential risks to respondents. You may discontinue the study at any time for any reason without penalty. You may ask questions at any time by emailing k14ara@hotmail.com. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer. The survey contains demographic, ranking, and open-ended questions regarding your family and charter school advertising awareness. You must be a legal adult to participate. By completing the consent form and returning this questionnaire, you are consenting to serve as a participant in this study.

This questionnaire will remain confidential and your name will not be tied to the research and data. We will protect the confidentiality of records and data pertaining to you, the participant. Your identity will not be linked to your responses in any way; once the prizewinner is announce the contact information will be destroyed and disassociated from the results. Your contact information will be asked at the beginning of the survey in order to enter you into the drawing for a chance to win [[one of the following prizes]]: \$50 shopping gift card [[if school has a store, additional prizes of: \$25 school store bucks, or \$10 school store bucks]]. Winners will be contacted by phone and/or email on February 2, 2015.

Thank you for your time and participation in this study.

1. What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your email? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your phone number? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Have you read the above statement and do you agree to participate in the study?
  - a. Yes (if yes, move to page 2)
  - b. No (if no, end survey with disqualification page)

[PAGE BREAK]

5. What is your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
6. What is your age?
  - a. 18-25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-45
  - d. 46-55
  - 55 or older
7. What is your current marital status?

- a. Single, Never Married
  - b. Married
  - c. Separated
  - d. Divorced
  - e. Widowed
8. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- a. Less than High School
  - b. High School/GED
  - c. Associates
  - d. Bachelors
  - e. Masters
  - f. Doctorate
9. What is your race/ethnicity?
- a. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - b. Asian
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - e. White
10. How many children do you have?
11. In what grades do you have students enrolled at <SCHOOL NAME>? (Check all that apply)
- a. Kindergarten
  - b. First Grade
  - c. Second Grade
  - d. Third Grade
  - e. Fourth Grade
  - f. Fifth Grade
  - g. Sixth Grade
  - h. Seventh Grade
  - i. Eighth Grade
  - j. Ninth Grade
12. How long have you had a student enrolled at <SCHOOL NAME>?
- a. 1 year
  - b. 2 years
  - c. 3 years
  - d. 4 years
  - e. 5 years
13. What type of school were your children enrolled in before <SCHOOL NAME>?
- a. Public/Traditional School
  - b. Charter School
  - c. Private School
  - d. Home School
  - e. Other:
14. Approximately how many miles do you live from <SCHOOL NAME>?
- a. 1-2 miles

- b. 3-5 miles
- c. 5-10 miles
- d. 11-20 miles
- e. 20+ miles

15. Approximately how many miles do you live from the nearest public school at which your child could be enrolled?

- a. 1-2 miles
- b. 3-5 miles
- c. 5-10 miles
- d. 11-20 miles
- e. 20+ miles

16. Before enrolling your student(s), did you see an advertisement for <SCHOOL NAME>?

- a. Yes
- b. No

[PAGE BREAK – If YES to Q15]

17. Where did you see the advertisement?

18. What kind of advertisement did you see?

19. What do you recollect about the advertisement?

20. Did the advertisement influence you to learn more or enroll in <SCHOOL NAME>?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partially. Please elaborate:

[PAGE BREAK – If NO to Q15]

21. Did you attend an Open House or Tour of the school?

22. What do you recall most from the Open House/Tour?

23. Did the Open House Tour influence you to enroll in <SCHOOL NAME>?

[PAGE BREAK]

24. How did you hear about <SCHOOL NAME>? (mark all that apply)

- a. Drove by school/Property Sign
- b. Word of Mouth (Friend, Family Member, Neighbor)
- c. Facebook
- d. Internet Search Engine
- e. Local Public School
- f. Local Charter School
- g. Open House
- h. Newspaper Article
- i. Mailer (Postcard)
- j. School Website

- k. Radio
- l. Yard Sign
- m. Safe Kids Fair
- n. Hill Air Force Base
- o. Printed Material (Flyer, Poster)
- p. Other:

25. Please mark the TOP FIVE most important types of information used in making your decision to send your student to a charter school. (Mark only one item as the most important, one as second most important, and so on. The information that was not among the top five in importance will remain blank.)

- Achievement test scores for charter schools
- Charter school open house or other school visit/tours
- Charter school website
- School newsletter
- School flyer
- Community fair booth
- Television
- Newspaper
- Radio
- Utah State Charter School Website
- Other Educational Website
- Online search engine
- Your child
- Your children's experience at another charter school
- Talks with teachers
- Talks with the Principal
- Talks with Board Members
- Talks with family members
- Talks with friends
- Talks with neighbors
- Talks with other parents
- Information packet
- Postcard
- Other

26. Please mark the TOP THREE most important educational goals for your child's charter school to accomplish. (Mark only one item as the most important, one as the second most important, and so on. The goals that were not among your top three in importance will remain blank.)

- Basic skills (reading, writing, mathematics)
- Academic excellence
- Good work habits and self-discipline
- Teaching how to get along with others from different social backgrounds and races.
- Developing high moral standards
- Business education integration
- Teaching critical thinking/problem solving skills
- Building self-esteem
- Preparing students for high school
- Developing specialized skills

27. Please mark the TOP FIVE most important reasons for choosing <SCHOOL NAME>. (Please mark only one item as the most important, one as the second most important, and so on. The reasons that were not among the top five in importance will remain blank.)

- My child's special needs were not met at the previous school
- The location is close to my home, job, or child care
- My child's friends attend the school
- The schools curricular emphasis or mission
- The principal
- The Board of Directors
- Good teachers
- I prefer a private school but could not afford it
- My child was performing poorly at previous school
- I wanted to ensure my child a spot in the schools Junior High
- Students get more individual help at the school
- This school has good physical facilities
- The racial/ethnic mix at the school
- Smaller class sizes
- Discipline
- Opportunities for parental involvement
- The school is safe
- My child wanted to attend this school
- My interest in being involved in an educational reform effort
- The school teaches values that traditional schools do not
- I was unhappy with the curriculum at previous school
- I was unhappy with the instruction at previous school
- Other

28. What influenced you the most to enroll your student at <SCHOOL NAME>?

[PAGE BREAK]

29. On a scale of 1 (Very Good) to 5 (Not Very Good), how good do you believe the following schools are at providing an equitable education?

	Very Good		Somewhat Good		Not
Very Good					
a. Public	1	2	3	4	5
b. Charter	1	2	3	4	5
c. Private	1	2	3	4	5
d. Homeschool	1	2	3	4	5

30. On a scale of 1 (Very Good) to 5 (Not Very Good), how good do you believe the following schools are at providing individual student learning opportunities?

	Very Good		Somewhat Good		Not Very Good
a. Public	1	2	3	4	5
b. Charter	1	2	3	4	5
c. Private	1	2	3	4	5
d. Homeschool	1	2	3	4	5

31. On a scale of 1 (Very Good) to 5 (Not Very Good), which is closest to your feelings towards the following school systems?

	Very Good		Somewhat Good		Not
Very Good					
a. Public	1	2	3	4	5
b. Charter	1	2	3	4	5
c. Private	1	2	3	4	5
d. Homeschool	1	2	3	4	5

32. When you were deciding where to send your student to school, was <SCHOOL NAME> your first choice, second choice, or third choice?
- a. My first choice
  - b. My second choice
  - c. My third choice
33. As a parent, what type of advertisement would have influenced you most to send your students to attend <SCHOOL NAME>?
34. What do you think the school could have done better to notify you about <SCHOOL NAME>?
35. Please share any comments regarding your exposure to advertisements for <SCHOOL NAME>:

**Appendix II: Primary Site Charter School Advertising Report**

Redacted to protect proprietary information.  
Full appendix submitted, reviewed, and approved by committee.

**Appendix III: Comparison Sample 1 – Charter School Advertising Report**

Redacted to protect proprietary information.  
Full appendix submitted, reviewed, and approved by committee.

**Appendix IV: Comparison Sample 2 – Charter School Advertising Report**

Redacted to protect proprietary information.  
Full appendix submitted, reviewed, and approved by committee.