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Site Visitation: School Leaders' Perceptions of a Diagnostic Tool for School Improvement

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Site-Visitation: School Leaders' Perceptions of a Diagnostic Tool for School Improvement

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Administration

by

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DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dissertations have a way of morphing into something other than what you started out doing. They start off as your idea and over time they evolve into the melding of several academic voices. The process of completing the dissertation is a different journey for everyone.

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Abstract

This case study explored the use of site-visitation as a diagnostic tool for school improvement. Nine charter schools in New Orleans were selected for the study. Based on qualitative research and systems theory, a within- and cross-case analysis of nine semi-structured interviews with school leaders were conducted. The school leaders' experiences with the state-run site-visitation model and their use of the findings for school improvement was explored. The findings led to the development of a hybrid accountability model that encompasses the components school leaders believe will lead to school improvement. This study aims to assist educators, policy makers, and researchers to better understand site-visitation and its role in school improvement.

KEYWORDS: Visitation, Site-Visitation, Observation, School Improvement, Systems Theory

Chapter One: Introduction

In an effort to improve student achievement nationwide, the United States has embarked on an education policy that has pushed school accountability measures to rely on test scores. Johnson (2008) summarizes the *No Child Left Behind* (20 U.S.C. §6301 et seq) (NCLB) policy as one that utilizes a linear over-simplified approach emphasizing test scores in reading and math as a means of measuring school quality, improvement and/or student achievement. Researchers, policy makers, and parents are making judgments on school performance or quality primarily on over-weighted numeracy and literacy test scores (2008; Datnow & Park, 2009). In 2008, President Barack Obama signed legislation that created the *Race to the Top* (20 U.S.C, §6301 et seq.) (RTT). This legislation also utilizes test scores in reading and math as a means to determine quality, improvement and/or student achievement. *Race to the Top* requires states to create evaluative measures linking in-state teacher preparation programs to teacher quality. Under this legislation teacher quality is determined by student achievement (test scores) and student growth data (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Edward Crowe (2011) identifies the challenge of this approach to improving teacher quality as “the proportion of public-school teachers whose students are in grades or subject areas that do not require standardized testing for accountability” (2011, pg. 5). Thomas Wilson (1996) proposes this reliance on test scores appears to be based on the assumption that test scores accurately reflect what is going on in the school.

Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder (2009) assert that the high-stakes testing redirects the efforts and resources “toward instruction in reading and math exclusively” (p. 625), thereby undermining a balanced approach to “raise achievement in other academic areas and in the social, behavioral, and civic goals” (p. 625). The authors also point to the narrow accountability

measures of test scores as contributing to “gaming” the outcome of the test scores. Testing pressures can result in acts of despair on the part of teachers and administrators (Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner, & Rideau, 2010). This behavior, where people do whatever they deem necessary to keep their job, position, status, is referred to as Campbell’s Law. Simply, when the value placed on an indicator (test scores) is perceived as the measure of a person’s or organization’s worth or performance (student achievement, school improvement), the individuals (teachers, administrators) become corrupt (Campbell, 1975; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Examples include (1) accusations of low proficiency levels on state accountability measures that make it easy for students to achieve adequate yearly progress, (2) a focus on those students just below the passing points, (3) ignoring not only the needs of current proficient students, but also those students perceived as below proficiency, (4) cheating by administrators, (5) the increase of disciplinary suspensions around testing dates, (6) excessive test preparations (drilling), and (7) adjustment in test scoring (Rothstein et. al., 2008, p. 67). Since the implementation of *NCLB* high-stakes testing, the news reporting of incidents of cheating scandals by administrators and teachers to achieve performance targets has exploded. A simple Google search (October 9, 2014) using the terms “high stakes cheating scandal” resulted in 155,000 hits. The Atlanta, Georgia scandal was the top hit followed by California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, Nevada, Maryland, Ohio, South Carolina and Texas

So if current test-based accountability leads to measurement errors and unethical gaming of the accountability system, then we might do well to consider the utility of accountability systems in general. The research of Mintrop and Trujillo (2007) explores the practical relevance of accountability and school improvement. They note that within 5-years of *NCLB* implementation participants in the Principal Leadership Institute at the University of California

went from using demographic, relationships, challenges, and culture descriptions to describe their schools to using state Academic Performance Index scores and annual interval increases. According to Mintrop and Trujillo (2007), this shift to describing schools by specific accountability numbers “have become signals of schools’ quality and character, an increasingly powerful shorthand and social fact” (p. 319). They further note accountability systems designed to assess student learning, to a large extent, are used to hold adults accountable for their teaching. That is, accountability systems are being applied for purposes for which they were not designed. This emphasis on a single high-stakes testing catch-all indicator as a measurement of improvement distorts the validity of what the test scores mean (Nicholls and Berliner, 2007; Herman & Baker, 2009; Lindle, J. C., 2009).

The use of specific test scores reduces school improvement to a generalization about the level of performance or quality of a school (Wilson, 1996). If we really want to know what is going on in an organization, a site-visit puts the actual behaviors and practice of educators in full view. What happens during the school day is important and currently we do not have a way of seeing what that is. If we want school improvement, we need to find out what is going on in the schools that impacts test scores and, ultimately, school improvement.

In any organization, a site-visit can assist in determining what is actually impacting performance. As Wilson (1996) states, the simple act of *seeing* a school “proffers the concrete, actual, mundane, day-to-day events that comprise learning and teaching in a class in a school” (p.201). The day-to-day “goings on” includes those activities that can be either emulated or changed to support school improvement. Test scores do not tell us *what* is impacting the scores. Scores only indicate an *area* of strength or weakness. When looking at test scores, the first

question school leaders should ask is: “but why?” What impacted those test scores? A site-visit could provide insight into the best practices or lack thereof, that support the scores.

For the purpose of this study, visitation is being defined as a process by which individuals physically enter a school, make observations on what is happening there, then report these findings back to some person or oversight body with the intent of evaluating the organization or making suggestions for improvement. Site-visitations are also commonly referred to as *school reviews*, particularly in the charter school context used in this study.

Site-visitations are utilized by many types of organizations for evaluation, improvement, accreditation, or award citations for excellence in a field (AACSB International, n.d.; AdvancED, 2007-08; Baldrige, 2009). The British have utilized site-visitation or inspections for more than 150 years to evaluate public schools (Wilson, 1996). Until recently, site-visitations were used in the state of Louisiana as one means to evaluate charter schools. These site-visitations are in addition to the math and literacy accountability measures employed by the state accountability mandates and the national *No Child Left Behind Act* (20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq.). While the state employs both quantitative and qualitative measures, it does not *link* the two for a more comprehensive view of what impacts student achievement. This study examines the relationship between Louisiana’s charter school site-visitation program, school leaders’ experiences and school improvement practices at individual schools that participated in site-visits.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study, *Site-Visitation: School Leaders’ Perceptions of a Diagnostic Tool for School Improvement*, is to explore principals’ experiences with site-visitation and to better understand the relationship between site-visitation and school

improvement. Specifically, this study examines the site-visitation protocol employed by the state of Louisiana and how school leaders are (or are not) using the information generated via site-visitation to guide school improvement activities in their schools. Principals or school leaders were chosen for this study because they are not only the agenda setters for their school improvement plans, they are accountable for the evolution of their improvement plan. According to Adams (2008), “the intentions of principals are judged by their actual leadership practices as well as the culture that reflects their leadership style” (p. 36). The movement towards decentralization of schools within the district model puts the focus on the principal or school leader, not the district superintendent.

To meet this end, this case study focuses on a legally mandated site-visitation process (Louisiana Administrative Code, Title 28 Part CXXXIX. Bulletin 126) in an attempt to ascertain how much these site-visits lead to school improvement. I studied the site-visitation protocol utilized by the Louisiana Department of Education. This protocol includes similar activities described in other site-visitation models discussed in the literature review of this study. The protocol includes pre- and during-activities by both the school and the site-visitation team - observations of school activities, interviews with stakeholders and students, review of documents, oral presentation of feedback and findings to the school leader or leadership team. These were followed by post activities such as providing a written report of findings. The visits were typically conducted over a half-day by a team of three persons.

The Problem in Perspective

With the implementation of *No Child Left Behind*, the United States embarked on a policy with a focus on criterion referenced test scores, in literacy and numeracy as the primary measures of school improvement, quality and/or student achievement (Johnson, 2008).

Historically, we expect schools to teach students and produce responsible citizens capable of functioning in a democratic society (Cuban, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). How do we measure these expectations? According to Wilson (1996), in order to truly know what goes on in schools, one must “be there.” An alternative to the current test-centered approach could be the inclusion of site-visitations as a component in school improvement, quality and support current accountability measures.

The trajectory of current school improvement is based on an accountability system that utilizes test scores as the primary indicator of student learning. In addition, test scores are utilized to make decisions about a school’s quality, student learning, and teacher’s performance. This current use of test scores is a reflection of a specific group of students’ knowledge on a given day in a narrow set of subjects – literacy and numeracy. Test scores are indicators about a group of students’ strengths and weaknesses. Based on this limited information, school-wide assumptions and generalizations about the level of all student learning and improvement are made. If the scores are high, the school must be good and the teachers must be good. Conversely, low scores indicate the school is not a quality school.

Nichols and Berliner (2007) point that this focus on educational outcomes in the form of high-stakes test scores “is inappropriate if the outcome is seen as the most important aspect of an educational system” (p. 146). Under the current system, schools are reduced to holding rallies, providing incentives, and threatening students to do well on high-stakes tests. The result of this pressure-to-motivate approach is a demoralization of the school leaders, teachers and students (2007). Additionally, pressure-to-motivate does not necessarily correlate to changed behavior or student learning in the long run (2007).

Site-visitation provides the mechanism for school leaders to explore the meaning of these test scores or indicators. Why are students doing poorly on the science concepts or fractions? Is it the curriculum, teacher, environment or school culture? What activities are impacting student learning and improvement? What can we change? What is another school doing that we may want to emulate? The site-visit is the “but why?” to the test score. Answers to the “but why” lead to school improvement. “Inspection suggests that, if we change how we know and judge schools, we will create knowledge that will directly support the improvement of practice in away that respects and strengthens the integrity of the school as an institution” (Wilson, 1996, p. 218).

In a public forum held October 27, 2010, at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, Diane Ravitch (Research Professor of Education at New York University and former Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H.W. Bush.) spoke about the charter movement, accountability measures, and New Orleans’ role in the educational landscape. The discussion highlighted her movement away from high-stakes testing as “the” indicator of student learning and accountability. According to Ravitch, the current political commentary of “resources and poverty don’t matter. Teachers are the sole cause of test scores.” Which begs the question, “what does it do to our sense of community when everyone is looking out for themselves?” NCLB has incentivized everyone to avoid low performing students. Additionally, the Race to the Top initiative has incentivized value-added assessment by evaluating teachers using test scores. Ravitch stated that “value added scores are highly unstable” and asserted that test scores are designed to test students, not teachers (Ravitch, 2010). Race to the Top requires states to use only four unproven turn-around models, and all four require the principal be fired. This competitive philosophy of the Race to the Top moves the focus to state level funding and away

from the children that need it most. The national movement is to beat up on teachers and educators (2010; Ball, 2003).

The charter movement started in the 1990s to help students with few resources. The state of Minnesota passed the first legislated charter school in 1991 (Laws of Minnesota 1991, Chapter 265, Article 9, Section3). With the implementation of NCLB and the Race to the Top, “high stakes testing has distorted the charter school movement” and charter schools are “becoming a business school idea where it is competitive...we will put you out of business” (Ravitch). Ravitch (2010) and Spillane & Coldren, (2011) acknowledges that non-test score factors and what goes on in the school impacts student performance. Site-visitation helps figure out what “stuff” impacts student learning.

Importance of the Study

The Center on Reinventing Public Education’s (CRPE) National Charter School Research Project (CRPE, 2006.) argues for the need to produce outcome studies that include information other than test scores (CRPE, 2006). New Orleans, the site of this study, currently has one of largest collections of urban charter schools in the country. Moreover, many studies are derived from analysis of “one-year snapshots of achievement” (CRPE, 2006, p.3) and do not consider the educational history of the students enrolled in a particular charter school or the differences between charter schools such as “financial stability, leadership turnover, teacher attrition, existence of a reliable parent clientele” etc. (CRPE, 2006, p.5). While CRPE’s focus is on charter schools, its argument for more educational research that includes information other than test scores supports this study of site-visitation.

General Research Questions

The specific research questions to be answered in this study are: (1) How do charter school leaders experience the state of Louisiana charter school site-visitation process, and (2) What influence does site-visitation have on school improvement activities?

This study of site-visitation within the context of the state of Louisiana charter school policy and charter schools in New Orleans contributes to the literature on several fronts, including school improvement, education policy, and alternative accountability measures.

Structure of the Study

This study focuses on site-visitation as a diagnostic tool for school improvement. The aim of this study is to contribute to school improvement research and literature by examining how school leaders are using the results for school improvement. To meet this objective, nine school leaders were interviewed. The findings of this study are important to policy makers and practitioners as the emerging themes and patterns from the site-visitation reports point to areas of strength and weakness and provide data for decision-making. There seems to be a logical case that principals could utilize site-visitation results to intervene in aspects of school operations or culture before they negatively impact school performance scores. What is not known, however, is the extent to which this is the process charter school leaders are following.

This case study (Creswell, J. W., 2007; Stake, R. E., 2006; & Yin, R. K., 2009) looks at the protocol mandated by Title 28, Part CXXXIX, Bulletin 126, Chapter 11, *Ongoing Review of Charter Schools* and revised statute 17:3971, Charter School Demonstration Programs Law, as implemented by the LDOE office of Parental Choice. The study begins by describing what the process looks like, what benchmarks are measured, who conducts the site-visitations, how and to whom are the results disseminated. In an effort to discover how school leaders are utilizing the

findings of these visits to make improvements, nine charter school leaders were interviewed to discover their experience with the site-visitation process and how they are using the findings of the visit to make improvements. The structure of the study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Structure of Proposed Study of Charter School Site-Visitation in Louisiana

Context	Literature	Methodology	Findings/Conclusions
State of Louisiana Site-Visitation	Conceptual Framework	Within-case / Across- case Structure	School Leader Experience
Legal	School Improvement	School Leader Interviews (9)	Usage of Findings
Cultural	Site-Visitation Historical		Site-Visitation and School Improvement

First, the background of the charter school movement in Louisiana and New Orleans in particular is outlined. Second, literature pertaining to school improvement and site-visitation is discussed. Third, the conceptual framework of systems theory supporting this study is presented. Fourth, the case study methodology is outlined. The study concludes with the analysis and discussion of finding including recommendations for policy makers and areas for further research.

Chapter One Summary

Quantitative data, i.e. test scores, illuminates specific measures of student achievement or improvement – literacy and numeracy. The test scores cannot identify what is going on in

schools that impact the score. Early accountability reformers, such as Ravitch, are beginning to publically acknowledge that their push for an over-simplified, quantitative accountability system based on test scores is flawed. They are recognizing that test scores are indicators and should not be used as the primary basis for determining quality, improvement, or accountability. Test scores are indicators and in order to know what truly goes on in a school, you need to be there.

One purpose of this study is to highlight site-visitation and explore its potential to augment the current accountability system and have a positive influence on school improvement. This research purports that the current reliance on numeracy and literacy test scores as the primary indicator of school quality or student performance should shift to being *one* of several measures used to assess school improvement, performance, quality, and accountability. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher suggests a hybrid system utilizing site-visitation and test scores to assess school performance.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to glean the processes and components of various site-visitation models currently in use. In addition, literature in school improvement and systems theory will be discussed. The phenomena of site-visitation will be studied through the lens of systems theory.

Gaps exist in education research on the use of site-visitations as a measure of school improvement or quality. Research focused on the experiences of school leaders and their use of site-visitation as a measure of school improvement is thin in the United States. Until recently, the focus of the majority of site-visitation research has been on Her Majesties Inspectors (HMI) in England. More current studies examine site-visitation in other countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, Ireland, Germany, Nigeria, etc. Additionally, research examining the impact of site-visitation has focused on the inspector or team members in terms of their beliefs and experiences (Silcock and Wyness, 1998) and the impact of the process on the school (Gray and Gardner, 1999).

There is a need for research that examines more than process and impact or reaction from the perspective of the site-visitation team and the school. For example, what type of information can be gleaned from site-visitations and how might school leaders use that information towards school improvement? Other questions include: What do the various models of site-visitation look like? What type of information is generated by the models?

The literature review begins with a discussion of systems theory as the conceptual framework for the study and follows with school improvement and site-visitation literature, a

definition of site-visitation, types of site-visitation, the components of site-visitation models and their relevance to the conceptual framework. This is followed by the context of the study and the history/evolution of charter schools in Louisiana. Finally, the State of Louisiana Office of Parental Choice site-visitation model is presented, followed by the chapter summary.

The search of existing literature was initiated by using the general terms *visitation*, *accreditation*, *learning walks*, *walkthrough*, *observations*, *inspection*, and *evaluation* in combination with *school evaluation*, *accountability*, *school improvement*, *school performance*, *school reform*, *school quality*, and *charter schools*. The reference sections in those articles located in the databases also were reviewed for additional sources. In addition, Internet searches utilizing specific website addresses and links to similar sites were conducted. These included accreditation specific websites, federal and state departments of education websites, local school district websites, legislative auditor websites, and program specific websites. Guidebooks and training manuals outlining the specific processes, duties and structures of the various visitation models were reviewed. The articles included were chosen based on the researcher's determination to include information related to types of visitation and their processes. Fifty-seven books and 289 articles and guidebooks were reviewed. While this number is sufficient to begin the process of identifying common components of visitation models, the researcher does not make the claim that this is an exhaustive review of the literature of this area.

The scope of the review was restricted to visitation models utilized in the United States, international models based on Her Majesty's Inspectorate in England, and inspection systems or processes utilized in other disciplines including education and business. While the medical field conducts site-visits that result in awards and accreditation, these articles are not included in the literature review. Since the activities associated with site-visitation and quality improvement are

similar across disciplines, this literature review concentrates on those most closely associated with education.

Conceptual Framework

Systems Theory. The framework for this study is systems theory. Systems theory purports that organizational learning requires feedback and the feedback loop or the amount of time it takes for the system to receive the feedback directly affects the ability of the system to contextually learn from the feedback (Hutchins, 1996). Feedback is critical in systems theory. It must be specific, timely and frequent in order to be effective. Site-visitation and the process employed by the Louisiana Department of Education Office of Parental Options (LDOE) is an example of systems theory in practice. The site-visitation protocol for the LDOE includes an oral presentation of findings to the school leader prior to the visitation team exiting the school. This oral presentation precedes the formal written report. By providing the organizational leader with immediate feedback (oral presentation), the leader has the opportunity to clarify findings, ask questions, and begin to make improvements.

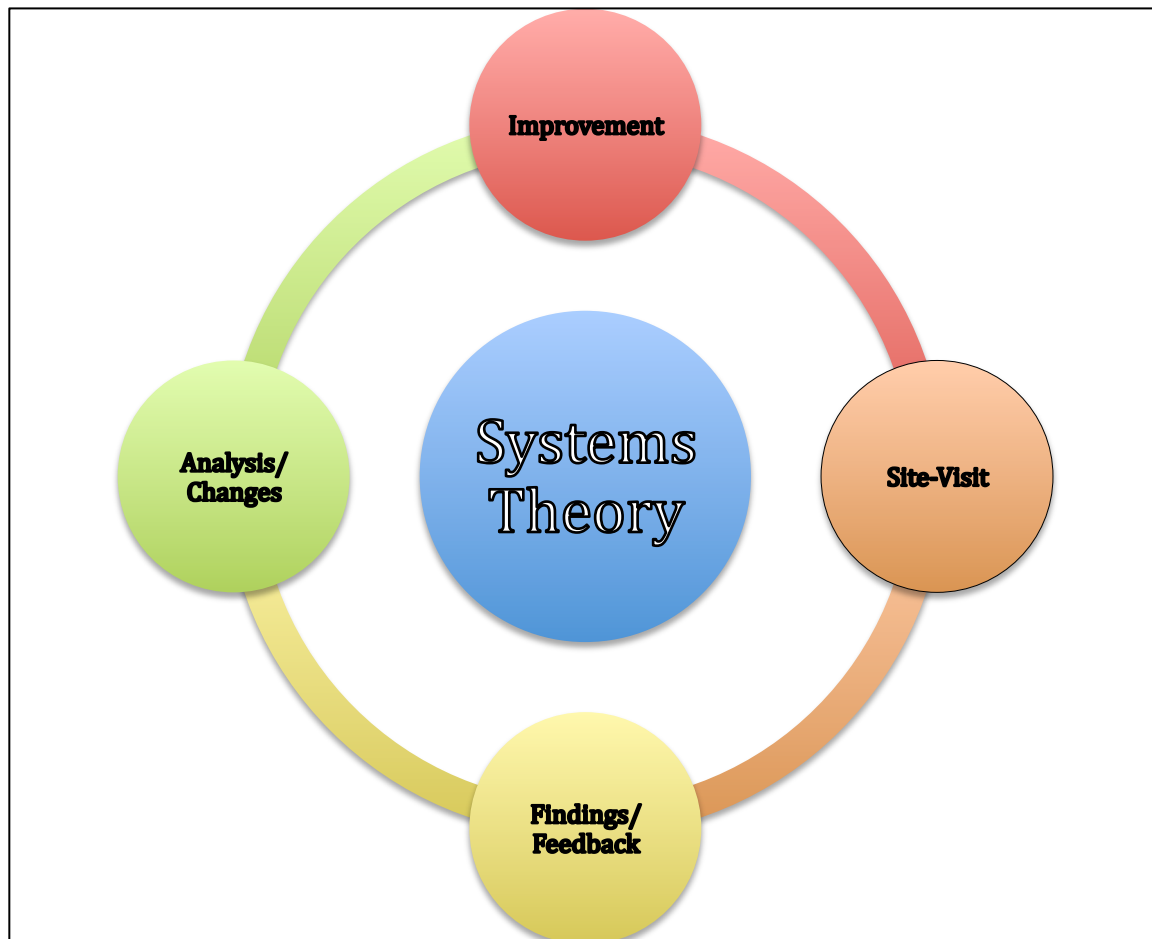
One method of learning in systems thinking is planning. Organizations plan strategically how they are going to adapt to changing environments. They learn by measuring feedback against internalized standards or accepted external standards and making adjustments based on what they have learned. This process is referred to as double looping because it is a continuing process involving feedback, self-evaluation or SWOT analysis (identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and adjustments or changes (Hutchins, 1996). School improvement plans (SIP) reflect how the school is going to accomplish its goals. That is, SIP's identify those activities schools plan on engaging in to support school improvement. These activities are measured and evaluated. Based on findings, adjustments are made. In the current

environment of testing in math and literacy as a means of measuring school quality, improvement, or student achievement, the ability to identify the strengths or weaknesses of activities impacting school improvement is limited to test scores. The test scores identify areas of strength or weakness but do not provide the detail necessary to identify those activities that impact student learning.

In Figure 1, the conceptual framework of this study, anchored in systems theory, is illustrated.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Hutchins (1996) and Bolman and Deal (2008) write that structure and function are closely related and that changes in how a system functions may require changes to the parts and their relationships. However, people tend to expect to get the same results by focusing on changing a few aspects of the system and not its whole structure. When education policy focuses on math and literacy as a means to measure improvement, changes are made based on those results, ignoring the other aspects of the system. Therefore, these changes can be dysfunctional with all the other parts of the school. Site-visitation considers those “other” parts of the educational system that support improvement. Hutchins refers to this “failure to move all subsystems through a parallel improvement process” (p. 83) as suboptimization. Bolman and Deal concur that focusing on units or parts (test scores) creates problems in coordination and control of diverse efforts. That is, efforts become fragmented as units (literacy and math test scores) focus on their own priorities rather than the overall mission of the system (school). Current accountability systems are being applied for purposes for which they were not designed (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). This emphasis on a single high stakes testing catch-all indicator as a measurement of improvement distorts the validity of what the test scores mean (Nicholls and Berliner, 2007). The end result is the overall performance of the system suffers.

Systems theory (Hutchins, 1996) includes the concept of equifinality, which assumes there is more than one way to do things. People and technology throughout the system are constantly gathering information. Input conversion occurs when the system converts the information gathered from the environment into useful recommendations. This dynamic function of systems is the information exchange among the subsystems involving adjustments or changes as a result of feedback (Hutchins, 1996). A consideration in the analysis of this study is to examine this exchange of information via the LDOE site-visitation process and school leaders.

Barry Oshry (2007) uses the metaphor of dance to describe the interactions of systems theory when he writes that they “are not simply collections of individuals, they are patterns of relationship...” (p. 121). Do you want to do the same dance or engage in something a little different? If you are having difficulty with a particular step, do you change it? How will this impact your partner and your performance? Does the music support the dance? Using this analogy, test scores may indicate that something is troubling with the dance (school), but they do not indicate if it is the music, the steps or the relationship between the two. A site-visitation (in this case observation) of the dance would provide the opportunity to see the specifics of the dance and identify the weaknesses.

Communication is critical in systems theory. Hutchins (1996) references the work of Forrester when he points to the critical role of communication and the existence of “leverage points” at the “information feedback and decision points, that is, locations in the system where effects from the environment are processed to make decisions about the future” (as quoted in Hutchins, 1996, p. 129). In order for changes to be made, it is critical that leaders accurately identify these leverage points and make appropriate decisions, such as changing the type of feedback from positive to negative or altering the decision-making rules (1996). Within the context of site-visitation, leverage points are the communication of findings of the site-visitation team. As school leaders process the information, they begin to formulate decisions about the future and changes within the organization. The decisions made at these decision points potentially can fundamentally change the structure of the system.

In his book, *All Systems Go*, Fullan (2010) explains the meaning of the term *all systems go* as “every vital part of the whole system – school, community, district, and government – contributes individually and in concert to forward movement and success” (p. 3). He stresses the

need for “higher order thinking skills for everyone in the system” (p. 19). Fullan further points to the current accountability system that uses “more sophisticated sticks” (p. 27) to motivate. As long as our education system continues to adopt “whatever the innovation *du jour*” (Elmore & Burney, 1999, p. 32) and is stuck in the mindset of reward and punishment based on industrial era models, i.e. enforcement, educational reform and improvement will be short term. Fullan writes that the “*solution is not a program: it is a small set of common principles and practices relentlessly pursued*. Focused practitioners, not programs, drive success” (p. 59). The current large-scale reform movements have little chance of success because they are based on a model that does not address “mobilizing the collectivity to engage in joint reform” (p. 31). Linda Darling-Hammond supports this shift “from enforcing procedures to building capacity” (p. 270). Additionally, she points that the shift must include movement “from managing compliance to managing improvement” (p. 270).

This study explores the decision points and actions of school leaders in an effort to answer the following research questions: (1) How do charter school leaders experience the state of Louisiana charter school site-visitation process, and (2) What influence does site-visitation have on school improvement activities? From a systems theory view, the feedback (communication or leverage points) from the site-visitation should identify areas where there are positive and negative aspects that need attention. Under the current system of test-score accountability, one of these leverage points should occur when the school receives the test scores. If there is an environment for school leaders to couple the test-score information with site-visitation findings, the result might be the basis for more robust and meaningful school improvement activities. Therefore, site-visitation is a means to manage school improvement.

Total Quality Management (TQM) is the application and practice of systems theory. The single purpose of TQM is to improve the performance of a business. The four components of TQM are: 1) workforce empowerment, 2) process improvement, 3) customer obsession, and 4) strategic planning (Anschutz, 1995, p. 1). Schools engage in a few of these activities when they develop School Improvement Plans (SIPs), and respond to accreditation requirements and accountability measures. Improvement is the common denominator between TQM and school-improvement activities.

According to Kaufman and Zahn (1993), “the quality system – the basis for data-based decisioning [sic]– is missing in most educational systems” (p. 176). While school systems collect data on test scores, truancy rates, etc., they do not collect data that identifies what is working and what is not working as they “move toward the ideal vision” (p. 176). Kaufman and Zahn further point to the connections between the concepts of TQM and “educational system planning and instructional systems development” (p. 177). When applying this philosophy to education, the argument can be made in support of peer observation and school inspections that involve constructive feedback and discussion under the auspices of collegiality that supports the professional development of teachers and leads to improved student learning (1993).

Anschutz (1995) notes that more inspections do not ensure quality; they only reduce the rate of defects (p. 21). The key to eliminating the defects is to change the process (p. 21). If the same process is employed, the outcomes will continue to be similar (p.127). Anschutz points out that any implementation of change in process is accompanied by pitfalls. He warns that entities need to be aware of the pitfalls: (1) Over time TQM can be perceived as a “buzz” word; (2) it needs to be understood that it takes time for the results to become apparent; and (3) TQM may

become a program within the organization. Diligence is the key to ensuring that TQM is seen as a strategy of the way the company does business (p. 12-13).

The current educational measures are based on an educational system developed during the Industrial Age, i.e., the period of mass production, electricity, running water, etc. The theoretical works of Henri Fayol, Luther Gulick, Frederick W. Taylor, Lyndall Urwick and Max Webre were influential in forming the structure of 20th century organizations (Shafritz, Ott, and Jang; Eds., 2005, Bowman & Deal, 2008). Taylor's (1911) work on scientific measurement, Weber's (1947) on bureaucracy and Fayol's ([1911], 1947), Gulick's (1937) and Urwick's (1937) work on managerial functions are based on systems that embrace a division of work, authority, responsibility, discipline, centralization, chain of authority, and order (2005). This structure emerged from the advent of machines and factories and is often referred to as the factory system. Under the factory system workers "were viewed not as individuals but as interchangeable parts in an industrial machine" (2005, p. 29).

Shafritz et al. describe the fundamental tenets of this era as:

1. Organizations exist to accomplish production-related and economic goals. There is one best way to organize for production, and that way can be found through systematic, scientific inquiry.
2. Production is maximized through specialization and division of labor.
3. People and organizations act in accordance with rational economic principles (p. 28).

Senge (2010) in Fullan's *All Systems Go*, refers to this as the assembly-line organization of schools – time schedules (bells), rigid curricula, grade levels, grades, and teachers as

managers of discipline. The one size fits all factory model is not appropriate for measuring school improvement, quality, or student achievement (Fullan, 2010).

This aspect of the factory model does not readily transfer to education. The model assumes you have control over the quality of the inputs (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In this respect, education is not standardizable.

A report written by Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, and Keeling (2009) for the New Teacher Project looks at this factory model from the teacher's perspective. Weisberg, et al., refer to this one size fits all as the "widget effect" – the assumption on the part of school districts that teachers are "interchangeable parts" and classroom effectiveness is the same for all teachers. That is, teachers are no longer considered individual professionals with individual strengths and weaknesses (2009, pg. 4). Similarly, students are not fixed materials that can be transformed into a mass-produced product (widget). Under the current measurements, student achievement is measured the same for each student. In the business arena, manufacturers manage quality by utilizing materials with constant composition and physical properties. The quality of the products (widget) may be judged on the number or percent of customer complaints and/or faulty widgets produced. A higher count of complaints or possible design defects may lead the business to re-evaluate the design and /or composition of the widget and prompt engineers to make corrections.

As with any service provider endeavor, you can count the number of people you "serve" using time intervals, but how do you measure the impact of the service provided? In education, you cannot control the quality of your inputs (students), thereby making it difficult to assess the output or change over time in the level of improvement (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Every student and teacher brings a different set of experiences – positive and negative – influenced by

his/her social and economic experiences and background to school each day. These experiences affect learning and the rate of progress (Cuban, 2008; Deneen & Deneen, 2008; Ravitch, 2010a).

This literature review includes three organizational models: Baldrige, Six Sigma and the Fifth Discipline. Baldrige is a national quality-award program based on best practices in an organization. The details of this award program are presented in the “Types of Visitation” section below. Six Sigma is a quality approach that sets a goal of excellence. Keki Bhote (2002) explains the objective of Six Sigma is to develop an infrastructure that maximizes loyalty, minimizes people turnover, maximizes returns, and goes beyond modest and mediocre quality standards (p. 25). The Fifth Discipline focuses on how people think of their organization. A more detailed discussion of Six Sigma and the Fifth Discipline follows.

Six Sigma. Andrew Berger (2003) writes that Six Sigma can be used in two ways: (1) “As a quality target for the company’s processes” and (2) “as a mechanism for building a culture of excellence as well as the delivery of financial benefits” (p. 5). Keki Bhote (2002) writes that three different perceptions of Six Sigma exist. The first one is the statistical one, the second is the “hyped Six Sigma peddled by some consulting companies” (p. 3), and the third is the Ultimate Six Sigma. Statistical Six Sigma refers to a quality standard of approximately three defects per million. “Once that level is reached, and the process is stable, inspection can indeed be reduced, or eliminated altogether” (Anschutz, p. 22). The importance of Six Sigma quality has grown and it is now considered a world standard. To illustrate the importance, Anschutz provides the example of a product composed of many parts. Using a product composed of 500 parts from a process with a capability of 1 ($C_p=1$), on an average, you would have 2.7 defects per thousand or a defect rate of 1.35 units. Conversely, if the same 500-part product is produced utilizing parts built to Six Sigma quality standards, the defect rate drops to .0017 defects per unit

(p.156). This statistical measure of quality aligns with the Industrial Age structure of our current accountability system based on test scores. It does not factor in those activities that could impact the quality of the outcome.

Fifth Discipline. Peter Senge (1990) terms “systems thinking the fifth discipline because it is the conceptual cornerstone that underlies all of the five basic learning disciplines...How learning organizations think about their world” (p. 69). Senge writes that metanoia – a shift of mind “ from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future” (p. 69) is the “basic meaning of a ‘learning organization’ – an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (p. 14).

Under the current education policy of relying on test scores in math and literacy, school leaders, policy makers, and stakeholders are making decisions based on parts of the system (test scores) with little or no consideration of the impact on the entire system. The benefit of site-visitation is it provides the details of what is going on in the schools, what is working, and what is not working in terms of school improvement. The findings of site-visits and the communication of these findings provide meaning and understanding to school leaders.

The exploration of the various types of site-visitation and visitation processes provide a applicable demonstration of systems theory and school improvement.

School Improvement Literature

Chris Marshall (2008) writes, “all those who are interested in education are keen to raise the standards but what, in practice, these standards are, and indeed how they can be assessed reliably, is still a cause of considerable debate, particularly in relation to pupils with additional needs” (2008, p. 69).

The literature acknowledges the role of site-visitations in the assessment of effectiveness, accountability and improvement of not only educational institutions but also health care (Warkentin, P. I.; Nick, L.; and Shpall, E. J.; 2000; Dlugaz, Y., 2005) and businesses (Baldrige, 2009). Many compliance regulations in the areas of federal, state and local food and safety require a site-visitation for verification. One example is the periodic inspection that the food and beverage industries are subject to in order to continue serving food and beverages. Another example are the safety inspections conducted by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In both examples, the purpose of the inspection is twofold: (1) to ensure the institution is compliant, and (2) identify areas of non-compliance for improvement. The value of site-visitation or “being there” (Wilson, 1996) is more intertwined in our daily lives than we realize.

Mark A. Smylie (2010) points that change and improvement are not the same. Change may lead to improvement, but it may also be in a lateral direction that provides for a different way of doing things but not necessarily one that leads to improvement. In his discussion of the history and logic of continuous improvement, Smylie refers to the fact that businesses operate in competitive environments. Therefore, they are continuously monitoring their competition and the industry and making improvements to stay ahead of their competitors. Improvement does not have an end; it is continuous (2010) in that organizations discover and learn new concepts and make improvements. This continuum of improvement is the core of the conceptual framework for this study of site-visitation, based on systems theory. It is also paramount for school improvement.

The concept of continuous improvement implores organizations to become learning organizations (Huberman, M.; 1992; Palestini, R. H., 2000; & Senge, P. M., 1990). Senge

(1999), states that continuous improvement is the natural byproduct of a learning culture. Conversely, within a controlling environment, it is viewed as an “admission of deficiency” (p. 6). In the current high-stakes testing accountability controlled environment, educators often focus on the deficiency level in test scores and how to be less deficient the next time. The typical response is another program (experiment) focused on being less deficient and not learning how to improve (1999). Senge (1999) points out that in school we are taught to perform, i.e., “mistakes are punished, correct answers rewarded” (p. 7).

The research of Ball (2003) explores this “performativity” [sic] environment from the teachers perspective. He defines performativity [sic] as “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements [sic], comparison and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)” (p. 216). The problem for teachers is the tension between being the type of teacher he/she want to be – focused on student learning and improvement – and the teacher he/she feels pressure to be – focused on keeping the job by producing results at all costs (2003). Each is concerned that what he/she does in the classroom towards improvement will not “be captured by or valued within the metrics of accountability and, on the other, that these metrics still distort their practice” (p. 223).

Smylie’s (2010) research discusses the most prominent improvement models found in education literature. He identifies these as:

- Lawrence Lezotte and Kathleen McKee’s (2002,2006) *The Effective Continuous Improvement Process*
- The National Study of School Evaluation’s (NSSE) model of *Breakthrough School Improvement* (AdvancED, n.d.a, b; North Central Association, 2004)

- The San Francisco Bay Area School Reform Collaborative's *Cycle of Inquiry* (Copeland, 2003; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2003)
- Allison Zumda, Robert Kuklis, and Everett Kline's (2004) *Six Steps of Continuous Improvement*
- The National Education Association's KEYS for Excellence in Your School *Continuous Improvement*
- Willis Hawley and Gary Sykes's (2007) *Model of Continuous Improvement* (p. 67).

All of these improvement models have roots in the basic total quality management model (TQM) of "Plan-Do-Check-Act" (Smylie, 2010, p. 64). This is often referred to as the Shewhart Cycle (2010).

Site-Visitation Defined

For the purpose of this study, site-visitation is being defined as a process by which individuals physically enter a facility (business or school), make observations on what is happening there, then report these observations or findings back to some person or oversight body with the intent of evaluating the organization or making suggestions for improvement.

This definition of site-visitation encompasses terms such as such as learning walks, walkthroughs, peer observations, inspections, etc. Peers and/or outside experts can conduct site-visitations.

Site-visitations range from peer observation among peers within an individual institution or school or at an outside institution or school to expert observations from outside professionals. The individuals performing the visitation could be educators, employees of the site being visited,

business/community people, external peers, professional consultants, etc. Time wise, the visits might range from a few minutes to a week or more. The results of the findings might go to an accreditation committee, to the entity and its administrators, to the media, to oversight agencies, or even the visiting committee. The expertise of the visitation team ranges from volunteers with backgrounds in the specific field to highly trained and/or certified inspectors.

The commonalities of models employed in on-site visits vary from the structured and formal to the unstructured and informal. In addition, when viewing the literature from a historical perspective, there appears to be a movement to adopt more aspects of quality management business models in the assessment of educational outcomes.

Much of the existing literature is centered on the establishment of government inspection of schools in the 1830s by the British (Wilson, 1996), beginning with the creation of Her Majesty's Inspectors, to the evolution of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England. The influence of the British system of inspection format can be seen throughout Europe and in former British colonies and territories (MacNab, 2001).

Types of Site-Visitation

The types of site-visitation covered by this literature review include those associated with accreditation agencies, award or certification programs, peer or internal visitation and public visitation. While the focus of this research is K-12 education, visitation processes from the fields of higher education and business are included. Site-visitation is also utilized in other disciplines such as the medical field. Literature pertaining to site-visitation in the medical field, was examined but not included because it fell within the categories of accreditation and awards.

While the names of accreditation agencies differ across disciplines, the awards, such as Baldrige, cross disciplines.

The following section of the literature review addresses the types of site-visitation by award programs, accreditation visits, peer or internal visits, and public inspections.

Award Programs.

Baldrige. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, named after the former Secretary of Commerce, Malcolm Baldrige, was established by an Act of Congress on January 6, 1987 (Capezio & Morehouse, 1993, p. 262). The management and development of the award program is assigned to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), an agency within the Department of Commerce (Reimann, 1993). The purpose of this award program is to: (1) promote quality awareness, (2) recognize quality achievements of U.S. companies, and (3) publicize successful quality strategies (Capezio & Morehouse, 1993, p. 263-264). The process for this award is rigorous and participants are required to submit written applications that target specific criteria.

Jerome Arcaro (1995) and others identify several benefits of utilizing the Baldrige criteria in educational institutions, including improvements recognized by the community as supporting the establishment of a educational culture that focuses on the needs of students (Anschutz, 1995; Capezio & Morehouse, 1993; Arcaro, 1995; Reimann 1993; Walpole & Noeth, 2002).

Another benefit of the program is all applicants are sent feedback reports that can be used to make improvements (Reimann, 1993). According to Rene Norris, Education Specialist for the Baldrige National Quality Program (personal communication, August 11, 2009), many entities submit their applications specifically to receive the feedback. They use the feedback to develop

strategies and make improvements within their organizations. Up to 18 awards may be awarded each year. Many years, not all awards are given out. The judges look for those applicants who can be role models for others (Baldrige National Quality Program, National Institute of Standards and Technology, Department of Commerce, (n.d.) and Award Process Review Cycle, (n.d.). The feedback loop tied to improvement is a major component in not only the Baldrige Awards, but also site-visitation and system theory. The communication of feedback provides the organization the opportunity to examine and respond to the comments.

Accreditation visits. According to Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder (2009), regional accreditation agencies have the structure in place that could support a school accountability system that addresses more than the standardized test scores in use in the United States. They further acknowledged that the peer-review component of the accreditation process has its challenges. Primarily, the team members, as a rule, are not professional evaluators and therefore may have difficulty with the two contradictory roles as “friendly peer advisors, making suggestions to school faculties about how to improve, and as judges, determining whether schools should receive accreditation” (p. 628).

One problem with this method may be team members’ reluctance to find fault and to apply standards strictly because accreditation team members are from schools accredited by the same regional agency (p. 269). In general, the accreditation associations do not evaluate teachers or students. They offer recommendations, commendations, or suggest areas for improvement and/or consideration. The recommendations are typically mandates that must be reconciled within a specific time period (AdvancED, 2007-08; International Baccalaureate, n.d.; AACSB, n.d.).

Peer/internal visitation. This section of the literature review refers to the visitation process in which peers observe each other for purposes of evaluation, improvement, and/or professional development. “Learning walks” or “walkthroughs” are specific processes that administrators or peers employ to better understand what is happening in the classrooms (Lemons, R. W. and Helsing, D., March, 2009). The February 2007 newsletter of the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (Using the Classroom Walk-Through, 2007, p.1) defines the walkthrough as “a brief, structured, non-evaluative [sic] classroom observation by the principal that is followed by a conversation between the principal and the teacher about what was observed.”

These observations or visitations can be implemented to address the results of data analysis to better determine strategies that may be more effective in specific schools or districts. Additionally, walkthroughs or learning walks can be used by administrators for staff evaluation or by peers as a means of professional development for improved teaching practices and building collegiality among peers (Bell, 2005). Literally, it is a “walk through” a school or classroom. These walkthroughs are generally short and range from two to 15 minutes.

A “Targeted Learning Walk” is one where the focus is on the specific, such as teaching, learning and/or the structure of the instruction. The primary difference between a “targeted” learning walk and the walkthroughs of old is the leadership team clearly identifies the purpose of the learning walk and identifies common and consistent protocol to ensure that all team members remain focused and follow the same process in gathering information (Cuderio & Nelsen, 2009).

In the role of observer, the researcher had the opportunity to shadow a “discovery walk” based on Marzano’s 9 Strategies. The school leaders decided they were going to use the discovery walks as a mechanism of not only school improvement but also staff development.

They set a goal of having every faculty member participate in one of the several discovery walks scheduled for the year. A follow-up interview with the principal revealed that at first the teachers were apprehensive about peers observing their classroom in action. But after a couple of groups of teachers participated in the discovery walks, other teachers were anxious to participate.

The process at this school is based on Marzano's 9 Strategies: (1) similarities and differences, (2) summarizing and note taking, (3) reinforcing effort and recognition, (4) homework and practice, (5) non-linguistic representations, (6) cooperative group learning, (7) setting objectives and providing feedback, (8) generating and testing hypotheses, and (9) cues, questions, and advance organizers. Using a rubric, several classes were observed. After each classroom observation, the visitation team would gather and discuss findings. At the end of site-visits for that day, the data was aggregated and the results were discussed among the team members. According to the principal, two or more teachers that participated in the discovery walk plan staff professional development around the findings. For this school, participation in the discovery walks has resulted in more collaboration across disciplines and among teachers.

The negative aspects of peer observation cited by Bell and Mladenovic (2008) include the possible intrusiveness of the observation, the possibility that the observers may not be objective, and the challenge to academic freedom in that what is observed may not be representative or accurate of actual student learning. In addition, peer observation is not always viewed as a way of enhancing teacher development and some teachers may resist suggested changes as a result of peer observation (2008, p. 737). Cuderio and Nelsen (2009) note that the walkthrough can become a means of checking items off a list and is not dynamic and meaningful to improvement. When this occurs, it is an indication that the process has become perfunctory and technical in

nature and not incorporated in the overall strategic goals of the school or entity (Lemons & Helsing, 2009).

Public inspection. The visitations categorized in this section include those that are a requirement of a public agency (such as a state or national board of education) or are inspections mandated by legislative acts. Entities subject to public inspection have common elements such as legal accountability mandates, publication of reports, and consequences for poor performance. In the United States, an example of public inspection is found in the state of Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT). In Europe, examples include England’s OFSTED and the Netherland’s risk-management approach.

Her Majesties Inspectors (HMI) and Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

The process of school inspections and the role of inspectors in school accountability had its beginnings in England. Since 1839, Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) have inspected schools for the purposes of monitoring, evaluating and comparing performance. The influence of this inspection process can be seen in accountability systems across Europe and even globally due to the British colonies and occupied territories. What began as an advisory role to assist teachers and schools has transformed throughout the years to inspections that determine levels of funding to the establishment of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in 1992 (Marshall, 2008). The slogan for OFSTED is ‘improvement through inspection’ (Marshall, 2008). John Izbicki (2008) describes the transition from HMI inspectors focused on the school’s curriculum, teaching and dispensing advice to the data driven “threat to the teaching profession” in the early 1990s. OFSTED has continued to evolve. The most recent changes to the inspection framework/process took effect September 2014 (OFSTED, 2014a). The School Inspectors Handbook (OFSTD, 2014b) outlines the details surrounding the roles of the inspectors, schools,

and function of the inspection. It also points to the importance of the role of teaching in promoting learning, acquisition of knowledge, and raising achievement. The most significant changes include the elimination of recording grades for the quality of teaching for specific individual classroom observations and a focus on a broad and balanced curriculum.

Additionally, Item 57 notes, “no single measure or indicator determines judgements, particularly since much of the data may be historical and relate to pupils that have left the school” (2014b).

This is in sharp contrast to the current test-score environment or a specific focus as described by Izbicki (2008).

The Framework for School Inspections states the following purpose of inspections: “the inspection of a school provides an independent external evaluation of its effectiveness and a diagnosis of what it should do to improve. It is based on a range of evidence available to inspectors that is evaluated against a national framework” (2014a, 1).

The OFSTED inspection framework is meant to perform three essential functions:

(1) provide parents with an expert and independent assessment of how well a school is performing, and help inform those who are choosing a school for their child, (2) provide information to the Secretary of State for Education and to Parliament about the work of schools and the extent to which an acceptable standard of education is being provided; this provides assurance that minimum standards are being met, provides confidence in the use of public money and assists accountability, as well as indicating where improvements are needed and (3) promote the improvement of individual schools and the education system as a whole (2014a, 2).

In the process of performing these functions, the inspectors are engaging school stakeholders by communicating emerging findings, providing opportunities for school leaders to explain or

provide evidence, involving governors, senior school staff, students and parents, and ensuring judgements are not only based on evidence but are agreed upon. As inspectors identify strengths and weaknesses, they are also concerned with how effectively school leaders utilize performance measures and the school's self-evaluation to drive professional development activities (2014b, 80).

Item 3 of the Framework outlines how inspection leads to school improvement:

- raises expectations by setting the standards of performance and effectiveness expected of schools
- provides a sharp challenge and the impetus to act where improvement is needed
- clearly identifies strengths and weaknesses
- recommends specific priorities for improvement for the school and, when appropriate, checks on and promotes subsequent progress
- promotes rigour in the way that schools evaluate their own performance, thereby enhancing their capacity to improve
- monitors the progress and performance of schools that are not yet good, and challenges and supports senior leaders, staff and those responsible for governance (2014a, 3).

The School Inspection Handbook outlines the process, responsible parties, and the precise steps required of each. The prescribed intervals for inspections are set to ensure fairness and balance to the school where the frequency is proportionate to school performance and circumstances. Inspections are scheduled every five years from the last day of school in which the previous inspection occurred. Inspections can begin after the fifth school day of the new

school year. For example, if the first day of the school year is on a Tuesday, inspections for that school year can begin five days later on the following Tuesday. Inspections can be announced or unannounced. An announced visit requires the lead inspector to notify the school leader by telephone “at or just after midday of the working day before the start of inspection” (2014b, 23). In this context, the working day before the start of inspection is the day the lead inspector meets with the school leader and team members to determine the timing and details of the visit. The purpose of the telephone call is to establish a professional relationship with the school leader (2014b, 26). If the inspection is unannounced, the inspector is only required to give 15 to 20 minutes notice via the telephone (2014b, 23).

The detail in the School Inspection Handbook is specific to the level of providing the telephone number and the exact verbiage to use when calling the help line about a school that needs improvement (2014b, 101, 105). Items 99 through 108 outline the measures for schools that are of concern. These include more frequent inspections, support or closure.

The OFSTED inspection model is centered in systems theory. Feedback is required during, at the end and after each inspection as stated in item 88 of the School Inspection Handbook:

Following the end of the inspection, there must be a feedback meeting that should include the headteacher, the chair of the governing body and at least one other governor, wherever possible. The feedback meeting should include as many representatives from the governing body, or those responsible for governance, as possible. In the case of an academy with no delegated governance functions, the feedback meeting should include at least one representative of the board of trustees from the multi-academy trust, where possible. It is for the lead inspector to decide, following discussion with the headteacher,

whether other senior staff should be present. A representative from the local authority and/or the designated responsible body should be invited by the headteacher.

The feedback follows with a draft of the written report going to and Independent School Provider (ISP) for editing. The ISP then forwards the finalized report to the school for a review for factual accuracy. The school has one day to respond unless it is in a category of concern. Under those circumstances, the school has five (5) days to respond. A school that does not fall into one of the concern categories will receive their written report within ten (10) working days of the end of the inspection. Fifteen days after the end of the inspection, the report is posted on the OFSTED website. If a school is found inadequate, the report is not published for 28 days. Copies of the report are sent to the headteacher, local authority, governing body, and other prescribed persons(2014a).

Item 42 of The Framework for School Inspection prescribes the grading scale for judging overall effectiveness:

Inspectors will use the following scale when judging the overall effectiveness of the school and making the four key judgments about the achievement of pupils, the quality of teaching, the behaviour and safety of pupils and the quality of leadership in and management of the school and, where applicable, judging the effectiveness of the early years provision and the sixth form.

- grade 1 – outstanding
- grade 2 – good
- grade 3 – requires improvement
- grade 4 – inadequate.

Item 43 of The Framework for School Inspection points to the following considerations:

In judging the school's overall effectiveness, inspectors will consider whether:

- the standard of education is good (grade 2) or exceeds this standard sufficiently to be judged as outstanding (grade 1)
- the school requires improvement as it is not yet a good school, because one or more of the four key judgments is judged as requires improvement (grade 3) and/or there are overall weaknesses in the provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- the school is inadequate (grade 4) and, if so, whether it has serious weaknesses or requires special measures.

Item 91 of the School Inspection Handbook provides the following directions for schools needing improvement: "Where the school is judged as requires improvement, inspectors should indicate that Ofsted has published a report, 'Getting to good: how headteachers achieve success', that sets out the strategies used in schools that have moved from satisfactory to good or outstanding. Inspectors should also direct schools to the guidance on 'Monitoring visits and support for schools that require improvement'."

Item 45 of The Framework for School inspections identifies the two categories of schools causing concern as:

- Serious weaknesses 29 – where one or more of the key judgments are inadequate (grade

4) and/or there are serious weaknesses in the provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. However, leaders, managers and governors are judged to be capable of securing improvement (this means that leadership and management are judged at grade 3 or above).

- Special measures – where a school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the leaders, managers or governors are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school

And Item 46 addresses those schools deemed inadequate:

The 'inadequate' judgment is subject to moderation by HMI. HMCI is required to confirm where special measures are required. If a school is judged to require special measures, Ofsted must determine whether the school should be permitted to appoint newly qualified teachers. This decision will be reported in the inspection report. In the case of an academy made subject to special measures, the lead inspector will make a recommendation on whether or not the academy may appoint newly qualified teachers. During monitoring inspections, the lead inspector will review this decision or (in the case of an academy) recommendation in the light of progress made by the school and confirm or revise the permission 31 or recommendation.

Wilson's (1996) book, *Reaching for a Better Standard*, offers a personal and in-depth view of the inspection process in England. Wilson spent 10 months in England shadowing 39 local and national inspectors while they worked, visited 14 elementary schools and five high schools. He spent two days to a week at seven schools and two or more weeks at two other

schools. His daily descriptions of what inspectors do provides details of how inspectors relate to and interact with school personnel including students. It also details how they form judgments, and make recommendations.

The Netherlands. In the Netherlands, schools govern with a high level of autonomy operating within the framework of attainment targets and examinations requirements established by central government. This autonomy charges schools with total responsibility for teaching and learning, personnel and materials. While they are free to decide how the budget is spent, they are also responsible for the quality of education they provide. Under this structure of autonomy, the Inspectorate holds the school boards accountable for the quality of education, finances, and statutory compliance. Therefore, they communicate directly with the board and not the school leader (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, May, 2010(a)).

The role of the Inspectorate is to monitor a school and assure or improve its quality. If schools demonstrate the capability to monitor and improve their own quality, “the Inspectorate keeps its distance” (May, 2010(a)).

The Netherlands has taken a risk assessment approach in which the level or frequency of site-inspection is based on the level of risk – the higher the risk, the higher frequency of inspection. No risk, less inspection. Annually, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education publishes the Annual Education Report, which “outlines developments and key themes in Dutch education” (Dutch Education Inspectorate, May 2010(b)).

After the new outcome data for the year has been processed, a date is set for a school’s annual risk analysis. The focus of this risk analysis is on the “outcomes, annual accounts and failure signals” (n.d. (b), p. 5). Outcomes are defined as student achievement and developmental progress. Annual accounts refer to school data including staff turnover, student population, and

financial management. Examples of failure signals include parental complaints and/or media reports (n.d. (b) p. 5). The findings of the inspection are discussed with the school board and the school management team. The inspection team drafts a report and designs an inspection implementation program for the school. Before the report is finalized, the school board has an opportunity to respond to the draft. If the Inspectorate and the school board fail to reach an agreement on the report, the board's responses are included in the report. Within five weeks after the assessment, the reports are published on the Dutch Inspectorate of Education website (n.d.(b)).

The schools are determined to be weak or at risk receive a tailored inspection program. The level of inspection is proportional to the identified weaknesses. If schools do not improve within two years, the inspection measures are increased and can result in an official warning (n.d.(b)).

In addition to the risk-based inspections, the Inspectorate conducts theme studies. These studies identify emerging themes and trends within the education sector. This helps provide a more national view of the state of education. The Inspectorate of Education stresses the importance of theme studies as they highlight “social context, political issues, and educational developments” that impact not only the quality of education but also the direction of education policy (n.d.(b) p. 20).

For the schools not identified as a risk, the Inspectorate conducts a visit every four years that may or may not be announced.

Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT). The Rhode Island Department of Education developed SALT over a

five-year period in conjunction with educators and schools. It was written into state legislations (Article 31) in 1997. The legislation “requires schools to engage in self-study and goal setting” (SALT Works, n.d.). SALT places the responsibility for the improvement process with the school and emphasizes the importance of the professional judgment of the teachers and other adults close to the students in the development of strategies to improve learning and teaching within their school (SALT Works, n.d.).

The three focus areas of SALT are (1) student learning, (2) teaching, and (3) the school. “This area [the school] focuses on all the structures and processes within and outside schools that promote and support teaching and learning. The school needs to be viewed as an organization and a community and assessed from those viewpoints” (SALT Works, “*The Salt Focus*,” n.d.). SALT is organized around a five-step ongoing cycle: (1) self-study, (2) school improvement plan, (3) school visit, (4) school support and interventions agreement, and (5) school report night. While the specific activities in this cycle are not new to the schools, the “organization into this ongoing cycle is new” (SALT Works, “*The Salt Focus*,” n.d.).

Over a seven (7) year period (1997-2004), the Rhode Island Department of Education, with support from Catalpa, Ltd., conducted 235 SALT visits to Rhode Island Public Schools. Wilson and Andrews (2005, June) of Catalpa Ltd. Research, surveyed the administrators and teachers that participated in the SALT site-visits. 80% of the teachers and 74% of the local administrators identified their participation in a SALT site-visit as “the most powerful professional development experience they have ever had.” When the SALT site-visitation team members were asked how important certain skills were for the site-visitation team member to possess, professional judgment was the highest at 94.8% followed by building consensus at 93.3%.

In the following section of the literature review, the key components of site-visitation models are explored.

Key Components of Visitation

As the literature was reviewed, the emergence of patterns and themes enabled the researcher to identify common key components of the various visitation models. Utilizing qualitative research methods supported by the research of Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Miles and Huberman (1994), Leedy and Omrod (2005), and Glesne (1999), the researcher looked for patterns and themes to identify key terms and to categorize the literature.

The six common key components of the visitation process as identified by the researcher included in this literature review are: (1) purpose of the visit, (2) team membership, (3) team activities (pre-, during-, post-visit), (4) site activities (pre-, during-, post-visit), (5) definition of evidence, and (6) dissemination of findings. Each of these components is presented within the context of the scope of the literature included in this review.

Purpose of the visit. It is important to note that the purpose of the visit (accreditation, compliance, award, etc.) impacts a school's response to the visitation process and team. A pre-planned announced visit allows for preparation on the school's part, while an unannounced visit could be viewed as an attempt to catch the school doing something wrong. As a research observer on both types of visits, pre-planned announced and unannounced, I have experienced the different responses. The pre-planned announced visit was a two-day accreditation visit. The school staff was prepared but at the same time expressed anxiety about the outcome. In the unannounced visit, it was obvious the school staff was caught off guard and did not practice the

culture it presented in their reporting. The culture of the school and its leaders potentially impacts the faculty, staff, and students reaction to site-visitation team members.

Team members. Depending on the type of visit and the school or organization demographics, the number of team members varies. The number of team members may be based on the population or size of the school, university, or entity. In addition, the scope or purpose of the visitation or inspection determines the number of team members. Generally, the regional accreditation associations base the size of their visitation teams on the type of school, the school enrollment, and the expertise of the volunteer pool available to participate in site-visitations. Conversely, the programmatic Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) fields their volunteer peer review teams with deans of AACSB accredited business schools (AACSB, n.d.). The awards models, such as Baldrige, involve more in-depth training and experience. SALT reviewers have little training intentionally. In England, Finland, and the Netherlands, the team members receive training.

Qualifications & experience. Since the accreditation associations rely on peer volunteers for their inspection teams, the team members typically do not and are not required to receive formal training for the visits (Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2009). The team leaders usually attend a training session, but not always. Rothstein, et al. (2009), point out that often the training or experience a team member has is his/her participation on other visitation teams. This is evident in not only regional accreditation site-visitation teams but also in peer or internal observations (AdvancED, n.d.; Bell, 2005). AdvancED does ensure that the team chair is trained and experienced in the standards and methodology employed by AdvancED.

Conversely, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) website hosts an e-learning tool for peer-review training. This website also includes a section titled “Process Documents” that provides the user with outlines of the roles and responsibilities of each team member, forms utilized in the AACSB accreditation process, and sample reports and templates for team members (AACSB, n.d.). Drew-Bryan and Price (1996) point that site-visitation provide opportunities for “in-depth look at details” . . . and “direct observation of pedagogical innovations. . . .” In addition, they point to the value of the visitation process: “English (1988, 46-47) notes that site-visits are ‘context determiners’ and that visitation reveals ‘the environment for learning and the special problems, barriers, impediments, and facilitators that may be present. . . .’” (p. 3).

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) appoints its evaluators. The IBO then nominates a team of evaluators, which have been “trained in programme [sic] evaluation by the IBO” (International Baccalaureate Organization, September 2005, p. 11). The nominated team of evaluators has a minimum of two members, depending on the size of the school. Each team includes at least one specifically identified experienced school practitioner trained in program evaluation. A full-time IBO staff member may or may not be a member of the team (2005, p.11).

The award or certification programs generally require visitation team members to be selected via an application or nomination process and to achieve certification and/or training in the specific award or certification program. Each fall, the Baldrige program solicits individuals to serve one-year terms as examiners. According to Rene Norris, Education Specialist for the Baldrige National Quality Program (personal communication, August 11, 2009), the board of examiners is made up of 500-560 volunteers selected annually via an application process. In

addition, in order to balance the expertise of the board, the examiners are selected from a variety of disciplines, including “. . . leading U.S. business, nonprofit, health care and education experts selected from industry; professional and trade organizations; government agencies; other nonprofit groups; and the ranks of the retired” (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2009, p.3). Norris writes that the make up of the board is approximately one third new examiners, one third returning examiners, and one-third senior and/or alumni examiners. In addition, each examiner selected must attend “one of the three-day preparation classes and must complete a 35-50 hour case study evaluation prior to attending the class” (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2009, p. 5). If the examiners do not attend one scheduled training session, they cannot serve as examiners. Norris states that there are typically five to seven examiners on each team and additional members may be added if the entity has multiple sites.

In peer visitation, the visitation team members can be internal or external. The members are typically volunteers but sometimes membership can be default by means of position or an implied duty that is difficult to refuse (Waite, 2002). Again, it depends on the type and purpose of the visitation (Lemons & Helsing, 2009). An example of peer visitation is the model of New Schools for New Orleans. This targeted one-day visitation was scheduled to provide the principal with feedback on two specific areas: school leadership and student discipline. The charter school visited was in its first year and it is the policy of New Schools for New Orleans to conduct a school visit during the first semester of the school year. According to an administrator for New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) (personal communication, November 24, 2009), targeted visits provide “gut checks” for new school leaders. The members of the visitation team included three support personnel from New Schools for New Orleans, one member of an educational non-profit and one member from a neighboring charter school. The expertise of

these members ranged from former principals, financial managers, and curriculum specialists. All were volunteers available on the specific dates chosen for the visit.

At the University of Sydney, Australia, the Faculty of Economics and Business utilizes peer observation of teaching as professional development to further develop faculty confidence to teach and improve teaching practice (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008). Team members, both experienced and new teachers, observe each other. Their experience and expertise is varied, as this is an internal peer observation for professional improvement.

New York Community School District #2, under Anthony Alvarado, took peer observation and professional development as a central mission of the district. In collaboration with principals and other school leaders, the “district staff designate[s] an experienced practitioner as a Resident Teacher” (Elmore, 1997, p. 13) who, in turn, agreed “to accept a certain number of teachers as visitors in her classroom” (p. 13). Thus, the number of observers varies. The goal of this visitation model is primarily for the learning of the visitor, not the assessment of the school.

In the case of the public category, visitation is usually a mandate or component of the legislative act. For example, the Dutch Supervision Act of 2002 cites inspection of schools as a means for the government to guarantee educational quality (Ehren & Visscher, 2008, June 1).

The difference in the attributes of accreditation visitation team membership and qualifications is the appointment of team members by the IBO board and the requirement by AACSB that the team members be deans of colleges of business. Conversely, the selection process and qualifications for visitation-team members within the awards or certification category require applications, letters of recommendations, and specific training. Depending on

the context, peer observation teams can include one individual, such as a principal or school leader, conducting an evaluative observation or numerous volunteer members as part of a larger process (such as a school district review or even a professional development process similar to New York Community School District #2).

Team activities. Most site-visitation modules require some level of preparation on the part of the team members prior to the visit. The activities of each team vary and depend on the purpose of the visit. Typically, pre-visit activities for team members include the review of documents and/or training. The team members of the accreditation associations, the award programs and the public program visitation teams are typically provided documents to review prior to the visit. These may be in the form of self-studies required as part of the accreditation process, applications for awards programs, or self-evaluations for the public categories.

Usually, the length of the visit is based on the purpose of the visit, the type and size of institution, and usually ranges from one to five days. Walkthroughs are short in duration (10 minutes or less) and can be specific in nature; that is, they may have a targeted purpose. Walkthroughs typically target a specific classroom or activity center of the school such as hallways, lunchrooms, playgrounds, learning centers, etc. Accreditation, public, and award programs engage in longer visitation processes that encompass multiple aspects of the school or institution. In addition, more time is required because visitation teams engage in discussion and collaborate on findings to come to a consensus and draft a report. The SACS accreditation, under the auspices of AdvancEd, requires the visiting team to informally report the recommendation and commendations to the principal, site accreditation team members, and the school staff in general. A formal written report follows later.

Site activities. The site activities for all models require some level of preparation. For the Walkthrough, the preparation may involve gathering documentation such as lesson plans, demographics, test scores, discipline reports, etc. The accreditation, public and awards programs require more detailed and in-depth report such as self-evaluations, strategic plans, proof of credentials, and demonstration of links to student learning and/or improvement.

The school is generally responsible for providing a room for the visitation team to meet, making certain documents and people available if the team requires it. In addition, the school bears all costs associated with the visit.

If there are recommendations, the school or organization may have a time frame in which to respond and rectify the findings. SACS visits provide a two-year window for schools to address the recommendations. New Schools for New Orleans assists with intervention when necessary but typically expects findings to be rectified by the second school year of operation. The Baldrige Award awards a maximum of 18 awards per year. An applicant can submit an application each year until winning the award, as long as he shows improvement. Once an applicant receives the award, he cannot apply for five years.

Definition of Evidence. The visitation process is subjective in that it relies on the judgments of the team members on the status of the school or institution. Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder (2009, May) acknowledge the reliance on the professional judgment of visitation team is not only subjective but controversial in terms of the level of expertise and professionalism of the team members. In addition, there is a direct link between the outcome of a site-visitation and the viability and reputation of an institution (Sinkinson, 2004). The 2004 study by Sinkinson discusses Ofsted Inspections and the role the managing inspector plays, as outlined by Ofsted in ensuring “consistency of judgement and reporting in reports” (Sinkinson,

p. 235). The basis of this research included a sample of four Higher Education Institutions (HEI) that met the study criteria of offering at least six subjects in which four or more rated the highest possible grades. In reporting survey results of all Higher Education Institution partnership providers of ITT, Graham and Nabb (as cited in Sinkinson), found that less than 10% of 152 providers felt confident “in the reliability, validity and consistency of the Ofsted inspection of their courses” (p.235).

Judgment is a key component in the site-visitation process. Michael Luntly (2005, September) states “one of the things that one acquires in education is a capacity for judgment, where this is a capacity for forming a view about what to think and what to do that, in some interesting sense, transcends the application of rules. It is the idea that judgment requires a distinctive cognitive ability” (p.281).

Dissemination of Findings. The dissemination of findings is similar across the various visitation models. The models included in this literature review include an oral discussion of the findings with the school or organization leader, followed by a written report. The variations between models occur at the various stages between the oral report and the written report. For the accreditation visitations, an oral exit of the findings is presented to the school outlining the recommendations, commendations, and opportunities for improvement (AdvancED, 2007-08). In the example of New Schools for New Orleans, recommendations were presented to the school leader, who, in turn, disseminated the information to various stakeholders. This immediate communication is key to systems theory. It provides the opportunity for organizations to begin to address findings immediately and engage in appropriate improvement activities.

The Louisiana charter school-visitation protocol is grounded in this systematic feedback loop. A visitation team makes observations based on internal benchmarks set by the office of the

State of Louisiana Department of Education Office of Parental Options. These internal benchmarks are grounded in established best practices and include specific areas covered by local, regional, and national educational guidelines and/or mandates. The ten benchmarks, including definitions and observation prompts utilized by the visitation teams on third-year visits are presented in Table 6 and detailed in Appendix C. The feedback loop of the charter school site-visitation is immediate in that at the end of the visit, the team members meet with school leadership and orally present their findings. This provides the opportunity for the school leadership to address findings and clarify or produce evidence that supports the schools practices. This feedback also provides the visitation team the opportunity to make adjustments prior to submitting the written report. This immediate feedback to the charter school leadership also provides the opportunity for the leadership to begin addressing findings prior to the written report and make the necessary adjustments and changes within a reasonable time frame prior to the five-year charter-renewal evaluation.

Weaknesses of Site-Visitation

Bell and Mladenovic identify weaknesses of site-visitation as intrusiveness of the observation, the possibility that the observers may not be objective and it is not always viewed as a way of enhancing teacher development (2008). Cuderio and Nelsen (2009) and Lemons and Helsing (2009) note that site-visitation can become a perfunctory and technical in nature, as a means of checking items off a list and not dynamic and meaningful to improvement. Lemons and Helsing argue that when site-visitation becomes perfunctory, the findings are not incorporated in the overall strategic goals of the school or entity. Rothstein, et al. (2009) argue, that often site-visitation team members are not professional evaluators and may be reluctant to find fault with peers. Another weakness of the various models identified in the literature review

is the lack of training for site-visitation team members. These weaknesses in site-visitation can be diminished somewhat when the purpose of the visit is clearly communicated.

Context of the Study

The focus of this study is the use of site-visitation as a tool for school improvement through the lens of the site-visitation policy and process employed by the State of Louisiana Department of Education Office of Parental Options. The context of the study is within the charter school structure in the city of New Orleans. In order to establish the validity of the site of the study and the reliability of findings in this case study, it is important to understand the environment that cultivated the emergence of a large number of charter schools within a short time frame. Therefore, the history of charter schools in Louisiana including legislation, governance structure and state accountability measures are included in this literature review.

Louisiana Charter School Legislation

Charter schools in Louisiana were created by the “Charter School Demonstration Programs Law,” enacted by Acts 195, No. 192, §, eff. June 14, 1995; Acts 197, No. 477, §1, eff. June 30, 1997, with the “intention of the legislature ... to authorize experimentation by city and parish school boards by authorizing the creation of innovative kinds of independent public schools for pupils...” (§3972. Intent and purpose). The legislation further provides ... “it is the intention of the legislature that the best interests of at-risk pupils shall be the overriding consideration in implementing the provisions of this Chapter” (§3972. Intent and purpose). The legislation defines the chartering authority, chartering process of revision and renewal, charter revocation, school authority, limitations, etc. The legislation is supported by Title 28, Bulletin 126 of the Louisiana Administrative Code that provides the rules governing charter schools in

Louisiana. Section 107 of the Administrative Code outlines five types of charter schools permitted under the legislation. Brief descriptions of the five types of charters authorized under the legislation and outlined in the Administrative Code are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Types of Charter Schools in Louisiana

CHARTER TYPE	DESCRIPTION
1	New start-up school with local school board and non-profit created to operate the school
2	New start-up school or conversion of pre-existing school with BESE and non-profit to operate the school
3	Conversion of pre-existing school with local school board and non-profit created to operate the school
4	New start-up or conversion of pre-existing school with local school board and BESE
5	Pre-existing public or new school in New Orleans under the jurisdiction of the Recovery School District (RSD) and/or BESE

(LAC 28; www.doe.state.la.us/ide/charter/2624.html)

These five types of charter schools provide the structure under which interested parties may participate in the development, operation, and analysis of independent innovative mechanisms of educational management, organizational structure, and curriculum with the purpose of offering better opportunities for educating students. The Administrative Code establishes the legal guidelines for the establishment of charter schools, and includes, as clarification, that it is not the purpose of the law to permit the “establishment of a charter school to be used as the means of keeping open an existing public school that otherwise would be closed” (Act 192, §3972, B.(2)) or “to provide a means of funding for nonpublic schools or any home study program” (Act 192).

The legislation originally provided for eight local school districts to either establish charter schools or grant charters to qualifying entities within their district. The legislation has

been amended through the 2011 legislative session, and the cap on the number of charter schools in the state has been removed.

History of Charter Schools in New Orleans

The convergence of actions on the part of federal, state, and local bodies, in addition to mother nature (the impact of hurricanes Katrina on August 29, 2005, and Rita on September 24, 2005), in a short time frame, opened the door for sweeping educational reform in New Orleans. The school board infighting was public, loud, and frequent. The conflicts between the New Orleans School Board and the superintendent of schools, coupled with failing schools, the state's accountability system, the creation of the Recovery School District (RSD), *No Child Left Behind*, and financial mismanagement created an environment ripe for change in the educational landscape of New Orleans (Adamo, 2007; Beabout, et al., 2008; Cowen Institute, July 2010; Frazier-Anderson, 2008). The turnover in top management positions also contributed to the governance problems. There were ten superintendents within ten years (Frazier-Anderson, 2008). In addition, there were seven managers of the payroll department between October 1999 and July 2003. The impact of this high turnover in key leadership positions created a fiscal environment with poor internal controls ripe for fraudulent activities. A March 24, 2004, Louisiana Legislative Audit Report revealed that hundreds of thousands of dollars in pay and benefits was paid to terminated employees. The Independent Auditors' Report dated March 9, 2005 reported the following:

The basic accounting and reporting systems for revenues, receivables, disbursements, accounts payable, accrued liabilities, payroll, and fixed asset were not effective during the year ended June 30, 2004 which resulted in inadequate accounting records. The magnitude of these systems was of such significance to the financial records and overall

financial reporting to the School Board that we were unable to gather sufficient competent evidential matter to complete our audit (Orleans Parish School Board, 2004).

In 2006, the Independent Auditors' Report expanded the description of financial deficiencies to include cash balances and deferred revenue (Orleans Parish School Board, 2005).

The over-involvement of the board with the day-to-day operations of the schools, including the hiring of staff, teachers, and principals, led to accusations of micromanagements and political influence. The publicized corrupt activities and discord between the OPSB and the community also led to a 2004 FBI investigation of the school system. As of December 2004, the number of OPSB employees charged with fraudulent activities was 24 (Office of Inspector General, 2004). The focus of the central office administration shifted from addressing the educational needs of its student population to responding to allegations.

Since Hurricane Katrina, several former school board members have been charged with fiscal mismanagement. For example, in 2008, a former member pled guilty to accepting more than \$100,000 in bribes in exchange for supporting the purchase from a specific vendor (U.S. Attorney General, Eastern District of Louisiana, 2010).

Hurricane Effects. The devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita provided an opportunity for massive, swift change in the educational structure in New Orleans. In essence, it presented the opportunity to re-invent public education in New Orleans (Adamo, 2007; Beabout, et al., 2008).

When Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005, levees protecting the city were compromised by storm surge and the city flooded. The massive evacuation prior to the storm ensured that many lives were spared but the same could not be said for both public and private

property. The majority of the school district's 125 schools and support facilities were in deplorable condition due to storm damage and long-term neglect (Orleans Parish School Board Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, June 30, 2006). The homes of many of the public school students, teachers, school board members, etc., also were damaged and most members were not able to immediately return to the city. There was a void of both students and teachers, support staff and district administrative employees. Many families enrolled their children in schools where they evacuated. Some families would eventually return to New Orleans; others would not. Hurricane Rita followed 26 days later on September 24, 2005.

In the meantime, the school board continued to be at odds and could not agree on a plan of action to restart operations and open schools. After back-to-back hurricanes Katrina and Rita, a November 2005 special session of the Louisiana Legislature resulted in the passage of Act 35.

Act 35 raised the performance threshold used to determine failing schools, thereby providing the legal authority for the state to intervene in school *districts* labeled “academically in crisis,” and take control of schools that were “academically unacceptable” (Act 35). Orleans Parish was labeled a school district in crisis. As a result, 107 low-performing OPSB schools were transferred to the Recovery School District (RSD) and were classified as Type 5 charter schools (Table 2). While this political restructuring appears to some to have been to improve academic achievement, there are those who see it as a frontal attack on the African-American community who have lost significant democratic control over their public schools. Kristen Buras (2011) argues that the impact of this massive shift of control from the OPSB to the RSD resulted in educational reform that is “an inequitable racial-spatial redistribution of resources” (pg. 296). Drawing on critical theories, Buras outlines the pressure from outside agencies such as the Aspen Institute, the Heritage Foundation, including federal, state and local politicians surrounding the

reforms. She describes these reforms as “less about responding to the needs of racially oppressed communities and more about the *Reconstruction* of a newly governed South – one in which white entrepreneurs (and black allies) capitalize on black schools and neighborhoods by obtaining public monies to build and manage charter schools” (pg. 297). The local school communities opposed these reforms. Buras describes the charter movement as a feeding frenzy where the focus is not on the students but on the financial opportunities available to charter operators.

Prior to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, 17 charter schools operated in Louisiana, five were located in New Orleans. As of the 2008-2009 school year, there were 58 charter schools statewide and 50 in New Orleans. In 2009-2010 the number increased to 66, of which 62 are in New Orleans (Public Information requests January 29, 2011; March 29, 2011; July 18, 2011). The increase in the number of charter schools in New Orleans in relation to the increase in the State of Louisiana is listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Number of Charter Schools By Year – State of Louisiana vs. New Orleans

YEAR	STATE TOTAL	NEW ORLEANS
Prior 2005	17	5
2005-2006	21	9
2006-2007	34	22
2007-2008	52	40
2008-2009	58	50
2009-2010	66	62
2010-2011	90	61
2011-2012	102	71
2012-2013	108	90
2013-2014	117	87

Louisiana Department of Education

As of the 2011-2012 academic year, the increase in the number of charter schools in New Orleans accounts for 68% of the number of charter schools in the state of Louisiana. To put this in perspective on a national level, the results of the 2010 National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) survey estimates that for the 2010-2011 year, there were 955 charter school authorizers nationally. Of that number, nationally, only 70 or approximately 9% of authorizers identified oversaw 10 or more schools while 86% oversaw five or fewer (p. 10). The list of charter schools in APPENDIX A illustrates the distribution of charter schools in Louisiana. The distribution of charter schools support the validity of this study of site-visitation within the context of charter schools in New Orleans.

Nationally, the expansion in the number of charter schools has created a business type market environment for school choice. Education in New Orleans, the specific focus of this study, has moved in the direction of this service-provider endeavor and away from the monopoly of a single central office provider, i.e., the locally elected school board. Parents have the opportunity to utilize the information and test scores marketed by the schools to select schools for their children. But do these test scores accurately reflect the quality of the schools or what goes on in schools?

Keeping this context in mind, structure and functions are closely related (Hutchins, 1996, Bolman and Deal, 2008). If you want to change how a system functions, changes may need to be made to the parts and to their relationships. The case of school reform in New Orleans illustrates changes in all aspects of the educational system from the governance structure to the accountability for school improvement. This paradigm shift from a simple central district governance structure to a complex decentralized structure, created unintended consequences in terms of serving the needs of children.

According to the NACSA, the responsibility for overseeing and ensuring the quality and performance of charter schools lies with the charter authorizer (2009). NACSA identifies six types of authorizers: (1) local education agencies (LEAs), (2) higher education institutions (HEIs), (3) non-for-profit organizations (NFPs), (4) state agencies (SEAs), (5) independent chartering boards (ICBs), and mayors/municipalities (MUNs).

In the state of Louisiana, currently two types of legislated authorizers exist: the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and the local school boards or LEAs (Title 28 Education, Part CXXXIX. Bulletin 126-Charter Schools, Chapter 3. Charter School

Authorizers, Section 301.). The NACSA survey also identified 19 (2% of the charter authorizers) as State Education Agencies (SEAs). Nationally, SEAs oversee 20% of the charter schools. By comparison, in 2010, the state of Louisiana Recovery School District oversaw 56 of the 90 charter schools or 62% of charter schools in Louisiana. In New Orleans alone, the RSD oversees 46 of the 61 charter schools or 75% of charter schools (List of Charter Schools, 2011 Appendix A). The end result of legislation and devastation was the emergence of the state-run Recovery School District as one of the largest chartered school districts in the country (Frazier-Anderson, 2008).

Currently, the majority of Louisiana charter schools are located within one city, New Orleans. BESE, the RSD, or the New Orleans Parish School Board oversees the schools. Additionally, different types of non-profit entities including local foundations, national management groups, and single school operators manage the schools. Added to this mix are 30 New Orleans private schools approved to participate in the voucher/scholarship program beginning with the 2014-2015 school year.

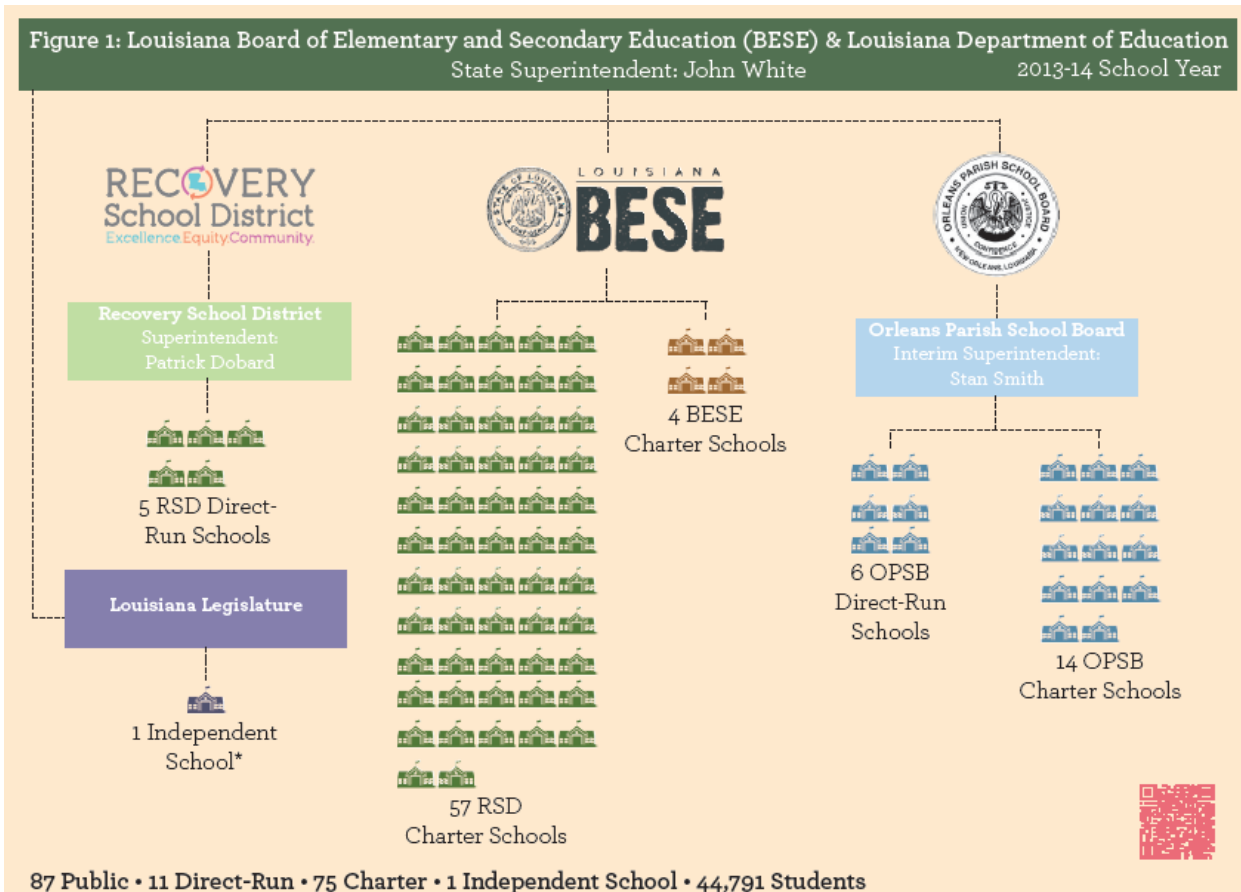
This mixture of decentralized and chartering of school management is referred to as a portfolio strategy (CRPE, 2009; Cuban, 2008), that is, a district that offers citizens distinct choices in the delivery and governance of education. According to Cuban (2008), one of the underlying assumptions of decentralization, school choice, etc., is that school leaders are free from central office policies and mandates that impact their school's improvement. However, with the expansion of charter management organizations (KIPP, Choice Foundation, Algiers Charter Schools, Success, etc.), the reality is you have a collection of smaller "districts" in which school leaders have to navigate the same political factors albeit on a smaller scale. The point is

school leaders have the freedom to make decisions that are best for their school's improvement within the framework of the charter organization they operate under.

The uniqueness of the emergence of charter schools and the organizational structure of school governance by a variety of management groups in New Orleans provides the opportunity to study site-visitation as a tool for school improvement within this hybrid or portfolio landscape of public education - decentralized charter schools within a single urban school district managed by state, local school district, non-profit, for-profit, and transformational groups (CPRE, 2009; CPRE 2011; Cuban, 2008; Frazier-Anderson, 2008). The detailed governance structure of the schools in New Orleans is presented in Figure 2 (Cowen Institute, 2013-2014). Within the context of this study, it is important to have a clear picture of the entities that have governance over schools.

Figure 2

New Orleans School Governance Structure 2013-2014



Reproduced with permission from The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University, 2011.

The management or governance of a particular school may influence not only the school leaders' perceptions of site-visitation but also their experience with site-visitation and their use of results for school improvement. Perceptions pertaining to the purpose of site-visitation – improvement, collaborative vs “gotcha,” looking for something wrong – impact the schools interaction with visitation teams and their response to the findings. Are the leaders embracing the findings as a path to school improvement or are they marking off a checklist until the next time? Does the culture of the school management organization support site-visitation as a means of school improvement?

Measures of Louisiana accountability, quality, school improvement, and NCLB.

With the rapid expansion of charter schools, the state was faced with how to evaluate the success, failure, and quality of public schools. Louisiana Title 28, Education, Part CXXXIX. Bulletin 126- "Charter Schools" defines the primary measure of school quality as:

Student performance is the primary measure of school quality. BESE shall use the state's assessment and accountability programs as objective and verifiable measures of student achievement and school performance. Student performance is the primary indicator of school quality; therefore, BESE will heavily factor all annual evaluations and contract extensions and renewal decisions on a school's achievement and student performance standards. (Chapter 11. Ongoing Review of Charter Schools, section 1101. Charter School Evaluation subsection D. Student Performance 1. Pg. 9)

In addition, Louisiana Act 621, the Public School Accountability Law statute, called for an educational accountability system for public schools that included annual content standards based assessment, testing standards, and information and testing data for analysis of programs. Louisiana Administrative Code, Title 28:CXI, Education: Bulletin 118 - Louisiana School, District, and State Accountability System (amended April, 2011) details the accountability system for public schools. The assessment programs outlined in Bulletin 118 included kindergarten-readiness screening, criterion-referenced tests, performance-based assessments, norm-referenced tests and exit exams. A listing of the Louisiana assessment programs can be found in Appendix B.

In the 2010 Regular Louisiana Legislative Session, Act 718 was passed. The purpose of this legislation was to make it easier for parents to understand how schools were performing by replacing the state’s five-star rating system based on district performance scores with letter grades (200 point scale) based on school performance scores (LDOE, n.d.). The logic behind this was that parents and the public understood what letter grades meant because they were accustomed to seeing them on report cards. Table 4 illustrates the differences between the two rating systems.

Table 4

Performance Labels - Letter Grade vs. Star System

Letter Grade System		Five Star System	
Letter Grade	SPS Range (2010-2011)	Star Level	SPS
A	120.0 – 200.0	Five Stars *****	140.0 and above
B	105.0 – 119.9	Four Stars ****	120.0 -139.9
C	90.0 – 104.9	Three Stars ***	100.0 – 119.9
D	75.0 – 89.9	Two Stars **	80.0 – 99.9
F	0 – 74.9	One Star *	60.0 – 79.9
		Academically Unacceptable	Below 60.0

In addition to the letter grade, a plus (+) or minus (-) sign would be assigned to indicate growth from year to year. This is explained on the LDOE website as follows: “A plus sign (+) signifies a school has improved enough to meet its 2011 assigned growth target (2010 – 2011 data was used in this example). A minus sign (-) indicates a school’s current growth score has

declined by at least one-tenth of a point from its previous baseline score. If a school does not receive a plus (+) or minus (-) sign, that signifies it has either shown no growth, or it improved on its baseline score, but not enough to meet its current growth target” (LDOE, n.d.). The plus (+) and minus (-) designations have proven to be confusing and are currently being considered for elimination.

Both accountability measures outlined in Louisiana Bulletins 118 and 126 for school improvement align with NCLB. According to Yell & Drasgow (2005), “the goal of the NCLB is that every child will be able to demonstrate proficiency on state-defined education standards in reading, language arts, math, and science by the end of the 2013-2014 school year” (p. 20). In order to reach this demonstrated level of proficiency, NCLB requires each state to develop rigorous and coherent achievement standards that outline what students are expected to know and do and “implement a statewide assessment system that is aligned to the state standards in reading-language arts, math, and eventually science” (2005, p. 22). The assessment must include a description and measure of at least three levels of achievement, including the following: high or advanced, proficient, and basic. Appendix B illustrates the different descriptors and definitions for the achievement levels for the Louisiana Assessment Program and NCLB (Title 28, Part CXI, §113 Achievement Levels; NCLB).

Another requirement of NCLB is for states to administer the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) every other year to a random sample of fourth- and eighth-grade students in the areas of reading and math. The basis for the NAEP testing is for national comparison of the statewide assessment tests to “confirm the rigor of the statewide assessment” (2005, p. 26). NAEP also is referred to as the nation’s report card.

In 2012, the state of Louisiana applied for, and was granted, a flexibility waiver under NCLB. This new accountability system (based on a 150-point scale) was implemented beginning with the 2012-2013 school year. The adjusted SPS Scale is reflected in Table 5 below.

Table 5

2012-2013 Adjusted SPS Scale

Letter Grade	Baseline SPS Range
A	100 - 150
B	85-99.9
C	70 – 84.9
D	50 – 69.9
F	0 – 49.9

Louisiana Department of Education (2013, December). Expanding Quality Options: Louisiana Type 2, 4, and 5 Charter Schools 2013 – 2104 Annual Report

The report highlights the following additional updates to the Louisiana accountability system:

- Alignment with Common Core Levels of rigor
 - Schools no longer receive credit for students scoring below proficient on standardized tests. Performance on ACT, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate exams are valued. Ancillary factors like attendance are no longer factored in to performance.
- Focus on students below grade level

- Schools are rewarded for making progress with students performing below grade level with up to 10 Subgroup Bonus Points added to their School Performance Score. (2013).

The convergence of federal, state, and local laws and mandates with a reliance on test scores, particularly math and literacy, as a measure of student improvement. This trajectory impacts the direction and focus of school-improvement activities. While the test scores may indicate a level of achievement, they are only indicators of what is going on in the school. The comparisons of annual test scores are perceived to reflect school improvement from year to year, which is viewed as a reflection or perception of the quality of the school. The constant changes to the education policy and accountability measures, renders an unequal comparison of school performance scores from year to year. For example, one year there is a 200-point scale and the next year is calculated using a 150-point scale. How many parents know, consider, or understand the impact this change has on a school's performance score? In addition, if bonus points are awarded, how do these impact the school performance score? If the focus on school improvement and accountability is to continue to reside in test scores, educators and policy makers must go a step further to determine those school activities that impact the test scores. In the case of bonus points, it could be useful to understand those activities schools engage in to achieve those bonus points. Site-visitation provides insight to the activities, both positive and negative, that impact test scores and school improvement.

State of Louisiana Charter School Site-Visitation Policy

Educators and policy makers are charged with making the best educational decisions for students. The State of Louisiana Charter School Office of Parental Choice utilizes site-visitations to measure accountability for ten non-test factor benchmarks. These non-test factor benchmarks range from the physical environment of the school to the accountability measures utilized at the school. Table 6 summarizes a list of the ten benchmarks and a brief definition for each one. A detailed list of the benchmarks and prompts included on the “Louisiana Department of Education Charter School Site-Visit Benchmark” form can be found in Appendix C.

According to F. Dunbar (personal communication, Spring 2010), the intent of the third-year site-visitations as outlined in the Charter School Law and conducted by the Office of Parental Support is to improve schools, not to “catch” the schools doing something wrong (Baris, 1991). It is intended to be used as a “check-point” so schools have time to make adjustments before the fifth-year charter-renewal benchmark. A memorandum dated April 22, 2010, from the interim director of the Charter School Office to all charter school board presidents outlines the third-year review process of Board of Elementary and Secondary Education-authorized charter school’s. The memorandum supports the purpose of the school site-visit as one where “quality practices and school operations” are observed (State of Louisiana Department of Education, 2010). In the Charter School Law, the role of site-visitation is to gather information about what is going on in the schools.

Table 6

Site-Visitation Benchmarks and Definitions

Benchmark	Definition
1. Physical Environment	The school provides a rich and stimulating learning environment for all children.
2. Climate	The school supports and promotes a culture of high expectations and mutual respect.
3. Student Engagement	All students are actively engaged in the learning process.
4. Curriculum	The school offers a guaranteed, viable, and compelling curriculum with a solid focus on essential skills and concepts.
5. Instruction	Teachers use the latest researched-based instructional “best” practices.
6. Assessment	The faculty and staff use varied and effective assessment practices to better meet both individual and group learner needs.
7. Technology	Technology is utilized effectively in a variety of ways to enrich and extend the overall learning experience
8. Leadership	School governance and operations are effectively and efficiently run.
9. Community Involvement	Parents, community members, and local businesses are active and positive participants in the educational process.
10. Accountability	All stakeholders take responsibility for the school’s continued success.

The ten benchmarks examined during a charter-school site visit address the non-test activities that impact student learning. By looking at the strengths and weaknesses of each of these non-test items, school leaders can have a better understanding of those activities that are supporting school improvement and those that are not. In other words, if the test scores are good, why are they good? Site-visitation findings provide school leaders the details necessary for decision-making. Based on the information generated by the site-visit, needs are identified and support can be provided where needed. The literature acknowledges the role of site-visitation in the assessment of effectiveness, level of accountability, and ultimately, improvement (Wilson, 1996; McNab, 2001). The findings from these site-visitation reports can provide the “why” to the test score accountability measures. In addition, these details provide insight to other school leaders interested in achieving the same results.

Test scores are an over-simplified approach to accountability and do not reflect the “goings on” in a school that directly impact those test scores (Wilson, 1996). The constraints of our current accountability system do not consider the non-test items that can be measured only by “being there” (Wilson, 1996). The site-visitation process utilized by the LODE Office of Parental Options provides the mechanism to measure and account for the school-based non-test factors that impact test scores (Administrative Code Title 28). An example of the non-test data generated by site-visitation or “being there” resulted in the recent closing of a New Orleans charter school. For the 2009-2010 academic school year the school posted a performance score of 78. The raw growth of 11.7 from the previous year of 66.3 exceeded the target growth of 10 for the 2009-2010 year. The school was given a performance label of one star and a growth label of “recognized academic growth” for the 2009-2010 year (LDOE, 2011). Additional information provided by the School Performance and Accountability Reports found 67% of the classes were taught by the NCLB definition of “highly qualified teachers.” However, the site-visitation conducted on March 2, 2010, painted a different picture of the school. The challenges listed in the report covered items such as a larger than expected number of students in the lower grades, lack of materials and equipment common to “best practices” early childhood classrooms, students off-task due to disruptive behavior, little active involvement of student learning exhibited in the classrooms, lack of evidence of data-driven decision-making in curriculum and instruction decisions, etc.

Emphasis in the site-visitation summary report highlighted the need for a curriculum specialist or instruction coach and professional development in areas such as student-centric instructional approaches and classroom management. The report noted a top-down management approach with little input from the staff in decision-making. Interviews with faculty, staff, and

students during the site-visit revealed that students had trouble understanding many of the teachers who spoke English as a second language. Students did not seem to understand the connection between what they were learning for the accountability tests (LEAP) and the relevance of the material to real life. In addition, internal audit documents obtained by *The New Orleans Times Picayune* newspaper revealed “classrooms without instructors for weeks and even months at a time, students who claimed their science fair projects had been done by teachers, a single special-needs instructor for a school of nearly 600, and an attempted bribe of an education official” (July 15, 2011).

Using an over-simplified approach and reliance on test scores, this school appeared to be performing at an acceptable rate and providing quality education to its students. Regardless of the test scores, a site-visitation provides useful information in determining what supports high test scores and areas for improvement on all levels.

Chapter Two Summary

Visitation/inspection has been around for a long time. The processes are basically variations of the English model, generally including multiple components such as formal reporting of findings, timelines in which to correct specified items, and consequences for failure to comply with the recommendations. Gary Bloom (2007) reiterates that it is essential for the clarity of expectations and roles be understood by all participants, that visitations are a key element of continuous improvement, that they are integral to the school and district culture, and that training and resource support are necessary in order for visitation to be successful (2007, p. 44). Bloom lists four suggestions for improved practice: (1) well-designed process with high expectations, (2) simple process including basic training in data gathering, feedback, and

inquiry-based protocols, (3) process alignment with student learning data and work, and (4) an on-going process supported by adequate resources (2007).

One of the strengths of site-visitation is that it provides insight to what is actually going on in a school. It can provide the detailed descriptions of what impacts a school's performance. Test scores only *indicate or suggest* the level of school performance. The weakness of site-visitation is the subjective nature of the process and the makeup of the visitation team. The models that establish criteria and training in order to serve on a visitation team provide more credibility to the findings. If qualification standards are set for team members and they are properly trained, the quality of the visitation-team reports could become more credible and less subjective.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The strategy of inquiry for this qualitative study is case analysis (Creswell, J. W., 2007; Stake, R. E., 2006; & Yin, R. K., 2009). How Louisiana charter-school leaders utilize the information generated by the state-visitation process for school improvement is explored. I chose this research design to allow for a within-case and cross-case analysis of the 2009-2010 Louisiana Department of Education Office of Parental Options Charter School Site-Visits.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

A qualitative research approach is appropriate when the researcher seeks a better understanding of complex situations (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005; Creswell, 2007, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2006; & Yin, 2009), and “explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 1) using thick descriptions (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The purpose of this study is to understand school leaders’ experiences with site-visitation and how they are using the findings for school improvement. The specific research questions to be explored are: (1) what are the school leaders’ experiences with the site-visitation process, and (2) how are school leaders using the results of the Louisiana Charter School Site-Visitation to improve schools.

Case Study Strategy. The strategy of inquiry to answer the research questions is case-study analysis. Researchers view case-study research from several perspectives. Some present it as a methodology, a strategy of inquiry, or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin 2003, 2009). Others approach case-study research as a choice of what is to be studied and not as a methodology (Stake, 2005). In this study, I choose to view case study as a method of qualitative research that provides the researcher the flexibility to

choose what to study (school leaders' experience with the State of Louisiana Charter School site-visitation process) in order to better understand a phenomenon (site-visitation).

Kahn and VanWynsberghe (2008) refer to case study research as an “under-mined” (p. 1) research method. Exploring the literature of how people learn through case studies and pulling together cognitive theories of learning, Kahn and VanWynsberghe document the basis for “cross case analysis as knowledge mobilization” (p. 1). Accordingly, deducing “...new connections made across cases produce new knowledge and augment existing knowledge and experience” (p. 4).

Conversely, the criticism surrounding qualitative case-study research and analysis stem from questions of lack of rigor, the ability of the researcher to generalize findings and justify comparisons beyond the particular study, whether it is one case or several (Flyvberg, B., 2006; Hamel, J., 1993; Merriam, S., 2009; Yin, R. 2009). The growing body of theory-based research similar to that of Kahn and VanWynsberghe (2008) negates these criticisms and supports qualitative case-study research as a viable and valid research methodology.

Case Study Structure. The structure of the case study is a multi-case, across-case structure within a state-policy context. The single cases within the study are categorically bound by the common characteristic (Stake, 2006) of experiencing a Louisiana Charter School Site-Visit during the 2009-2010 academic school year. Since the researcher seeks to understand site-visitation from the perspective of school leaders' experiences and how they are using the results for school improvement, the multi-case structure allows the researcher to focus on specific characteristics related to each site-visitation.

While each case is unique in its own set of relationships and problems, the focus of this study is to answer the following question: What is the connection/relationship of site-visitation findings and school improvement practices?

Quintain. Stake (2006) refers to the structure of this study of the whole as a “quintain” (personal communication August 12, 2011). Specifically, Stake (2006) defines the quintain (pronounced kwin’ ton) as “an object or phenomenon, or condition to be studied” (p. 6). Additionally, Stake (2006) states “multicase research starts with the quintain” (p. 6). Khan and VanWynsberghe point to Stake’s multicase method of focusing on the quintain or the “common focus for a set of case studies” (p. 7) as a means of developing a better understanding. The quintain is explored through the analysis of common research questions applied across the cases (p. 7). In order to understand the quintain – the role of site-visitation in school improvement – we study a collection of nine single cases.

Role of the researcher. The researcher has participated both as a site-visitation team member and an observer for K-12 schools in the New Orleans area. In addition, the researcher has experience with preparing for site-visitation. The researcher served as coordinator for SACS accreditation at a community college in Louisiana and as the registrar of a four-year institution subject to a SACS accreditation visit and interview. The researcher also initiated the participation of the Lafourche Parish Government in the Governmental Finance Officers Association in the competitive Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting Award. In addition, the researcher has participated in financial and compliance audits that required outside professionals to spend extended periods of time on-site examining activities and files. As a finance professional, the researcher has been trained to look beyond the numbers for explanation.

As a result of these experiences, I value quantitative data but I tend to view it as an indicator and not the sole answer. I believe it points you in the direction, but qualitative research is where you are going to find the detailed explanation of what is really going on.

IRB approval. Having successfully completed the “Protecting Human Research Participants” online training course and subsequently receiving certification by the National Institute of Health (Appendix D), the researcher has met the requirements to conduct this research. Application was made to and approved by the University of New Orleans Institutional Research Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the specific research presented in this study.

Confidentiality and informed consent. All reasonable means of confidentiality have been maintained. The names of the charter schools and principals interviewed will remain confidential. Both the charter schools and principals are identified by a coding sequence known only to the researcher and principal investigator. The principals agreeing to participate in the study have signed a confidentiality statement and a University of New Orleans IRB consent form (Appendix E). All site-visitation documents will be maintained in the principal investigator office in a locked cabinet. All electronic information will be kept in password secured formats. Three years after the study is completed, all identifying recordings and documents will be destroyed.

Sampling and Recruitment. The mass emergence of charter schools in New Orleans provides researchers the condensed geographic area and congruent culture in which to study site-visitation. Additionally, the State of Louisiana Administrative Code requires a level of site-visitation for all charter schools. The governance structure in New Orleans (Appendix F) leads to a more open response. In other locations, the school district structure is still intact, therefore

you are talking to the superintendent and not the principal or school leader. In New Orleans, the principal or school leader is the top administrator. This setting is an opportunity to study how school leaders use site-visitation for school improvement.

The collection of single cases to be studied consists of 10 schools subject to the Louisiana Charter School Site-Visitation in the academic years 2009-2010. Through document analysis and interviews, this researcher aims to discover (1) how charter school leaders experience the State of Louisiana charter school site-visitation process, and (2) what influence site-visitation has on school improvement activities.

A sample of 52 schools were approached in order to ensure maximum variation of the total population. Employing criterion and iterative sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the sample of 52 schools was sorted by the difference between the raw growth between the 2010 and 2009 School Performance Scores (Schools-At-A-Glance, 2011). This information was entered into the Excel spreadsheet. Using the data-sort feature of Excel, the schools were sorted by the school performance score differences from lowest (negative) to highest (positive). The sample was divided into four categories as shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Study Categories (School Performance Growth = 2010 SPS – 2009 SPS)

SPS < 1

SPS > 1 < 10

SPS > 10

No SPS for 2009/2010

Note: SPS = School Performance Score

The schools chosen for this study fall into one of the categories illustrated in Table 6. Schools with no SPS were not included. Attempts were made to solicit schools from each SPS group.

Maxwell (2013), argues that in qualitative research when “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 97), the researcher is engaging in purposeful selection. Palys (2008) uses the term purposive sampling to describe this more deliberative process of selection. According to Weiss (1994), there are times when convenience sampling is appropriate. In fact, sometimes it is the only way to gain access to a group that has the information the researcher is seeking.

Data Collection. The researcher aimed to collect the following data:

1. State documents including the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 Charter School Site-Visitation Reports, LDOE List of Charter Schools, Schools-At-A -Glance
2. School professional development documents, including calendars and agendas
3. School improvement plans
4. Interviews with 10 school principals (Appendix G).

One of the major strengths of qualitative inquiry is the opportunity to collect multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). The rationale for using multiple data supports triangulation, thereby strengthening the findings and supporting internal validity (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A formal public information request via e-mail was submitted to the Office of Parental Choice in November 2010. Within the legal three-day time frame, the Office of Parental Choice acknowledged the request and informed the researcher that the information was being gathered.

After the Christmas 2010 holidays, follow-up e-mails and phone calls were made. On January 28, 2011, at the request of the Office of Parental Choice, a second formal public information request was submitted. The documents forwarded to the researcher on February 11, 2011, were not the documents requested. However, the documents did contain some of the information the researcher was seeking. The Office of Parental Choice forwarded 29 site-visitation summaries for the 2008-2009 academic year. These documents represent the professional judgment and consensus of the site-visitation teams. The site-visitation findings were documented in the single form for each school with two columns — one identifying the “strengths” and the other “challenges.”

To obtain the 2009-2010 site-visitation summaries the researcher resubmitted the formal request for public information to the Office of Parental Options on March 23, 2011. The 23 Site-Visitation Summaries were forwarded to the researcher on April 2, 2011. These schools were added to the Excel spreadsheet for a total of 52 schools.

Using an Excel spreadsheet, the 52 schools were listed, including the grade level of the school and the date of the site-visitation. Utilizing the Louisiana Department of Education website to access various reports and data sets, the following additional information was included for each school: charter operator, charter type, academic year opened, percent free/reduced lunch, school performance score comparison between 2009/2010, and the percent of highly qualified teachers (NCLB qualifications). In addition, the information included on the site-visitation summary was verified with online official reports from the Louisiana Department of Education (Schools-At-A-Glance and List of Charter Schools). Table 8 reflects the number of schools in each category.

Table 8

Sample Categories (School Performance Growth = 2010 SPS – 2009 SPS)

SPS < 1	5
SPS > 1 < 10	20
SPS > 10	9
No SPS	14
Schools with name conflicts*	4

Note: There were name discrepancies for three schools. The school name listed on the Site-Visitation Summary for four schools did not correspond with the official school name used by the Louisiana Department of Education. Some schools are referred to by previous names, numbers, or shortened names. Clarification was requested but not provided. These schools were not included in the sample.

Data analysis.

Phase I. The site-visitation summaries for schools ultimately chosen for this study were analyzed and culled for the top common themes and trends (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The format of site-visitation summaries presented the findings for each school as strengths and challenges. The researcher realized that the number of themes and codes produced by these documents was more than manageable or needed for this study. Since the focus of this study explores the school leaders use of the information presented as a result of site-visitation, the researcher focused on the challenges identified in the summaries. The identified challenges of technology, instruction, and curriculum were compressed into the broader theme of curriculum.

Where possible, other challenges were categorized under leadership. The information gleaned from this review process provided the researcher with school-specific background and a better understanding of the identified areas needing improvement. It was plausible for the researcher to believe that some of these identified challenges would be addressed in the school-improvement plan. Additionally, this information supported the trajectory of the interview with school leaders. Table 9 illustrates the terminology the site-visitation teams used in describing the curriculum challenges:

Table 9

Terminology Describing Curriculum Used by Site-Visitation Teams

Terminology	Description
Augment	Curriculum with technology
Underutilized	Technology with curriculum
Professional Development	Need to better utilize technology with curriculum
Vision	Lacking in the use of technology and curriculum
Developing	Curriculum is a work a progress
Connection with Instruction, Disjointed, Inconsistencies	Curriculum is not being followed or used
Alignment	With standards or curriculum
Share Best Practices	Mentor less experienced teachers
Differentiation	In instruction

2009-2010 Site-Visitation Summary Reports. Public Information Request from the Louisiana Department of Education

Phase II. The analysis of the site-visitation summaries was followed up by requests for semi-structured interviews with the principals of the schools within the purposive sample. The criteria for selecting the principals to be interviewed were those available for interviews within the time period set by the researcher. The purpose of the interview was to explore the school leader's experience with site-visitation and determine if and how the school leader was using the results of the visit to make school improvements. Informed consent was obtained from the school leaders at the interview.

Phase III. Following the interviews with the school leaders, the researcher reviewed the documents provided by the school leader (professional development calendars, school improvement plans, etc). Since there were inconsistencies in the types and ages of documents provided by the schools, the researcher used the documents as points of reflection in the analysis of the interviews.

Interview protocol. The overarching research question is the quintain: the role of site-visitation in school-improvement activities?. Through interviews with school leaders, the researcher aimed to develop a deeper understanding of site-visitation and its role in school improvement. The interview protocol is in Appendix G.

Scheduling an interview. To schedule an interview, the school leaders were contacted first by e-mail, then by telephone. Three attempts were made to schedule interviews. The researcher sent two emails to the original 52 school leaders and not one responded to the emails. The researcher called the school leaders that she had worked with in the past to no avail. After this dead end for almost a month, the researcher appealed to her dissertation chair and committee members for assistance. After reviewing the list, 12 schools where the committee members knew the school leaders were identified. The committee members sent a personal email to each

school leader introducing the researcher and asking them to participate in the study. By opening the door to these school leaders, the researcher was able to move forward with the study (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2013).

Obstacles to leader access. This lack of interest in participation on the part of the school leaders was attributed to several possibilities. One, identified by the University of New Orleans Computing Center, was the internet security at the schools could be structured to block the UNO email and prevent it from pushing through. Their security could be labeling the researchers email as trash or junk mail.

Other possible reasons were identified during the school leader interviews. One of the school leaders stated that the only reason he made time for the interview was because he respected the researcher's dissertation chair. He further stated that he and many school leaders were burnt out with all of the solicitations they received for study participation. Another school leader stated she was hesitant to participate because in one study the researcher did not accurately account for their interview. She further stated that the researchers comments were biased toward southern perceptions and did not acknowledge the culture of the area. In fact, that particular researcher had expressed to this school leader his preconceived notion of the education and cultural climate of New Orleans. She was highly sensitive to being recorded. She felt that many outside researcher's did not look at context which she considered important. Because of that researchers expressed bias, she considered his research a dishonest reflection of the educational climate in New Orleans.

Emails were sent to the 12 principals selected for interviews. The goal was to interview at least ten, with one principal from the schools falling in each sample category previously

presented in Table 7. Ten principals responded and scheduled interviews. One principal did not follow through. The researcher arrived twice for scheduled appointments and after sitting outside of the principal’s office for more than 45 minutes, a teacher arrived to inform the researcher that the principal would not be available for the appointment. This school leader was eliminated from the study. The total number of participants in the study is nine. The breakdown of the final sample categories of schools is illustrated in Table 10.

Table 10

Final Sample Categories

	<i>School Performance Growth</i>	
	<i>2010 SPS</i>	<i>2012 SPS</i>
	<i>minus</i>	<i>minus</i>
	<i>2009 SPS</i>	<i>2011 SPS</i>
SPS < 1	1	3
SPS > 1 < 10	5	3
SPS > 10	0	3
No SPS for 2009/2010	3	

Case Study Participants

This section profiles each of the schools where leaders agreed to participate in the study. Table 11 provides a snapshot of each school. The reasoning behind the passage of Act 718 creating the letter grades (Table 4) was parents and the public understood what letter grades meant because they were accustomed to seeing them on report cards. What is not stated is that

the public and parents are accustomed to interpreting letter grades on a 100-point scale and not a 150-point or 200-point scale. As illustrated in Table 11, only one type-5 charter school scored letter grade of B. Of the seven (7) type-5 charter schools included in this study, six (6) had a letter grade of D+ or lower.

Table 11

Sample Case Selection Profile Relative to 2010 – 2009 School Performance Scores

Case	Charter Type	Letter Grade	Baseline SPS Score	% of Students Performing At or Above Grade Level	2011 – 2012 Top Gains Schools
1	5	D+	80-90	60-70	No
2	5	D-	70-80	40-50	Yes
3	5	F	50-60	20-30	No
4	3	A	100+	100	No
5	5	F	60-70	40-50	No
6	5	D+	70-80	40-50	No
7	4	B+	100+	60-70	Yes
8	2	B+	100+	80-90	Yes
9	5	F	50-60	30-40	Yes
10	5	B+	100+	70-80	No

Source: www.louisianabelives.com/docs

One of the six (6) type-5 charter schools with a letter grade of D+ or lower posted 65.6% of it students performing at or above grade level. Five (5) of the type-5 charter schools with a letter grade of D+ or lower had 46.4% or less of students performing at or above grade level.

Yet School number 2 with a letter grade of D- and 42.1% of its students scoring at or above grade level was designated a top gains school for the 2011-2012 school year. School 9, another type-5 charter school is also labeled a “top gains” school for the 2011-2012 school year, yet it holds a letter grade of F and 39.5% of its students scored at or above grade level.

The Louisiana Department of Education recognizes schools that achieve their growth target as Top Gains Schools. Schools are awarded the designation of Top Gains Schools and are eligible for monetary awards “if they are not in subgroup component failure, and they are not identified as failing NCLB subgroup performance more than one year” (2014). In 2013, schools with a letter grade of A had to increase their School Performance Score (SPS) by 5 points to earn the designation of a Top Gains School. In order for schools with a letter grade of B or lower to be designated a Top Gains School, they had to increase their SPS by 10-points. Schools can earn up to an additional 10 bonus points that can be used to meet their growth expectations. These bonus points can be earned by showing significant “growth by subgroups of the lowest-performing students or a combination of both overall improvement or subgroup growth” (2014).

At best, the designation of schools with letter grades and designations as “top gains” schools are misleading. Do parents *knowingly* choose to send their child to a “top gains” school with a baseline school performance score of 54.2 where only 39.5 % of the student population scores at or above grade level? In the choice and/or market driven environment of charter schools, the label that sheds the most positive light on the school is going to be touted to the public, e.g., Top Gains School.

Interview Timeline and Protocol

The interviews for this case study were conducted between September 2012 and December 2012. The responses to the interview questions were transcribed, coded and analyzed to determine how the State of Louisiana site-visitation process compares to the various processes discussed in the literature review, and how/if school leaders in New Orleans are using the information in visitation reports for school improvement.

The initial verbatim transcription of the school leader interviews was outsourced and completed in February 2013. The researcher verified the transcription by simultaneously listening to the audio and reading the transcription. Corrections were made where necessary. The transcribed interviews were emailed to the participants for review and verification in March 2013. The instructions to the participants were to respond only if they had objections or corrections to the transcribed interviews. No response on the part of the participants represented agreement with the accuracy of the transcribed interview. The participants were also reminded they could withdraw from the study if they chose.

After a period of no response from participants, a follow-up communication was sent in April 2013 to insure the intent of the participants and the accuracy of the transcribed interviews. As of June 1, 2013, the researcher had not received any corrective feedback from the participants in regards to the accuracy of the transcribed interviews. There were no requests for withdrawal from the study.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the charter schools in New Orleans, Louisiana, that participated in the State of Louisiana Office of Parental Options Charter School Site-Visitation during the 2009-2010 academic years.

Chapter Three Summary

In this chapter, the methodological approach to the study was outlined. Detail was provided in terms of the case-study structure, IRB approval, data collection and analysis, obstacles to access of participants, interview protocol, and study limitations. The following chapter is a discussion of the findings and data analysis of this study.

Chapter Four: Findings / Data Analysis

This chapter is a discussion on the findings of this study. I explore the school leaders' experiences with site-visitation with special attention to the components identified in the literature review. Analysis of the charter school-visitation reports and the principal interviews answer two research questions. First, how do charter school leaders experience the state of Louisiana charter school site-visitation process? The data from the interviews indicates the school leaders believe site-visitation *could* support school improvement, but often fails to do so in its current configuration. The second research question addressed by this research is what influence does site-visitation have on school improvement activities? The responses to this question point to not only the flaws in LADOE model of site-visitation but also to the components of site-visitation that, if constructed differently, could lead to those activities that support school improvement. In addition, the findings of this study will assist policy-makers in determining the impact of the current visitation process and how the process can be improved to support school improvement

The findings are organized by components of site-visitation and the themes that emerged from the school leaders' responses.

Findings / Analysis

After verification of the transcribed interviews, the researcher conducted five separate rounds of data segmentation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996,) and coding centered around the research questions: (1) What are the school leaders' experiences with the site-visitation process and (2) how are school leaders using the results of the Louisiana Charter School Site-Visitation to improve schools. In order to identify themes and code the school leaders' experiences with

site-visitation, the researcher began with the components of site-visitation identified in the literature review: (1) purpose of the visit, (2) team membership, (3) team activities, (4) site activities, (definition of evidence, and (6) dissemination of findings. The research questions lead to one goal of this study, which is to better understand the quintain (Stake, 2006) – site-visitation and its role in school improvement. Additionally, it allows the researcher to explore school leaders' views of the current site-visitation process as a diagnostic tool for school improvement and how, from their perspectives, the process could be improved to become more useful tool for school improvement.

The analysis and findings are presented in a format organized around the components of site-visitation, the categories of responses, and emerging themes within the responses. The researcher presents the findings of the within-case, across-case study in this format to provide better understanding of the quintain: the role of site-visitation in school improvement from a school leader's perspective.

Typical Pre-visit Activities

The school leaders discussed the preparation activities that are associated with site-visits as documented in the literature review (Baldrige, OFSTED, Dutch Inspectorate of Education and SACS Accreditation). School leaders ensured “niceties” such as food, drink and workspace were provided. Seven school leaders stated the site-visitation team reviewed documents, processes, and their state-approved charter to ensure compliance. These types of activities align with those found in the literature and the review of the various types of site-visitation. Two schools expressed frustration with the amount of time spent pulling documentation together required by the pre-announced visits. When leaders described impediments to, or presented

excuses for gathering documentation required for a site-visit, it triggered questions for the researcher related to their school improvement process. Was their school improvement plan something they continuously reviewed and utilized for improvement? Or was it something they did to meet a mandate? For the researcher, the leaders comments about the pre-visit activities pointed to possible negative preconceptions towards site-visits in general.

Typical During-Visit Activities

In addition to the pre-visit activities, schools were involved in activities during the site-visit. These activities included arranging for various stakeholders (internal and external) to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. Schools were required to provide a meeting room for the visitation team and the niceties such as food and drinks. The schools were involved with responding to requests of the visitation team, fulfilling requests for clarification of documents, policies, and even providing additional documentation.

Typical Post-Visit Activities

Post-visit activities varied based on the type of visit and the organizational structure of the school. The feedback from the visitation team (oral and/or written) was seen as the most important takeaway by principals.

These pre- during- post- activities are documented in the literature review of the various site-visit models studied – accreditation, award, public and peer/internal review. In this study, the researcher did not find evidence of any activities not addressed in the literature.

The pre-during-post- visit activities of the school led the discussion toward the school leaders' experiences with the visit.

School Leaders Experiences With Site-Visitation

The goal of this course of inquiry was to capture the leaders' overall perception of the visit he/she experienced (positive or negative) and to further explore his/her interaction with the team. Participants were cued to discuss their interaction with the team, his/her opinion of the qualifications of the team members and his/her perceived benefits of the visit. The school leaders' perceptions of site-visitation were categorized as positive, negative, and neutral. A more detailed examination of the findings within those categories follows in Table 12.

Table 12

<i>School Leaders' Overall Perception of Charter School Site-Visitation Process in Louisiana</i>			
Leaders' Overall Perception	Number of Leaders	Case – School / Leader	Charter School Type
Positive	3	4, 9, 10	5, 3
Negative	2	3, 5	5
Neutral	4	2, 6, 7, 8	5, 4, 2
Total	9		

Based on the data collected, the opinions of the leaders were pretty diverse. This perhaps points to a pre-disposition issue or the need for a visit protocol to be tailored to an individual school.

Positive Experiences. School leaders expressing a positive experience pointed to the professionalism of the site-visitation team, their perceived qualifications of the team members and the feedback that the school leaders were provided. These schools were mostly the higher-performing schools within the sample. The lower performing schools, whose leaders expressed positive experiences with site-visitation, described a school environment focused on school

improvement with frequent review and analysis of data. This begs the question of the relationship between the perception and practice of school leaders in terms site-visitation and school improvement. One comment regarding a school leaders' positive experience was:

...simply put this visit asks the question, "do you do what you say you do?"...not to say necessarily that we should be doing something different but it's a way of checking our own perception of ourselves and I think every institution needs that once in a while (School Leader 4).

Another school leader expressed confidence in his/her schools' state of readiness "...It's a proxy for how we would fair if anyone else came in" (School Leader 9). Ironically, this school was a failing, but improving school whose school leader described the school improvement process as "open ended" and "when needed". When asked for a copy of the school improvement plan, the researcher was told it was not accessible. Other school leaders pointed out that the findings of the site-visit (positive and negative) often supported their efforts to obtain additional resources for those activities that support student achievement and school improvement.

Negative Experience. Those school leaders expressing negative experiences with their visit indicated the amount of time and documentation required to prepare for the visit was "arduous" (School Leader 3). School Leader 5 also felt the site-visitation team did not consider the culture or context of the school. Both of these schools were transformational takeovers of failed schools. The perspective of School Leader 5 is that:

...the state came in once, they gave us a report and we haven't heard from these since...if the same team from the state came in this year to do something similar, I would, like my attitude about the whole situation would be a lot different because we're up for extension

[charter] this year...in the environment that they have now where everything is based on test scores, that is, I've had school leaders say it doesn't matter, while a site-visit is good, it's all about the test scores (School Leader 5).

School Leader 5 points to the purpose of the visit in his/her comments, that is, site-visits don't appear to have any consequence unless you are up for charter renewal. At that point in time, the stakes are higher, but renewal decisions basically boils down to your test scores. The leaders note that when a charter is up for renewal, the site-visit is more about the schools compliance with their charter agreement / contract with the state. However, all the school leaders in the study spoke to the primary weight of test scores when charter renewals were reviewed. This lack of clarity around the purpose of a visit is a key finding, which is discussed further in subsequent sections of this report.

Neutral Experiences. Interestingly, the four school leaders expressing neutral experiences led schools ranging from the lowest percentage of students performing at or above grade level (42.1%), to the second highest percentage of students performing at or above grade level (85.9%) as illustrated in Table 11. Two were type-5 charter schools posting grade levels of D+ and D- and the other two were a type-2 and a type-4 charter schools with grade levels of B+. School Leader 6 approached the visit as he/she “knew what the schedule was going to be” and served as a “facilitator” for interviews and school tours. School Leader 2 describes his experience as “they interviewed me”. School Leaders 7 and 8 noted they answered questions and coordinated meetings and interviews. The tone, inflection, and language these leaders used in describing their experience led the researcher to code their responses as “neutral.”

School leaders felt, regardless of school performance, if the school charter was not renewed for any reason, there was always another charter group waiting to step in and takeover the school. Perhaps this underlying belief fueled the neutral experiences with site-visits. It appears these leaders did not value the site-visit in one-way or another. They also complied with what was requested and did not appear over-burdened by hosting the visit.

Perceptions of Site-Visitation Team Members' Qualifications

The school leaders indicated they interacted with the visitation team on multiple levels. Leaders acted as tour guides and facilitators through interviews and meetings (small and large groups, one on one) with various constituent configurations (parents, board members, students, faculty, staff). This typical interaction is identified in the literature exploring the various models of site-visitation such as award programs, accreditation, and public inspection.

The interaction of the school leaders with the visitation team is further categorized by school leaders' positive, negative and neutral perceptions (Table 12).

Positive Experiences. The school leaders responded positively to certain aspects of the visiting team membership. The school leaders expressing a positive experience with site-visitation seemed to value the professional background of the team. For example, School Leader 2 commented "team members had different wealth of knowledge and were looking at different areas..." The leader further explained "...to me, it was a group of people from different backgrounds that came together that understand the inner workings of the school and then when they met together they were able to decipher and say, 'okay what the school was doing and where they need to go'." The perceptions of School Leader 3, "...yes; representation from a

broad range of areas [subject and expertise],” support School Leader 2’s perceptions of the qualifications of the members of the site-visitation team.

A possible explanation for these positive perceptions of team member qualifications could be the communication of qualifications and professionalism, “...they each had their own bailiwick – academic, finance, culture (School Leader 7). The preparation the team did before stepping on the school grounds supported the perception of knowledge and professionalism as noted by School Leader 9, “yeah, definitely...prepared for what they were doing.”

Negative Experiences. When asked about the qualifications of the members of the site-visitation team, the response of the school leaders hinted at the tone or attitude about the visit. School Leader 4 stated, “...state team is bureaucrats, for accreditation, more peers...” Speaking disparagingly about his experience with the state visitation team, he stated, “we taught *them* a few things.” When pressed for more detail, the school leader responded, “I’ll tell you something; quite frankly it was so irrelevant I don’t really remember it. It could have been one, it could have been three [visits].” He expressed frustration with the “one size fits all mentality” because his school was different than most other schools in the area. School Leader 8 expressed this same frustration: “...honestly we always feel that we are at a disadvantage because we’re a type [x] charter and there are fewer of us...we always feel outside the norm.” Both leaders expressed the importance of recognizing the differences in each school’s mission. While this is one of the recognized advantages of charter schools – to have a narrower focus or niche (Arts, Sciences, Technology, College Preparatory, etc) - in their experiences, this difference was not considered in the site-visitation process, nor the broader school-accountability process used by the state.

School Leader 10 didn't "know if it [the team composition] was appropriate or inappropriate... team members did not have that context [transformational take over of failing school]." Responding to the out-of-state group hired by the LDOE, School Leader 6 responded: "I'm just assuming that these people had some background but they didn't provide that to us as it relates to the validity of the team or the reliability of the team, I'm not sure." They "seemed like very capable people" was the response of School Leader 5. Overall, negative views of the visiting team members centered around the idea that often the team members not only did not understand the context or culture of the school, they acted uninterested as if school context and culture did not matter.

Based on the responses of these school leaders, it appears that communication of the qualifications of the site-visitation team members impacts the school leaders' perception of the validity of any recommendations the team members would suggest and the value or usefulness of these recommendations in terms of school improvement.

The literature presented in this study points to accreditation and award-site-visits (Baldrige, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) and public-visitations (Rhode Island, Office for Standards in Education, International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO]) that outline required experience or qualifications for site-visitation team members. For example, the IBO requires that team members undergo evaluation training specific to the IBO program, and the RIDE office intentionally did not provide intensive training to its team members [teachers]. The AACSB requires all team members to be a former College Dean and complete online training modules while the Baldrige program requires members to attend a one three-day preparation class in addition to completing a 35-50 hour case study evaluation. This requirement of expertise or training could explain the value placed on site-visits by accreditation

and award agencies as expressed by School Leader 4 and School Leader 7. Both of these leaders had recently also experienced an accreditation visit and one had also experienced a site-visit for a Blue Ribbon School Award.

It appears the school leaders placed importance on the team members understanding of their schools in terms of context (take-over, transformational) and culture. The distance of team members from the culture and context was seen as a negative in the eyes of the school leader. This could influence the importance the school leader placed on the findings of the visitation team. If the team did not understand the culture or context of the school, how could they accurately evaluate the school? This implies questions in terms of the validity and reliability of the team findings. Perhaps visitation might be improved by providing a mix of folks both close to and far from the school (in terms of culture and context). For example, a national or state team would dedicate a specific number of spots for local team members with knowledge and understanding of the school culture, context and educational landscape.

School Leaders' Perceptions of the Benefits of Site-Visits

Leaders held diverse opinions of the perceived benefits of site-visits. Table 13 reflects the themes the leaders used to describe the benefits of site-visitation: (1) provide opportunity for school-reflection, (2) validation/confirmation, (3) external perspective and (4) identify strengths and weaknesses. For several leaders, the benefits overlapped each other. Such as the reflective process became more urgent when external visitors were coming to look at the school.

Reflective. A few leaders such as School Leader 6 and School Leader 8 combine the reflective process with the benefit of the external perspective, “the value of the site-visits is again when someone comes into your house, it makes it more urgent...those baseboards are going to

get touched immediately” (School Leader 6). He/she explains that while their school is continually reviewing data and monitoring progress, the fact that visitors outside of their school community were coming to visit caused them to review their processes to ensure everything was up to date. School Leader 8 points to experiencing accreditation and other site-visits as “it forced us to make sure that we had all of our ducks in a row...so I think we had to become very reflective.” School Leaders 6 and 8 viewed the external perspective as one that would validate what they were doing, how they were doing it, and they were moving in the right direction.

Table 13

Themes: School Leaders’ Overall Perceived Benefits of the Charter School Site-Visitation Process in Louisiana

Perceived Benefit	Number of Leaders
Reflective	5
Validation / Confirmation	3
External Perspective/Urgency	3
Identify Strength / Weakness	3

Similarly, School Leader 7 spoke of the benefits of discussion and reflection with a close lens on what you do as a school.

“...Anytime you write up an evaluation of what you do, the process of the discussions and really airing what we do ...because when you’re doing it you don’t really think about it you just do it...so you know that time to reflect, even in crunch time, is a real benefit in and of itself.”

For some leaders the process of preparing for the visit forced them to reflect on what their school actually did. It prioritized reflection for professionals in a fast-paced context that often didn't facilitate it naturally. The leaders recognized the importance of reflection but perhaps the time set aside for reflection was always getting pushed to the back burner. Reflection skills are needed throughout the school year for the various planning and evaluation activities.

Theoretically, reflective activities should revolve around the school improvement plan and should be continuous to ensure the school stays on track with their goals and makes adjustments as needed. The reality as stated by a few school leaders is, it is done when it is needed and often rushed.

Validation/Confirmation. For other leaders such as School Leader 2, it was the "... 'ah-ah' moment...confirmation of [a] known need or [to] identify [an] unseen need...how can school strengthen this weakness...they saw something that you...didn't see." The benefit is the opportunity to garner support for a weakness or area in need of improvement. Others noted that the site-visit not only confirmed that you did what you said you were going to do, but it validated your approach to teaching and learning.

Identify Strengths and Weaknesses. Leaders noted that weaknesses cited in the site-visitation reports were not necessarily a negative. Often the school leader had previously identified the weakness. The fact that the site-visitation team identified the same weakness provided the school leader with support to garner the resources to address the weakness. It clarified the weakness as a need and not a want, especially in terms of budgetary shifts or solicitation of outside funding.

External Perspective. Two school leaders viewed the external perspectives as important because "...they [site-visitation team] have the opportunity to come in and see for themselves..." (School Leader 10) and discern if you do what you say you do. As School Leader 7 pointed out, when you consistently do something, often you lose perspective and just do it without thinking about it. In the words of School Leader 5, it's "good to get someone else's perspective...point out areas of growth which you may or may not be aware of." Over time, it is easy to become complacent and ingrained in processes and not notice the indicators that point to the need for change or improvement. For School Leader 9 the prospect of an external perspective

...[is] really good [be]cause it's a proxy for how we would fare if anyone else came in...the fact that someone's coming in and saying, *do you have these things in place?* raises the bar...it's good because when you come out of it and you get the feedback you know what you need to fix.

It is interesting to note that only one school leader (School Leader 9) specifically mentioned "feedback" as one of the benefits of the site-visitation. While the school leaders spoke of site-visits pointing to confirmation of what you do, identifying strengths and weaknesses, imposing a reflective practice and an external lens, few discussed how the visiting groups' "findings" were relevant to or merged into their School Improvement Plan. A possible explanation for this omission is the school leaders disconnect between their perceived relevance of the site-visit and school improvement.

School Leaders' Perceptions of the Site-Visit Findings

The researcher sought to understand how the school leaders were using the information provided by the site-visit teams. Were they using it for improvement, staff development,

planning? Was the information useful? Did they consider the findings when they reviewed their school improvement plans? In addition, the researcher probed the school leaders for further explanation of how/when the site-visit findings were reported to them and the efficacy of this report-back mechanism. Table 15 illustrates the leaders' perceptions of the timeliness and usefulness of that feedback.

Table 14

School Leaders' Perceptions of Site-Visit Findings Usefulness and Timeliness

School Leader	Feedback Timeliness	Feedback Usefulness
2	No	Yes
3	No	No
4	No	No
5	No	No
6	No	Yes
7	No	No
8	Yes	Yes
9	No	Yes
10	Yes	Yes

Systems theory and school improvement literature supports the importance for timely feedback (Hutchins, 1996; Oshry, 2007; Senge, 1990; Warkentin, et.al., 2005). In addition, the improvement models discussed in Smylie's (2010) research point to the role of feedback in the cycle of continuous improvement. Smylie points to businesses that operate in a competitive environment and continuously monitor their competition in order to maintain a competitive edge.

Improvement does not have an end; it is continuous (Huberman, 1992; Palestini, 2000; Senge, 1990; Smylie, 2010).

School Leader 2 was candid but serious in his/her response:

Honestly, I mean do you want my honest opinion?...I honestly think [site-visits are] just something shown, done just to show good faith. They say ‘hey, we’ve been in these schools, hey, if they get the test scores, if they get the SPS score that they need for renewal, alright fine, we’ll give them their renewal. But if they’re not, at least we’ve been in the school to see, you know, what’s going on’”.

School Leader 2 had not received a copy of the report for the LDOE site-visit, nor did the team debrief the school leader before they left. The visitation team thanked the school leader for allowing them to visit the school. The fact that the school leader was not provided an oral debrief before the team left and had yet to receive a copy of the report supports leaders perceptions of the current site-visitation protocol as perfunctory and unimportant. That is, the fulfillment of a mandate, an item checked off the list.

In the case of School Leader 5, the site-visit was conducted in April and the written feedback was not received until June. His/her description of the usefulness of the feedback was “...you have moved past it...which is why the face-to-face meeting at the end of the day is so important...”Leader 5 recognized the importance of timely feedback. His/her experience with other site-visitations influenced his perception of the importance of timely feedback. His quote is important because it demonstrates that school leaders value the feedback and do not want to waste time in making improvements. What importance or value does feedback provide to a school leader if it is given after the end of the school year?

School Leader 7 describes one of the drawbacks for charter schools that are part of a charter management organization. In this case, the school leader was left out of the feedback loop altogether.

In fact, they did not do a debriefing when they left. They finished the teacher interviews and left the school...we were a [award-recognized] school; we had site-visits with that [award process], we had SACS; there's always been a debriefing; there was no debriefing...no, we have not gotten anything that would point us to 'you need to improve this and here are your accolades' ...not reported, everything went to [the charter management organization?]'".

Systems theory points to the importance of communication and feedback in the process of continuous improvement (Hutchins, 1996; Oshry, 2007). Forrester, as quoted in Hutchins (1996), identifies feedback as the communication of leverage points, those points where decisions can be made about the future direction of the organization. Within the context of site-visitation, leverage points are the communication of findings of the site-visitation team. School Leader 3 expresses frustration and resignation with the lack of urgency in communicating the findings:

...feedback turnaround could be more timely...delay is counterproductive. If debrief with school leader was held, I wouldn't have a problem waiting on the written report, I would know where to start immediately....

In the two cases school leaders experienced an exit interview, debrief and/or timely feedback, the findings and information were perceived as useful (Table 15). The comments of School Leader 6 sums up the value and usefulness of feedback.

A good principal...would take any feedback and utilize it...we took the information and we utilized it and we used it for benchmark assessment; we used the data to decide where we were going so a lot of information came from that site-visit...”.

For School Leader 6, all feedback was considered useful information on some level. School Leader 10 cited the usefulness of the feedback “...confirmed some things we hear about how special our school is...it speaks to the unspoken...”. While School Leader 9 described the information and feedback as a “no brainer...they tell you ‘here are the things you need to fix’...” In the case of School Leader 9, the leverage points were clearly identified by the visitation team so the school was left to make decisions on how they could best rectify them.

The delay in the communication of the findings hinders the leaders’ decision-making in terms of timely corrective action. Without the communication of findings, the school leader could unknowingly make decisions that are counterproductive for improvement. For schools that are part of a charter management organization (CMO) the lack of communication and timely feedback to school leaders about the site-visit creates a missed opportunity for all parties to work towards school improvement. School leaders under the governance of CMOs or NOPS did not receive their feedback or written report directly from the site-visitation team. The report was sent to the “central” office for review before forwarding the findings to the school (School Leaders 3, 6 and 7).

School Leaders’ Perceptions of Their Own School Improvement Plan (SIP) Process

The School Improvement Plan (SIP) is one of the accountability requirements of NCLB. Victoria Bernhardt (2013) stresses the importance of practicing continuous improvement in order to achieve school-improvement goals. According to Bernhardt (2013), one of the key questions

centers around the purpose of the school. The process of school improvement aligns with the accreditation, award, and business models for improvement – assessing your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Then develop a plan to strategically reach your goals. The premise is that you review the school-improvement plan regularly and compare where you are to where you want to be. For School Leader 7, it is a mandate “...you want the truth?... nobody ever reads this stuff...we keep 5% improvement, 10% improvement, whatever it is...when we need to do a line item, we do it [SIP]...” It is reasonable to believe if school leaders embraced the concept of the SIP, that site-visitation findings would be addressed in the SIP. The School Improvement Plan should be reflective of the daily routine of school activities towards the goal of continuous improvement. School Leader 7 describes a process where the SIP is not a dynamic plan that guides the schools improvement. If the school analyzed the data associated with the annual levels of improvement (5%, 10%, etc.) they would find that over time, their achievement goals were unreasonable. School Leader 4 noted this approach had been used at his/her school prior to his/her tenure. It illustrates that many school leaders viewed the SIP as a mandate and not useful.

Given this study’s interest in examining the relationship between site-visitation and school improvement, emphasis centered around the role of the school improvement plan. As described below, the importance and role of the SIP in school improvement varies among school leaders.

The researcher asked each school leader for a copy of its school-improvement plan. Four schools readily located a copy. Three sent their copies electronically and one could only produce its 1999 School-Improvement Plan. Table 14 identifies the descriptor and frequency school leaders used to describe the school-improvement process at their schools. In addition, the letter

grade for the school is included to explore the relationship between the, SIP process and the school letter grade. The data is presented around the school leader's described themes of frequency of their SIP process: (1) continuous or on at least a monthly basis, (2) three times a year and (3) infrequent or when needed.

The responses of the school leaders to this question reflected the leaders' approach to improvement. The school improvement plan should outline those activities designed by the school to lead to improvement. The leaders describing their process as continuous or those with a frequent level of review outlined a process that was collaborative with the review of several layers of data.

Continuous SIP Process as Identified by the School Leader. Two school leaders used the term "continuous" to describe the frequency of their SIP process while two others described it as bi-monthly or weekly. School Leader 2 describes a process identifying benchmarks for one, three, and five years, and of constantly reviewing data,

"...of course everything is based on test scores...plans are always changing and evolving, but you want to make whatever you're doing on a daily basis ultimately [to] be able to reach the 5-year goal..." "I think we've gotten, as educators, so far away from student engagement because the bottom line is 'oh, you have to pass this test'...it doesn't tell you much about a school, that just tells you the kids did well on the test".

School Leader 2 recognizes the compressed timeline he/she has to turn the school around and acknowledges their efforts have been recognized with the designation of a Top Gains School.

Table 15

School Leader Descriptor / Frequency of Their School Improvement Plan Process

School Leader	Label	Frequency	Location of Official Plan	Letter Grade
2*	Continuous	Continuous	Principal's Office	D-
3	School Improvement Team	Bi-monthly	Principal's Office	F
4	Mandatory	Weekly	Principal's Office	A
5	Long Strategic Meeting	Annual	Not Available	F
6	Training	Annual	Charter Management Office	D+
7*	Open ended	When Needed	Charter Management Office	B+
8*	School-wide	3 Times a Year	Charter Management Office	B+
9*	Open ended	When Needed	Not Accessible	F
10	Dynamic, evolving, ongoing	Continuous	Charter Management Office	B+

*Note: * denotes Top Gains School*

School Leader 4 points to the fallacy of the arrangement within the SIP of calculation of School Performance Scores. The timeline for improvement applied to low performing schools provides the dimension for them to show improvement. However, for a school like School Leader 4's where 100% of the students are performing at or above grade level and the baseline SPS is 186.2, a few students with a below average test score during a testing period can have a negative impact on the SPS. And the ability of this type of school to move subgroups and earn bonus points makes it difficult to achieve the Top Gains School designation. The School Leader indicated the label of Top Gains School was not as relevant to a school such as his/hers.

The frequency of engagement with the SIP process at School Leader 4's school is described as reviewed weekly by leadership team and quarterly by the entire faculty. During the interview, this school leader mentions on more than one occasion that he/she only provides and only does what is legally mandated.

“By law, we have to have a SIP, so we're very careful about SIP...if done correctly, SIP is a very good touchstone to bring people back to what you're doing and why you're doing it, and, yes, we do have quarterly meetings and quarterly discussions, and we try to fold the SIP report into the SACS accreditation...SIP effects SACS because they try to look for the merger of the two. Before I got here they just changed the date on the [SIP] didn't bother...”

He/she uses the term, mandated, as a label of the school's SIP process. The SIP is mandated by the state therefore he/she approaches it seriously and diligently with weekly reviews followed by quarterly meetings and discussions. But he/she also acknowledges the role the SIP plays in the success of a school and the importance of it being a collaborative effort. If given an option, School Leader 4 would choose a different approach to school improvement based on the accreditation process.

School Leader 3 describes a bi-monthly process centered around a school-improvement team that is a

...cross section of representation...look at the goals we've set for ourselves as a school and we talk about our progress...most of our goals obviously center around improving our achievement in math and ELA....it's really helpful when we meet together as a team

because we're constantly talking about the progress we're making towards achieving these goals.

School Leader 10 was an experienced educator from New Orleans. He/she understood the culture and garnered the respect and support of the community. The demographics for the school were similar to the other type-5 charter schools in New Orleans – high percentage of free and reduced lunch, single parent households, female head of household, high poverty. Yet, this school had letter grade of B+ and a student population where 70.5% of the students were performing at or above grade level. During the interview, the school leader got animated and excited in talking about the strides the students were making and the importance of the School Improvement Plan.

You look at your school's weaknesses, your strengths, look at all the data and you develop this plan that's supposed to improve the school over some time and you know that has not happened, which is why we are here where we are today. But for [our school] and for school improvement, for us it is truly a dynamic process and truly evolving and ongoing living process...our goal everyday is to have improved student achievement.

The four schools in this section were categorized by the theme “continuous” based on the frequency of their SIP process. Two of the schools supported letter grades of D- or below and the other two schools had letter grades of B+ and higher. Two of the schools were designated Top Gains Schools.

Three Times a Year SIP Process as Identified by the School Leader. The SIP process described by School Leader 8 fell in the middle of the “continuous” category and the “infrequent” or “as needed” category. The school had a letter grade of B+ and was designated a Top Gains School. This school leader describes a process that is collaborative and structured around a school-wide committee made up of teachers, parents, and administrators. They meet three times a year and review surveys, test scores, and feedback from the various meetings throughout the year to develop their plan. The leader also states that he/she makes sure everyone understands the mission of the school: “Everybody had to read our charter, the content of the charter”.

Infrequent or When Needed SIP Process as Identified by the School Leader. Four schools are in this category. The descriptors the school leaders used to describe their SIP process included: long strategic meeting, training and open-ended. The two schools described as having an open-ended process also classified the frequency of their SIP process as “when needed”.

School Leader 5 skirted around answering the question about his/her schools SIP process. The researcher coded the response as “no response” because a process or timeline about the school improvement plan or process was not described other than an annual strategic meeting. The school leader noted that his/her school had experienced a review and it utilized that information with test-score data and teacher surveys: “We brought all this information to our leadership team and then our leadership team sat down together in a fairly long strategic meeting and said ‘what are we going to do with this information, let’s prioritize’...we were able to prioritize”. The letter grade for this school is F and only 44.8% of the students perform at or above grade level.

School Leader 9's description of the school improvement process at his/her school is "we kind of get together, frame it in a template that the state requires." The school has a team of people including other school leaders "...it's internally based...like...we didn't [need] our school review from external constituents to come and tell us what we needed to do." When the researcher asked for a copy of the school improvement plan, the school leader responded that it was "not in a template that we can share cause it's uploaded to the state, so we don't have like the...".

The leadership of this school did not come across as understanding the possible connection between the SIP, site-visitation and/or school improvement. The leadership attitude was one that knew what was needed and did not need assistance from outsiders. They did not appear to embrace the idea that perspectives of external constituents could be useful in achieving school improvement. It should be of no surprise that the letter grade for this school was F and only 39.2% of the students were performing at or above grade level. Yet this school was designated a Top Gains School. The school leader admitted that the bonus points earned by their subgroup improvements accounted for the Top Gains School designation.

For School Leader 6, the SIP process is considered an annual training for the school leadership team:

"a group of instructional focused people that decides on what the goals are, what the data speaks to, what are your deficiencies, and so we disaggregate the data and decide what are our strands that we're missing and we set a goal for the school...Plan actually presented at the beginning of the school year to the whole faculty and we do that with our five-day training that we have for our teachers...Everything in our plan speaks to literacy

because that's where our major deficiency is, that's what's causing math and science and social studies not to grow”.

The leadership does not describe a process where data and the SIP are revisited to ensure their goals are on target. The letter grade for this school was D+ and 46.4% of the students perform at or above grade level. School Leader 7 was truthful and candid in his/her description of the SIP process, “nobody reads this stuff.” His/her comments illustrate the importance he/she places on the SIP. This school leader verifies the process School Leader 3 described as existing at his/her school prior to his/her tenure. This school had a letter grade of B+ and 66.3% of the students performed at or above grade level.

It appears to the researcher that this school leader considers the school improvement plan as a legal mandate, which has little value to his/her school in terms of school improvement. It's required, they did it, it is over there in that box, done.

Is there a connection between the attitude and or understanding of the school leader in terms of the SIP process, continuous improvement, and site-visitation? Is this perception reflected in the integration of the SIP process in the daily activities of the school? Does the school leaders' attitude about the importance or role of the SIP influence school improvement?

School Leaders' Perceptions of the Current Protocol of Charter School Site-Visitation

The purpose of this research – examining the extent to which site-visitation is a viable diagnostic tool for school improvement- is explored through the school leaders' experiences and perceptions of the site-visitation process conducted by the Louisiana Department of Education. The diversity of the school leaders' perceptions and descriptions of the current protocol is discussed below, followed by a discussion of how the site-visitation process could be improved.

Positive Perceptions. School Leader 5 and School Leader 10 identified the current protocol as a good diagnostic tool for school improvement. Both of these leaders operated schools that were part of a multi-school charter management group. Both school leaders experienced site-visits by their management groups as well as the state. Interestingly, School Leader 5 described his school improvement process as an annual process consisting of a long strategic meeting. Conversely, School Leader 10 described his school improvement process as continuous and ongoing. These principals valued LADOE visits when they had an identified purpose of improving schools. School Leader 5 felt if the purpose of the site-visit was for improvement, the site-visitation team would operate like a “coach” and provide direction. For School Leader 10, the benefit of the site-visitation lies with the school leader and what he/she does with the information.

Negative Perceptions. The school leaders’ negative opinions of the usefulness of the current protocol as a diagnostic tool for school improvement used the terms listed in Table 17 to describe the current protocol. The terms school leaders utilize to describe the current site-visitation protocol point to a process that is not designed for school improvement. The same terminology can be found in the comments the school leaders made in reference to their perceptions of their SIP process, their experiences with the visitation team, and their perceptions of the usefulness of the findings.

Table 16

School Leaders with Negative Perceptions: Description of Current State of Louisiana Department of Education Charter School Site-Visitation as a Diagnostic Tool for School Improvement

School Leader	Description
2,3	Done to show good faith
3,5, 9	Compliance
4, 7	Designed for Charter renewal
2, 5, 6, 7, 8	They look at quantitative [test scores] so they [don't] even care what the qualitative findings were.
7, 10	Not designed for improvement

Participants shared a number of negative perceptions of the state’s site-visitation protocol. “Done to show good faith” refers to being able to publicly report that the school has been visited by the LDOE. The terms “compliance” and “designed for charter renewal” refer to the legal requirement of a site-visit for charter renewal. That is, is the school compliant with [its] charter? Are they eligible for charter renewal? The description pertaining to the test scores supports the compliance and charter renewal response. Looking at these descriptions collectively, it is clear that many participants do not perceive the current protocol as a tool for improvement. The school leaders’ opinions regarding the State of Louisiana Charter School site-visitation protocol point to the need for a clarity on the purpose of the site-visit as the critical measure of increasing the likelihood that the site-visit leads to school improvement. If the terminology illustrated in Table 17 was classified as the purpose of the site-visit, then the usefulness of the findings would be just as lacking. There would be no reason to expect to draw

school improvement practices from a process viewed as meaningless compliance. It is the opinion of School Leader 8 that the usefulness of site-visits as a diagnostic tool for school improvement is hampered by the vague purposes of this particular visitation protocol.

...depends on where a school is in [its] development...if you were a school that was struggling, I think it could be helpful. I think anytime you look at things with fresh eyes, and if the evaluators or the visitors were able to give meaningful and specific feedback, I think whatever we're doing when we're talking about student improvement, teacher improvement...specific and meaningful feedback they can make changes. But if you're given broad and generic feedback, what does that tell you to get better? Do this more efficiently, what does that even...if you tell someone how to do something...if people knew how, they would generally be doing it, I believe.

Implied here is the idea that if visiting teams were expected to communicate specific teacher and school-level findings that would lead directly to improved short-term practice, then this would be more likely to happen. Without this specific mission, principals are uncertain how to take action on the team's findings. Similarly, School Leader 5's perception about the site-visit is reflected in the following comments:

the purpose [of the current site-visitation protocol] is for charter renewal]... [it's]about three things – test scores, contractual obligations, and financial health...if they're coming in and the stated goal is we're going to come in and do a site-visit and the goal is to improve your school, I think there's a huge role they can play...that's a learning thing...

For School Leader 4, the tool is more efficient than effective,

tendency to put everyone in the same basket; bureaucrats tend to look at boxes and categories; develop uniformity, and that is not what schools are about...I think each mission of every school is different and the one problem we have with public education is it's a one size fits all mentality.

That is, the current process ignores the very unique nature of charter schools and that is the diversity of school missions. Every school is treated and measured the same while the individual missions are ignored. Another feature of the charter schools is the idea of site-based management. Decisions are made without the bureaucratic underpinnings. Therefore, school leaders are able to act quickly and appropriately for their school. For New Orleans, the bureaucratic and political actions, outlined in the Legislative Auditors Reports from 1998 through 2004 and beyond, were the impetus to embrace the operational freedom of charter schools with open arms. Because of these various actions over time, the New Orleans School Board lost the public trust. The public developed a general distrust of bureaucracy that was an important part of the urban charter school expansion in NOLA and elsewhere.

State visitations face an uphill battle at legitimacy because private (rather than public) entities are often perceived as more effective/efficient.

School Leader 5 is at a transformational school (a situation in which a new charter group takes over an intact failing school). He/she discussed the importance of receiving feedback in a timely manner as to the usefulness of the information leading to school improvement.

...if they want to give feedback that could be useful to a charter group it would have to be definitely earlier on...the state department would spend money...it would be done

yearly as opposed to every three years because at that point you're making decisions so it's not really something that can be utilized...it might have been going on for three years...by that time it is too late..."

School Leader 5 expressed frustration with the charter renewal process as it relates to transformational schools and the assistance they could use in successfully turning those schools around. He/she felt if the school was part of a CMO, you had resources but the state did not allow enough time for the changes to show results. School Leader 9 described being part of a CMO as a "luxury" in terms of being able to have the support of other school leaders. School Leader 3, also the leader of a transformational school, points to the disconnect between educational research in terms of the change process and the actual implementation in Louisiana. "We know from educational research that the change process can take from 5 to 7 years, however, schools are basically given maybe 2 years to show tremendous growth" (School Leader 3). He/she believes the site-visit would provide the data to support the change that is underway at schools.

For School Leader 7, the state site-visitation was a waste of time. In his/her opinion, the current protocol is not designed for improvement. His/her school is an award-winning school.

No. It's not designed for that,[improvement] it's designed for them [LDOE] to determine whether they're going to overwork the charter. It's [process] designed for us to put out "A" [specific test scores]. Timelines are much too short, they should have had that sucker two months before we got it...timelines were crappy...to compressed...coincided with the beginning of the school year...I'm not satisfied with

[our] test scores. I didn't create this system, I don't like this system, I don't have much respect for this system but it is what it is...

School Leader 7 refers to the one size fits all accountability measures. As far as this school leader was concerned, the site-visit was part of a mandatory checklist required for charter renewal. The renewal process also includes document review of financial data, student achievement data, and legal and contractual performance data. The state came in, they checked things off the site-visit list and left. The benefit to the school was only in terms of what was in their charter contract and the state law that mandates a site-visit before charter renewal (Title 28, Part CXXXIX. Bulletin 126 – Charter Schools of the Louisiana Administrative Code).

School Leaders' Suggestions for Improving the Site-Visitation Process in Louisiana Charter Schools

When asked for the opinions on how the State of Louisiana Charter School Site-Visitation process could be improved to the point of being beneficial to school leaders in terms of assisting with school improvement (Table 18), the school leaders voiced the need for support based on findings.

Table 17

School Leaders' Opinions on How State of Louisiana Charter School Site-Visitation Could be Improved to Support School Improvement

School Leader	Description of Purpose and/or Support Based on Findings
2, 3,5, 9	Provide Instructional Support
2, 3, 5, 9, 10	Improvement
2, 6, 7, 8	Consider School Culture and Climate
2, 6, 7, 9, 10	Consider Qualitative Measures When Evaluating a School

School leaders expressed the need for site-visits to consider qualitative measures of performance when evaluating a school such as school mission, environment, culture, instruction, and innovations. While the LDOE site-visitation included qualitative measures and information school leaders considered useful, they had no bearing in the calculation of a school's performance score. School Leader 8 points to the role of culture and environment in school improvement, "...could be tremendous advantages...school culture is a really important part of student's academic experience. We teach many things above and beyond the test, the content that gets us a test score and I think that that's important for evaluators to see..." Could the mission and culture of the school influence student improvement? School Leader 2 follows with, "schools are doing great and wonderful things that are not measured by test scores...culture and environment within a school matters". The current accountability measures of math and English do not adequately measure all of what schools do. In terms of systems theory, decisions that affect the whole school and all activities in the school are being made based on two narrow measures. If systems theory were a consideration in the school improvement process, the math and English test scores would be leverage points (where decisions are made) for those two areas only. The same emphasis should be provided to the other subjects that are taught, as well as non-academic skills that are under the purview of schools to provide.

Other school leaders felt visits centered specifically around instructional support could lead to school improvement. Two of these schools were turnaround schools that had a short timeframe to move the school from failing status to one of improvement. For School Leader 3, instructional support was vital to achieve the turnaround in the allotted timeframe.

...utilize the network person...function more like a master teacher, spend several days at the school, observe classes, meet with leadership, stakeholders, offer suggestions how

you can improve instruction and systems within the school...should be random [site-visits]

The instructional support described by School Leader 9 is reflective of the literature of Learning Walks (Cuderio & Nelson, 2009; Lemons & Helsing, March, 2009). "...visits more around instruction visit; CMO's have luxury, they can send leaders from school A to school B, [and] have discourse." School Leader 9 also points to the importance that the visiting team have an understanding of the culture and environment of the school, "[it is] risky if you don't have [an] understanding what the school is about. Without having parameters set up efficiently or effectively schools can be extremely frustrated with the feedback given."

Other suggestions for a process that supported improvement would include "more time to get ready and to go through the process" (School Leader 7) and "...feedback that is useful...earlier on...visits done yearly" (School Leader 6). School Leader 7 is referring to the timing of the visit in terms of other accountability activities schools are required to report on and participate in. If the purpose of the site-visitation process is school improvement, the process deserved the respect and time frame for all participants to be fully engaged.

The majority of the school leaders perceived the accreditation site-visitation process as the standard to emulate. In the words of School Leader 4, "...the accreditation process is better because it is peers and not bureaucrats." School Leader 4 expressed his/her respect for the experience and perspective that peers brought to the site-visit. The general feeling was the bureaucrats were only interested in marking off a check sheet while peers brought more understanding of the day in and day out goings on of a school.

School Leader 10 points to the reality of what is at stake for schools that are at risk, those failing schools and those turnaround school that are working against the clock:

...there should be a process, [I'm] not sure this is the [best] process. Too many times in the past we have paired the wrong leaders with the wrong schools or simply because people thought that the line for progression was you became a principal. Unless CMO's [Charter Management Organizations], RSD, and [the] state is willing to step up and say we all have a part in this... [the reality is,] they don't HAVE [emphasis by school leader] to because there are some operators who are just waiting in the wings to take over...support can never be viewed from a management perspective...unless that team is coming in to show someone how to do the work...come in with a solution.”

The school leaders had definite opinions about how site-visitation could be a beneficial diagnostic tool for school improvement. Their comments lead to the discussion of the quintain – site-visitation and its role in school improvement. In addition, the following chapter includes a discussion of the policy implications, how the protocol could be improved and future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

This chapter presents a discussion on the findings described in Chapter 4. It begins with a discussion of the role of site-visitation in school improvement. It continues with a discussion on the implications of this study towards policy, practice and future research, and ends with my concluding thoughts of the study: the need for continuing research on site-visitation as a diagnostic tool for school improvement, and utilizing systems theory as an organizing principle towards school improvement.

The Role of Site-Visitations on School Improvement

This study was structured to explore the role of site-visitation in school improvement through the perceptions of school leaders, given their important role in setting the school improvement agenda in a school (Wimpelberg, 1993; Teddle & Stringfield, 1993). In order to understand site-visitation, various protocols and uses of site-visitation were examined and documented in the literature review. The specific protocol for the State of Louisiana Charter Schools was studied more closely and interviews investigating the experiences of nine (9) school leaders with this form of site-visitation were conducted.

The data from the interviews indicates the school leaders believe site-visitation *could* be a diagnostic tool for school improvement if the protocol was different. The school leaders expressed a need to include school culture, environment, and more specific suggestions for improving instruction in the site-visit. The irony of this suggestion is the charter school concept of school-based freedom and control in exchange for generating the test scores the public demands. If as a charter operator, you do not succeed in delivering the test scores, the public can oust them and choose another operator. Do the charter school leaders in this study believe in

more differentiated accountability? The data presented indicates that they do and their responses to the interview questions point to a paradigm shift to education reform that embraces more than test scores as an accountability measure.

They even offer suggestions such as adopting a model based on the regional accreditation process such as SACS. The school leaders in this study trust the SACS accreditation model, understand its protocol and respect the standard it sets for schools. School Leader 4 states the accreditation process is better and trustworthy because it is made up of peers and not bureaucrats. The general feeling among school leaders in this study was the LADOE model had evolved into one that was mandatory, not useful, and structured to point out weaknesses and not highlight the schools strengths. Its main purpose was for charter renewal and not school improvement. Senge (1999) points to the performance culture of education focusing on rewards for correct answers and punishment for incorrect ones. This was the view of the LADOE site-visitation protocol of the school leaders in this study. The leaders believed the accreditation model was more helpful in terms of school improvement because their peers made up the site-visitation team and understood the importance of and breadth of other factors that influenced school improvement; such as culture, environment, etc. The leaders also valued the varied expertise of the accreditation teams because the team looked at schools from a regional perspective.

Rothstein, Jacobsen and Wilder (2008) support the accreditation model of site-visitation as a building block towards school improvement. Their suggested model combines aspects of accreditation agencies with the school inspections of England and Finland. “School inspections should be designed to determine primarily whether students are achieving adequate outcomes in the eight goal areas of American education, not whether schools are meeting the idiosyncratic goals of their faculties and administrations” (pg. 155). After reviewing historical documents

about the goals of education Rothstein, et al. summarized the eight goals as “(1) basic academic skills, (2) critical thinking, (3) the arts and literature, (4) preparation for skilled work, (5) social skills and work ethic, (6) citizenship, (7) physical health, and (8) emotional health” (Rothstein, et al. pg. 43). The current accountability measures focus on the first two goals – basic academic skills and critical thinking. They issue a stern warning to educational systems placing undue emphasis on test-based accountability: “as an unintended consequence, these accountability systems have interfered with, even destroyed, schools’ efforts to achieve the other goals” (pg. 42).

While the school leaders in this study lament the role of test scores and the impact the scores have on their schools, leaders recognize the importance of providing an environment and culture of continuous improvement. It is disconcerting, but at the same time understandable, that many school leaders do not view the state protocol for site-visitation as anything other than jumping through another compliance hoop. The fact is the current accountability systems (NCLB, Race to the Top), on all levels – federal, state and local - rely on a review of test scores and/or documents to validate the quality of a school. Utilizing this type of quantitative information, the analysis of school improvement and quality in Louisiana could be calculated by anyone anywhere on the globe. The current analysis and grading of a school does not require a site-visit. One must never enter a school building to make a formal assessment of a school’s quality. Hypothetically, the analysis could be outsourced overseas as many businesses have done and the results would be the same. It is just a crunching of the numbers. In Louisiana, those numbers also generate a letter grade for the schools. The application of generating a letter grade based on test scores has an unintended effect. As outlined in the research of Mintrop and Trujillo (2007) and Nicholls and Berliner (2007), the current accountability systems are being

applied for purposes they were not designed for. For example, the perception of a school labeled “A” is very different than that of a school with a lower grade of say “D” or “F”. Yet based on those public labels, parents are making decisions about the quality of the schools they consider for their children. This does not imply that parents rely solely on the test scores or letter grades. What seems to get lost in the application of test scores and letter grades to overall school performance or quality is the fact that these measures are based primarily on the performance of students in two subject areas: math and English. The designation of a school based on test scores triggers other evaluative measures that impact schools such as teachers being evaluated and rewarded or disciplined based on these numbers (Schwartz, Hamilton, Stecher & Steele, 2011). Also, schools are being closed and reopened under new management under this system.

School Leader 2 makes a point about the role of test scores and how it does not capture everything that goes on in a school...“but the reality is...that over the last three years since I’ve been here we have done three different moves [to new buildings and new non-congruent neighborhoods]. My population has been totally transient over the last three years” (School Leader 2). Because the student population had “drastically” shifted for three years in a row, the school leader felt that for each year a different population entered the school, their school was being unfairly evaluated as if the majority of the same cohort of students had been consistently enrolled for the past three years. The school leader expressed frustration with the quandary and the possible impact on the school’s ability to successfully renew its charter. An accountability system designed to include site-visitation could accommodate the impact of these moves on the overall performance of the school and provide for the adjustments. This leader was in the third year of his charter yet he felt his school population was in year one. A visitation-based

accountability system could take this into account when making evaluative decisions, a test-only system typically does not do this.

When the leader was asked what parents looked for in the current school choice environment, *School Leader 2* responded, “SPS scores...not the environment”. The leader further commented:

My question in my brain is ‘okay, so let’s say the school didn’t make the score that they needed to be the cut off score; let’s say they did not make that and you’ve been into the school, what recommendation would you give to the BESE Board to say that this school ... should stay in existence?’ You know would you say ‘okay, I’ve gone into the school, the environment is this, you know, the environment is this way, teachers are doing this’. So I have to see what that fight is going to be when that recommendation [is made]...Here’s the thing; here’s where we go with this, there are, there could be schools that are doing great and wonderful things but haven’t made gains with test scores and there could be schools that are making great gains with test scores and not doing anything with their culture and environment within their school and so the question is which school is the best school for a child to go to and if I had to, and it’s just me...I believe that a great culture and climate is what makes it great because then, in turn, everybody buys in to what needs to ultimately be done and its just a matter of finding out what they need to focus on, or what we need to focus on to make sure that we get that buy-in to improve student improvement.

The environment described above by School Leader 2 is not out of the ordinary for schools in this study. An accountability system that provided the mechanisms to capture data

other than test scores and augment the current test based system would provide a truer picture of the quality of the school. School leaders would have information to make justifiable inferences about their school's overall quality. Mintrop and Trujilo (2007) conducted a case study on nine (9) California schools exploring the "practical relevance of accountability systems for school improvement" (pg. 319). They cite the disconnect between the functions of accountability and assessment. Test scores represent the performance information as part of "a strategy for improving educational quality" (pf. 320). In other words they are an *indicator* of the *subject* areas the adults in the school should examine. The relevance of an accountability system is only reached when the test scores or performance indicators, and the school leaders experience in terms of what represents quality and effectiveness "draw justifiable inferences" about the quality of their school and the impact of their own actions (2007). "Systems measuring students reward or punish the unmeasured actions of adults" (pg. 338). Often adults in schools become engrossed in the potential impact test scores could have on them (rewards vs. punishment) and respond from their perspective.

The current accountability system of test scores does not consider this shift in student population as a variable in school performance. Schwartz, Hamilton, Stecher and Steele (2011) point that reliance on test scores can distort performance outcomes, especially when there is a shift in student population, where the scores are from different cohorts of students and could be "artifact of differences in the characteristics of these students rather than a reflection of true changes in achievement" (pg. 14). Yet, decisions are being made and perceptions are being developed about the quality of the school, teachers, and students based on misinterpretations of test scores that often are not reflective of the current student population.

Implications for School Accountability Policy

Policy can be seen as a response to an organizational disturbance or problem (Smith & Smith, 2009; Spillane, Gomez & Mesler, 2009). The passage of Act 35 by the Louisiana Legislature provided the legal authority for the state to intervene and take over failing schools in New Orleans. This was a direct response to the crisis created by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the inability of the OPSB to reopen schools (Spillane, et al, 2009). The magnitude and timing of these unplanned changes altered the governance and organizational structure of the largest school district in the state and created a complex hybrid model of governance. The governance of an organization determines the roles and responsibilities of the different players (Smith & Smith, 2009). It determines who has what level of power and their level of influence. Within the Louisiana Charter School Law, the governance structure became more complicated after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (see Figure 2 and Appendix F).

The layers between the authorizer and the school leader varies dependent upon whether the school is a member of a charter management company or group. Given the increase in the number of schools (45) that are part of the twelve (12) charter management organizations (CMO's), the school leader is often on the outside of accountability findings (Appendix J). For example, in this study four (4) schools (schools 6, 7, 8 and 10) are part of CMO's. School Leader 6 and School Leader 7 neither received an oral debrief by the site-visitation team nor a copy of the written report. One of the purported benefits of charter schools is site-based decision making. The actions of these CMO's represent missed opportunities for the school leaders. They are on the ground at the school yet they did not have the opportunity to interact with the site-visitation team when it was time to provide feedback. Systems theory (Hutchins, 1996; Smyle, 2010; Fullan, 2010) identifies feedback as a critical leverage point in decision-making.

The school leaders were not afforded the opportunity to take advantage of the feedback at the point it was given. In the meantime, those same leaders are in positions where they may be making decisions that are counterproductive to the feedback. This type of action on the part of the CMO points to the problems with the central district organizational structure. One of the promoted benefits of the charter movement is the freedom from the auspices of a district type office and the ability to make decisions at the school level.

From a systems theory perspective, the impact of Act 35 not only altered the governance structure of schools in New Orleans; it continues to impact policy decisions surrounding educational operations. Spillane *et al.* (2009) point that organizations are not static; they are in constant motion. For example, the choice environment in New Orleans has created organizational competition on two fronts (1) student recruitment and (2) charter management expansion. Student recruitment is important because dollars are attached to students. The charter management expansion is relative whenever a school fails, as School Leader 10 states, “there are some operators who are just waiting in the wings to take over”. When schools show signs of not meeting performance requirements, the circling of wagons begins and other charter groups compete to take over the school.

The political side of the charter environment in New Orleans is reflected in the use of power, resources and influence - that is, who gets what, when, and how it’s acquired (Spillane, *et al.*, 2009). All stakeholders are in a position to gain or lose the resources associated with student performance. The stakes are clearly outlined in the Charter School Law, as are the benefits of meeting the standards and the consequences for not meeting the standards. This opens the door for activities not focused on student learning and intellectual growth. It contributes to those activities directed toward meeting the minimum requirements, such as teaching to the test to

ensure that the test scores improve (Spillane, et al., 2009). Under NCLB and RTT, the threat of resource adjustments is not just financial, and the consequences are punitive. When schools fail to meet the academic benchmarks, they are sanctioned with consequences often throwing them into cycle that makes it difficult for them to improve. Parents move their students from low performing schools, external funding dries up, teachers transfer to other schools, school morale is affected, and the ability of the school to market itself in a choice environment becomes next to impossible. The community becomes witness to the slow death of a school.

According to Sandra Vergari (2000), “charter schools are immersed in two accountability processes: market accountability and bureaucratic or public accountability” (p. 484). Market accountability exists as schools find they are responsible to the individuals and families that choose to attend their school. If these individuals or families are dissatisfied, they can exit the school and attend elsewhere. Bureaucratic or public accountability exists in the role of the charter authorizers. Their role is to “oversee the use of public dollars” (2000, pg. 484) and monitor the market accountability processes. In terms of student choice, the consequence of both accountability measures is the financial benefit or loss when students exit their school. In terms of public accountability, poor performance scores provide authorizers the platform to close schools.

The explosion of charter schools and the transfer of schools from the OPSB to the RSD shifted significant dollars from the control of the OPSB to individual schools and charter operators. Additionally, in the Orleans Parish school-choice environment, the schools with the highest performance have waiting lists while those with the lowest test scores have multiple openings. The amount of public financial support a school receives is based on student enrollment. When you throw new facilities in the mix, marketing perceptions surrounding those

schools changes (newer is better) and chances to improve diminishes for those low performing schools in old buildings. Both of these – marketing and test score accountability – are public and utilized by schools to recruit students. How to account for these marketing factors in determining school improvement is one of the challenges. Our current accountability measures do not factor in these aspects of the educational landscape. This is one area where site-visitation could strengthen the accuracy of information schools provide to promote their schools. With site-visitation as a publicly reported companion to test based accountability measures, schools would have incentives to accurately market their schools to the community. As School Leader 4 describes one of the benefits of site-visitation as “it’s a way of checking our own perception of ourselves...do you do what you say you do?” The site-visitation could be a measure to hold schools accountable to their mission, culture, goals and allocation of resources.

The findings described in this study on site-visitation provide policy makers ideas to strengthen accountability.

Conclusion and a Proposed Accountability Model

Site-Visitation provides observers the opportunity to see the school as a unit and system at work (Hutchins, 1996). The interactions of the unit (school) are viewed in terms of the political, organizational, governance perspectives in real time. This interaction provides rich data in terms of what is actually going on in schools. The results of the visits provided some school leaders areas within their unit to make improvement. That is they have the opportunity to implement changes in a way that their school culture would be receptive to. Overall, the school leaders did not believe the LDOE site-visitation protocol was useful in terms of school improvement. After completing the writing of this case study, I believe the role of the site-

visitation is a potentially valuable tool in school assessment. However, the law does not provide for the use of this data in determining the School Performance Score. Furthermore, the Office of Parental Support does not utilize researched-based methods to analyze the data generated by these reports to build a database of benchmark criteria that could be beneficial to all schools as they strive for improvement. Currently, the reports are provided to the schools and there are no policies in place that require the schools to acknowledge the site-visit reports, much less address the findings. If a database of the current site-visitation findings existed, it would be helpful to the current discussion of changing school governance. The public reporting of site-visits is utilized in other countries such as England, and the Netherlands. Within this country, public site-visit reports are available for the Rhode Island Department of Education SALT visits and regional accreditation site-visits. It is possible that publication of these reports would demystify the structure of good governance under the current structure, thereby influencing the development of policy.

While the intent of the Louisiana Charter School site-visit is to assist schools to ensure their charter renewal at the five-year point, the punitive consequences of the state accountability system, based on test scores, outweigh the purpose of the site-visit. The school leaders participating in this study expressed a desire for meaningful feedback that was helpful. *School Leader 3* summed it up. “Feedback turnaround could be more timely...delay is counterproductive”. He acknowledged that an oral summation at the end of the site-visit would let him know where to start immediately. Also, without the oral exit interview, the school does not have the opportunity to provide evidence or correct a misinterpretation on the part of the visitation team. This approach does not foster a sense of trust or respect on the part of the school towards the visitation team (Wilson, 1996). It falls into the category of “gotcha” in that the

school leaders and stakeholders are caught off guard by the written findings regardless of if they are good or bad.

The accreditation model of visitation is one in which most United States educators are familiar. However, the current OFSTED (2014a, 2014b) model for inspection (site-visit) appears to be a more robust model focused on improvement. It encompasses the risk management component of the Dutch system (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, et al., 2010a) with an inspection system that is supportive to schools, even those that are struggling. It has evolved over time. It utilizes the quantitative information generated by the school (test scores, attendance, etc.) to assess risk and follows up with an inspection that generates useful feedback in terms of recommendations for improvement.

The findings of this study identify aspects of a site-visitation model that the participants believed would be most helpful to them as leaders. A comparison of the LDOE site-visitation model, test based accountability and a draft hybrid accountability model are presented in Table 18.

Table 18

Components of Site-Visitation and Test Based Accountability Measures

Characteristics of Accountability system (Bell, 2005; Fullan, 2010; Lemons & Helsing, 2009; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007; Rothstein, Jacobsen & Wilder, 2009; Wilson, 1990)	Louisiana Department of Education Site-Visitation Model	Test Based Accountability	Proposed Hybrid Accountability Model
Evidence of Student Achievement	Not Measured	Measured Narrow Focus	Expanded Measured Focus both Quantitative and Qualitative
Perceived Importance by Schools	Unimportant	All Important	Both Data Sources Count/Have Weight
Evidence of School Culture	Some Data Provided	No Data	Significant Data Provided Given Visiting Members have training and understanding of local norms
Timelines of Feedback	Hit or Miss	Several Months Delay	Immediate oral presentation to school leader and/or faculty/staff with a written report ASAP
Reliability of Feedback	Uneven depends on school leader and team members. 1 time measure, limited reliability.	Reliable, but on limited domains	Reliable: Use student assessment and Observation Data, plus public database of visit reports Use of Standard Protocol and Evidence from Existing Research
Utility of Feedback / Practical Relevance	High if School Leader and Team agree on focus, low if they do not	Provides Indicators of strength/weakness but proposes no solutions	High given a thorough analysis of achievement data by team and custom visit focus areas, and knowledge of pre-existing school focus areas

Schools are systems and until we shift how we conceptualize the whole system in terms of all data points – quantitative and qualitative, we are going to continue seeing parts (math and English test scores) and react to those parts thereby overlooking the impact those decisions have on the system as a whole (Senge, 1999). The proposed hybrid model offers many advantages over the site-visitation protocol experience by the school leaders in this study. The major advantage is the site-visitation team would enter the school with a thorough and more comprehensive understanding of the norms, culture and climate of the school. Additionally, the hybrid model points to team members that are highly trained in data analysis of student achievement.

In some ways, Louisiana has been moving towards a hybrid model as discussed above. In 2013, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), in collaboration with charter school leaders, board members, charter management organizations, financial experts and other stakeholders developed the Louisiana Charter School Performance Compact (CSPC). This is an accountability mechanism establishing performance criteria for charter schools and ensuring rigorous oversight by the LDOE (LDOE, 2013). One of the mechanisms cited in the CSPC is an annual visit scheduled at least four weeks in advance. Another mechanism is an annual review “received and publicized each school year; the annual review analyzes a school’s academic, financial and organizational performance scores along with information collected from the ongoing oversight process” (LDOE, 2013, p.6). The CSPC further cites a “differentiated oversight: frequency and intensity of school visits differentiated based on school performance” (p. 6). The school visits are to be conducted by a “Portfolio Team”. However, there is no description of the qualifications and/or training of this team to prepare them for the task of site-visitation. Will the state use a patchwork of independent contractors to conduct the site-visits as they did in the past? What is the capacity of LDOE to perform an annual site-visit or “tour” of the charter schools? What research supports this new model? Research supports the importance of trust between schools leaders and the site-visitation team in order for the judgments of the team to be considered valid (Wilson, 1996). This study points to the importance of the perception school leaders have of *any* site-visitation conducted by the state. If the state decides to implement a useful site-visitation model, it is important to garner the buy-in of the school leaders. The findings of this study point to some of those components of site-visitation the school leaders believe are important, such as the background and training of the team membership, the purpose of the visit, timeliness of feedback, and the usefulness of the findings.

However, after reviewing the documents and interviews associated with this study, it is fair to consider that the explosion of charter schools after hurricanes Katrina and Rita impacted the ability of LDOE to perform the site-visitations as originally intended – as a positive resource to schools. Perhaps the lack of human capital available to conduct the site-visitations forced the protocol to morph into what school leaders described as a perfunctory step for charter renewal.

Future Research

The researcher is interested in investigating the recently introduced site-visitation process outlined in the Louisiana CSPC. This study could contribute to the development of research based methodology and analysis of this new CSPC site-visitation mechanism. Research analyzing charter school renewal site-visits across charter management companies in not only Louisiana but in other states could provide insight into how different CMOs utilize the data. Within a management company, especially those that operate in other states, how are they using the findings from other states towards improvement of not only student learning but, organizational learning? Do the management companies employ a systems approach to the findings?

Our educational and accountability measures need to be moved out of the industrial age of strictly numeric productivity to an era that encompasses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to generate a holistic path towards school improvement. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. Currently we are following the test score path that other countries (England, Netherlands) have tried and moved away from. Young Zhao (2009) believes we are doing our children a disservice when we prescribe their learning. Our education system requires a

paradigm shift from the industrial age to a global educational system that enhances individual talents and supports student learning.

This leads to key questions. Why are we following the same path years later? What led England, Finland, the Netherlands and other countries to move away from the punitive models measuring school improvement? What can we learn from them? Perhaps some answers have already been put forth by two of the school leaders who participated in this study.

School Leader 3:

There's a disconnect between what we know to be best practice in terms of the change process and what the actual implementation look like here in Louisiana... We are a takeover or transformational charter school; we know from educational research that the change process can take from 5 to 7 years. However, schools are basically given maybe 2 years to show tremendous growth. Site-visits would give you some hard data to support the change that is taking place over time. That support piece is missing from the school improvement process in Louisiana.

Perhaps the CSPC and its site-visitation component will provide the mechanism to address the timeline of the improvement process and provide meaningful support to school leaders that leads to school improvement. According to Swaffield and MacBeath (2005), this is challenging because "external inspection and honest disclosure by schools are unlikely bedfellow, no matter the political or cultural context in which they operate" (pg. 242).

The state of Louisiana has the opportunity to establish the CSPD site-visitation model as one that is useful to school leaders towards school improvement. The implementation of this

model is critical in terms of how it functions: as a diagnostic tool for school improvement or as a mandatory, perfunctory, exercise for all parties.

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APPENDIX A

List of Charter Schools 2014-2015

<p><u>BESE Charter/Independent Schools</u> International High School of New Orleans International School of Louisiana LyceeFrancais de la Nouvelle-Orleans New Orleans Military/Maritime Academy New Orleans Center for Creative Arts</p> <p><u>OPSB Direct Run Schools</u> Benjamin Franklin Elem. Math and Science Eleanor McMain Secondary School Mahalia Jackson Elementary School Mary Bethune Elementary Literature/Technology McDonogh #35 Academy McDonogh #35 College Preparatory School</p> <p><u>OPSB Charter</u> Alice M. Harte Elementary Charter School Audubon Charter School Benjamin Franklin High School Bricolage Academy Edna Karr High School Edward Hynes Charter School Einstein Charter School ENCORE Academy Homer A. Plessy Community School Lake Forest Elementary Charter School Lusher Charter School New Orleans Charter Science and Mathematics Robert RussaMoton Charter School Warren Easton Senior High School</p> <p><u>RSD Direct Run</u> A.P. Tureaud Elementary School Benjamin Banneker Elementary School F.W. Gregory Elementary School G.W. Carver High School Sarah Towles Reed Senior High School Walter L. Cohen High School</p> <p><u>RSD Alternative Schools</u> Crescent Leadership Academy The NET Charter High School ReNEW Accelerated High School #1 ReNEW Accelerated High School #2</p>	<p><u>RSD Charter</u> Akili Academy of New Orleans Algiers Technology Academy Andrew H. Wilson Charter School Arise Academy Arthur Ashe Charter School Cohen College Prep Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School for Sci/Tech Dwight D. Eisenhower Elementary School Edgar P. Harney Spirit of Excellence Academy Esperanza Charter School Fannie C. Williams Charter School G. W. Carver Collegiate Academy G. W. Carver Preparatory Academy Gentilly Terrace Elementary School Harriet Tubman Charter School James M. Singleton Charter School John Dibert Community School John McDonogh High School Joseph A. Craig Charter School Joseph S. Clark Preparatory High School KIPP Believe College Prep (Phillips) KIPP Central City Academy KIPP Central City Primary KIPP McDonogh 15 School for the Creative Arts KIPP New Orleans Leadership Academy KIPP Renaissance High School Lafayette Academy Lagniappe Academy of New Orleans Lake Area New Tech Early College High School Langston Hughes Charter Academy Lawrence D. Crocker College Prep Lord Beaconsfield Landry-Oliver Perry Walker High Martin Behrman Elementary School Mary D. Coghill Charter School McDonogh #32 Elementary School McDonogh 42 Charter School McDonogh City Park Academy Mildred Osborne Charter School Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business Morris Jeff Community School Nelson Elementary School Paul Habans Charter School Pierre A. Capdau Learning Academy ReNEW Cultural Arts Academy at Live Oak ReNEW Dolores T. Aaron Elementary ReNEW Schaumburg Elementary ReNEW SciTech Academy at Laurel Samuel J. Green Charter School Sci Academy Sophie B. Wright Learning Academy Success Preparatory Academy Sylvanie Williams College Prep William J. Fischer Elementary School</p>
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APPENDIX B

State of Louisiana Assessment Programs – test type, test population, and purpose or expected outcome.

Name of Test	Test Type	Test Population	Purpose/Outcome
Kindergarten Developmental Readiness Screening Program (KDRSP)	Required approved screening	Each child entering kindergarten for the first time	Placement and planning instruction
Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP)	High stakes criterion-referenced tests in English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies	Grades 4 and 8	Performance tied to promotional policy
Graduation Exit Examination (GEE)	Criterion referenced test in English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies	High school students	Required to receive high school diploma
<i>Integrated</i> Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (<i>i</i> LEAP)	Integrate criterion-referenced and norm-referenced test	Grades 3,5,6,7,and 9 (Spring 2010 last administration of grade 9)	Evaluate students, schools, and district performance
LEAP Alternate Assessment Level 1 (LAA 1)	“On demand” performance based assessment	Special education students	Knowledge and skills in targeted areas
LEAP Alternate Assessment Level 2 (LAA 2)	Criterion-referenced based on modified academic standards	Students with persistent academic disabilities served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA)	Participation in academic assessments sensitive to measuring their progress
English Language Development Assessment (ELDA)	Research-based program measuring reading, writing, speaking, and listening to English	Limited English Proficiency students in grades K-12	Measure proficiency of English
End-of-Course Tests (ECOT)	Criterion-referenced and standards based	High school students enrolled in and/or receiving credit for EOCT course online	Assess student mastery of six high school courses
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or Nation’s Report Card	National test	Random stratified sample population of students	Gather data about subject-matter achievement, instructional experiences, and school environment

APPENDIX B (continued)

Achievement Levels for State of vs. No Child Left Behind Regulations

State of Louisiana		No Child Left Behind	
Level	Definition	Level	Definition
Advanced	Superior performance beyond mastery level	High or Advanced	How well are students mastering the content standards?
Mastery	Competency and well prepared for next level of schooling	Proficient	How well are students mastering the content standards?
Basic	Fundamental knowledge and skills for next level of schooling	Basic	How are lower achieving student progressing toward mastering the content standards?
Approaching Basic	Partial knowledge and skills for next level of schooling		
Unsatisfactory	Has not demonstrated fundamental knowledge and skills for the next level of schooling		

Note: Louisiana Administrative Code 28 CXI, §113; Yell & Drasgow

APPENDIX C

LDOE Charter School Site-Visit Benchmarks

Benchmark	Definition	Prompts
1. Physical Environment	The school provides a rich and stimulating learning environment for all children.	Clean, quiet, safe, comfortable, well-lighted and orderly facilities, abundant instructional resources, displayed student work, well-stocked classroom and school libraries, adequate space for individual and group work, etc.
2. Climate	The school supports and promotes a culture of high expectations and mutual respect.	Consistently enforced disciplinary policies, on-task students, use of effective classroom management strategies, posted codes of conduct, an overall focus on academic achievement, significant opportunities for collaboration and thoughtful discourse among students, teachers, and staff, etc.
3. Student Engagement	All students are actively engaged in the learning process.	Project-based learning, hands-on activities, real-world problems, challenging, authentic, and purposeful tasks, open-ended questions, student-directed inquiry, collaborative learning, overall excitement for learning exhibited by both teachers and students, etc.
4. Curriculum	The school offers a guaranteed, viable, and compelling curriculum with a solid focus on essential skills and concepts.	Posted standards, essential questions, goals, and objectives, curriculum mapping and alignment initiatives, lessons, activities, and projects aligned to standards, developmentally appropriate materials, adequate time allocated to all subjects, etc.
5. Instruction	Teachers use the latest researched-based instructional “best” practices.	Strategies to maximize participation, guided and independent practice, adequate wait-time, use of multi-sensory learning tools, differentiation, reading, writing and computation across the curriculum, equitable grouping practices, interventions for children behind grade level, etc.
6. Assessment	The faculty and staff use varied and effective assessment practices to better meet both individual and group learner needs.	Mutually agreed upon scoring rubrics and quality guidelines, anchoring samples, portfolios, multiple drafts, regular pre and post diagnostic evaluations, standard-based/criterion-referenced grading, individual and group learning plans, etc.
7. Technology	Technology is utilized effectively in a variety of ways to enrich and extend the overall learning experience	A share vision for technology integration, equitable access, evidence of teacher productivity tools, student-generated products, Internet research, use of instructional hardware and software, short and long-range technology plans, student motivation and proficiency, Web 2.0 activities, significant, embedded, and ongoing technology support, etc.
8. Leadership	School governance and operations are effectively and efficiently run.	Evidence of participatory instructional leadership, team-based school organization, regular board, steering, department, and grade level meetings, mutually understood protocols and procedures, comprehensive and ongoing leadership training and support, etc. ⁹
9. Community Involvement	Parents, community members, and local businesses are active and positive participants in the educational process.	Community partnerships, volunteer opportunities, artifacts related to community service, events and programs designed to promote and support quality participation, parent and community resources, perception data (surveys), a shared understanding of school improvement initiatives, etc.
10. Accountability	All stakeholders take responsibility for the school’s continued success.	A shared school improvement plan a comprehensive community review process, use of various types of data, posted agendas and calendars, online grading and communication tools, a community reporting system, job-embedded professional development designed to improve both teaching and learning, etc.

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval/Certification

***University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans***

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Brian Beabout
Co-Investigator: Mary Shannon C. Chiasson
Date: May 8, 2012
Protocol Title: "Site Visitation: School Leaders' Perceptions of a Diagnostic Tool for School Improvement"
IRB#: 01May12

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. The above referenced human subjects protocol has been reviewed and approved using expedited procedures (under 45 CFR 46.116(a) category (7)).

Approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Use the IRB number listed on this letter in all future correspondence regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project!

Sincerely,




Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

APPENDIX D (continued)

Project Report and Continuation Application

(Complete and return to IRB, GP 2001. Direct questions to IRB administrator Jessica Grande 280-6013 or IRB Chairman Bobby Laird at 280-5454)



**THE UNIVERSITY of
NEW ORLEANS**
Committee for the Protection of
Human Subjects in Research
GP 2001
Phone: 504-380-6013
Fax: 504-380-6049
humansubjects.uno.edu

IRB # 01 May 12 Current approval expires on: May 8, 2013

Review Type: Expedited Risk Factor: Minimal

PI: Brian Beabout Department: Educational leadership, counseling Phone: _____

Co-Investigators: Mary Shannon Chiesson

Project Title: Site Visitation: School Leaders' Perceptions of a Diagnostic Tool for School Improvement

Please read the entire application. Missing information will delay approval!

I. PROJECT FUNDED BY: _____ UNO Proposal # _____

II. PROJECT STATUS: Check the appropriate box and complete the following:

1. Active, subject enrollment continuing; # of subjects enrolled: _____

2. Active, subject enrollment complete; work with subjects continues.

3. Active, work with subjects complete; data analysis in progress.

4. Project start postponed. New start date: _____

5. Project complete. end date: _____

6. Project cancelled. No human subjects used.

III. PROTOCOL: Check one.

Protocol continues as previously approved

Changes are requested* *List (on separate sheet) any changes to the approved protocol.*

IV. UNEXPECTED PROBLEMS: (did anything occur that increased risks to participants?)

Number of events since study inception: _____ since last report: _____

Have there been any previously unreported events? Y?N _____

If such events occurred, describe them (on a separate sheet) and how they affect risks in your study.

V. CONSENT FORM AND BENEFIT RATIO

Does new knowledge or adverse events change the risk/benefit ratio? Y?N _____

Is a corresponding change in the consent form needed? Y/N _____

VI. ATTACH A BRIEF, FACTUAL SUMMARY of project progress/results to show continued participation of subjects is justified; or to provide a final report on project findings.

VII. ATTACH CURRENT CONSENT FORM (only if subject enrollment is continuing); and check the appropriate blank:

Form is unchanged since last approved

Approval of revision requested herewith; (identify changes)

(Electronic) Signature of Principal Investigator _____ Date _____

IRB Action: Continuation approved; Approval Expires: _____

Continuation disapproved

File closed

Signed: _____ Date _____

Submit by Email

Print Form

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

I consent to participating in research entitled: *Site-Visitation: Perceptions of a Diagnostic Tool for School Improvement*

Shannon Chiasson, Co- Investigator, has explained the purpose of the study as an exploration of the charter school site-visitation process in Louisiana – school leaders experiences with the site-visitation and how the use of findings for school improvement. The procedures to be followed are my participation in an individual interview with an expected duration of 30 – 45 minutes. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

I understand that personal identifying information including but not limited to names of participants and their school affiliation will be kept confidential.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised questions have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

If I have additional questions about this research, or my rights as a human subject I have been provided the following contact information: Dr. Brian R. Beabout, College of Education and Human Development, Lakefront Campus, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA 70148. Telephone (504) 280-7388 or e-mail at bbeabout@uno.edu.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

DATE: _____

(Participant)

SIGNED: _____

SIGNED: _____

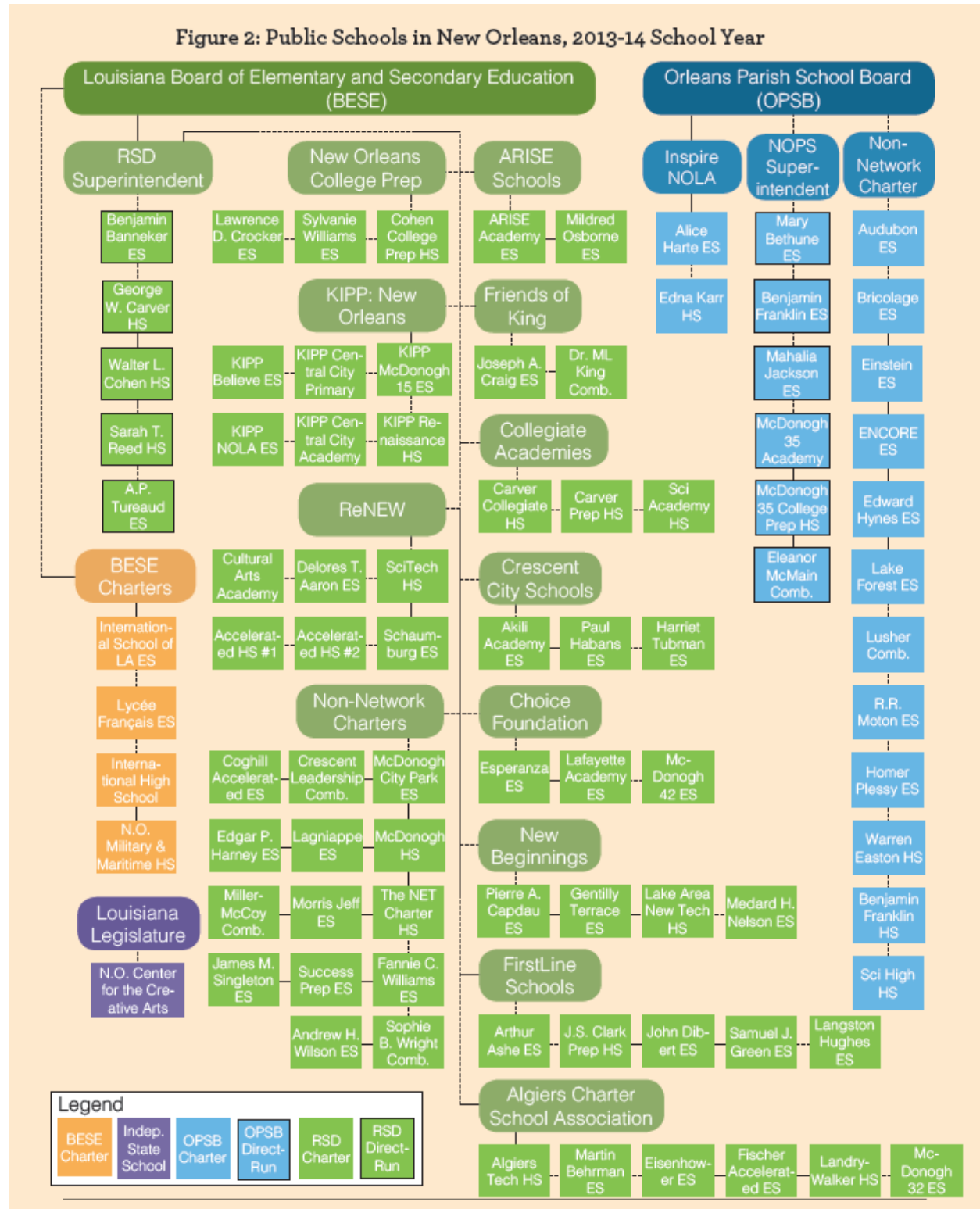
(Printed Name)

SIGNED: _____

(Principal Investigator)

APPENDIX F

School Governance in New Orleans 2013-2014



APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

Lay Summary

1. I am Shannon Chiasson, a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership at the University of New Orleans
2. I am conducting a qualitative study for my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Brian Beabout.
3. The results will be analyzed to explore the Louisiana Department of Education, Office of Parental Choice Charter School Site-Visitation process and how school leaders are utilizing the findings of the site-visits.
4. New Orleans was selected as the study site because of its proximity to my home and the high concentration of charter schools in the city.
5. No risks to participants.
6. All responses will be confidential.
7. I will review the Site-Visitation Summaries for each school in the sample and meet the school leader for one interview. The interview will be one-on-one interview.
8. Each session should last no longer than 30 – 45 minutes
9. I would like permission to record the interviews by tape recording, i-pod, and digital pen.
10. Transcribed interviews will be submitted to each interviewee for an accuracy review.

I want to talk to you about your experience with the State of Louisiana Office of Parental Choice Charter School Site-Visitation Process. I am mostly interested in your experience and perceptions of the benefits of the site-visit process and how you are using the resulting information for school improvement. I am going to break this interview into three sections beginning with the preparation process you and your school engaged in prior to the site-visit, then we will talk about your experience with the actual visit, and finally we will talk about the findings and how you are using them to make improvements in your school.

Interview Questions and Prompts

1. I would like you to tell me about any activities you and/or your faculty and staff engaged in to prepare for the site-visit.
2. Describe your experience with the visit?
 - a. What was your interaction with the visitation team?
 - b. In your opinion, did the composition of the team members seem appropriate for your school? Why/why not?
 - c. What do you perceive as the benefits of the State of Louisiana Office of Parental Choice Charter School Site-Visitation?
 - d. Were you principal of this school during a site-visit by the LDOE Office of Parental Choice in 2008-2009 or 2009-2010
3. Describe your School Improvement Process
 - a. Ask for a copy of Professional Development Calendar, School Improvement Plan, Budget
 - b. Be prepared to provide a copy of the Site-Visitation Summary Report
4. What are your thoughts on the findings or recommendation of the visitation team?
 - a. How were the findings reported?
 - b. How are you addressing the findings?
 - c. For improvement?
 - d. Staff Development?
 - e. Planning?
5. In your opinion, is the current protocol of charter school site-visit a good diagnostic tool for school improvement/change?
 - a. How do you think the process could be improved
 - b. Is there anything that I did not ask about charter school visitations that you would like to share with me?

APPENDIX H

Permission to Reproduce and Cite Work

RE: Permission to Reproduce & Cite Public Education Governance Structure
The Cowen Institute [coweninfo@tulane.edu]

To:
M
Mary Shannon Chiasson

Monday, July 11, 2011 10:29 AM

Hi Mary,

It is fine for you to use this.

Thanks,
Amy

From: Mary Shannon Chiasson [mailto:mschiass@my.uno.edu] **Sent:** Thursday, July 07, 2011 7:27 PM **To:** The Cowen Institute **Subject:** Permission to Reproduce & Cite Public Education Governance Structure

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am requesting permission to reproduce and include both charts in the "Public Education Governance Structure Organizational Chart: September 2010" found at <http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/School-Chart-Update-Sept-2010.pdf> in my dissertation. The author attributed to these charts is The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University. If these charts have been updated, I would appreciate permission to utilize the most recent information.

I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Administration at the University of New Orleans. The subject matter of my dissertation includes the charter school structure in Louisiana and the city of New Orleans.

I appreciate your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Shannon Chiasson
Graduate Assistant to Dr. Brian Beabout
College of Education
University of New Orleans
2000 Lakeshore Drive
New Orleans, LA 70148
mschias1@uno.edu

APPENDIX I

Permission to Cite CREP Article

RE: Permission to cite ncsrp working paper #2008-6

Mary Shannon Chiasson

To:

M

Center on Reinventing Public Education [crpe@u.washington.edu]

Thursday, July 07, 2011 6:48 PM

Thank you! I appreciate your prompt reply.

From: Center on Reinventing Public Education [crpe@u.washington.edu]

Sent: Thursday, July 07, 2011 6:41 PM

To: Mary Shannon Chiasson

Subject: Re: Permission to cite ncsrp working paper #2008-6

Hi Shannon,

You have permission to cite the paper, so long as the author and publication info is properly attributed.

Best of luck!

Deb

On Jul 7, 2011, at 4:37 PM, Mary Shannon Chiasson wrote:

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am requesting permission to include ncsrp working paper #2008-6 titled "Quality Improvement and Performance Management in Schools: Lessons From Abroad" by Ashley E. Jochim and Katharine Destler as a reference citation in my dissertation.

I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Administration at the University of New Orleans. The subject matter of my dissertation includes site-visitation.

I appreciate your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Shannon Chiasson
Graduate Assistant to Dr. Brian Beabout
College of Education
University of New Orleans
2000 Lakeshore Drive
New Orleans, LA 70148
mschias1@uno.edu

APPENDIX J

Charter Management Organizations in New Orleans 2013-2014

Charter Management Organization	Number of Schools
Algiers Charter School Association (ACSA)	6
Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) NO	6
ReNEW-Reinventing Education, Inc.	6
FirstLine Schools, Inc	5
New Beginnings School Foundation	4
Choice Foundation	3
Inspire NOLA	2
Crescent City Schools	3
Friends of King	2
New Orleans College Preparatory Academies	3
ARISE Schools	2
Collegiate Academies	3
Total New Orleans Charter Schools in a Charter Management Organization	45

Louisiana Department of Education, 2013 Multiple statistics by site for elementary/secondary school students.

VITA

The author was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Business Administration with a concentration in finance from the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Alabama in 1977. She completed her Master's of Higher Education degree in 2002 from Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana. She joined the University of New Orleans education graduate program to pursue a Ph.D. in Educational Administration and became a member of Professor Brian Beabout's research group in 2009.