

ROCKETSHIP EDUCATION:
AN EXPLORATORY PUBLIC POLICY CASE STUDY

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Doctor of Education

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is an exploratory case study of the finances of the Rocketship charter school chain, especially those related to real estate. Rocketship is a not-for-profit charter management organization, one of the first in Santa Clara County, California. This study seeks to determine if the financial transactions related to Rocketship charter schools yield profits for investors, despite Rocketship itself being a non-profit entity, and if they do, how and where do they do so. In order to characterize fairly and completely the profits of Rocketship Education itself and Rocketship-related entities, this study uses publicly available documents to track money flowing in and out of Rocketship and related entities, for example, the various Launchpad Development companies. Using data from initial and renewal charter petitions, annual budget documents, filings with county, state and federal government agencies, bond prospectuses, tax credit programs, state and federal grants, plus data from publicly available datasets, this study derives an estimate of Rocketship's profitability. It found that [Results TBD]. [Conclusion TBD]. These results, it is hoped, will serve to inform local, state, and federal legislatures when they establish public policy for charter schools, not only in California, but throughout the United States.

Keywords: Rocketship Education, charter management organization, privatization, charter finances, education public policy, profit, real estate, bonds, venture funds, philanthrocapitalism

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Abbreviations

- ARUSD** Alum Rock Unified School District
BAN Bond Anticipation Note
CAFR Comprehensive Annual Financial Report
CDE California Department Of Education
CINA Change in Net Assets
CMO Charter School Management Organization
COE County Office of Education
COVID-19 Corona Virus Disease 2019
CPRA California Public Records Act
CSBA California School Boards Association
CSFA California School Finance Authority
DOE U.S. Department of Education
EC or Ed Code Education Code of California
ECLS-K Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten class of 1998 or 2011
EMO Education Management Organization
FOIA (federal) Freedom of Information Act
GO bond General Obligation Bond
LASD Los Altos School District
LCAP Local Control and Accountability Plan
LCFF Local Control Funding Formula
LEA Local Education Agency
SACS Standardized Account Code Structure
SARC School Accountability Report Card
SARS-CoV-2 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus #2
SCCBOE Santa Clara County Board of Education
SCCOE Santa Clara County Office of Education
SCC Santa Clara County
SEDA Stanford Educational Data Archive
TPS Traditional Public School
TRAN Tax Revenue Anticipation Note

Glossary

ADA Average Daily Attendance, the method that the state of California uses to determine how many students attend a particular school. An alternative is to use the number of students enrolled, some of whom may attend sporadically but still need to be educated when they do attend. (California Department of Education, 2019)

arm's length transaction A transaction, often financial, where all parties are independent and self-interested. (Wex Definition Team, 2010)

blended learning A method of teaching where both in-person instruction and virtual instruction are used. (Graham, 2018)

bond A bond is a loan whose terms (maturity date, interest rate) are fixed. Bonds are issued by a borrower (the debtor) to investors (the creditors) who are the source of the funds borrowed. The borrower is liable for repaying the debt, usually on a fixed schedule. In return for getting the funds now, the borrower agrees to compensate the creditor by repaying both the amount loaned (the principal) and interest on the amount outstanding at an agreed upon (ther interest) rate. (Borad, 2015)

charter school A publicly funded but privately run school that is independent from the usual public school system. Like public schools, charter schools are tuition-free, must accept all who apply, and are governed by a school board. Unlike public schools, the school board is unelected. (California Department of Education (CDE), 2023a; California School Boards Association, 2016; Eckes, 2024)

charter school authorizer A governmental entity that grants charter schools the authority to operate and which provides oversight. In California, a chartering authority could be a public school district, a county office of education, or the

California Department of Education. (National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), 2024)

charter management organization (CMO) “A non-profit organization that operates or manages a network of charter schools (either through a contract or as the charter holder) linked by centralized support, operations, and oversight.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 2) and (CDE, 2021)

conduit bond A conduit bond is a type of municipal bond where the bond is paid back, not by a public entity’s revenue stream, but by a private entity, the conduit borrower, for example, a limited liability company or corporation. The public entity, the conduit issuer, is merely passthrough entity, between investors and a private entity. (Cooper, 2017) (See Government Accounting Standards Board, 2019 for details on what qualifies as a conduit bond.)

cross-collateralization A term from bond financing which indicates that an asset has been used as collateral in two different obligations. (Lip, n.d.)

debt, convertible An obligation (a loan or a bond) that can be converted into another form, typically common stock or equity (Chen, 2020), but in Rocketship’s case, from a loan into a grant or donation.

double bottom line grantors Grantors (philanthropies) which measure social impact in addition to fiscal performance. (Clark et al., 2015)

education management organization (EMO) “A for-profit entity that operates or manages a network of charter schools (either through a contract or as the charter holder) linked by centralized support, operations, and oversight.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 2) and (CDE, 2021)

general obligation bonds (GO) General obligation bonds are tax-exempt bonds backed by a public entity's tax revenues, and not from the revenue of a project. California state law limits bond debt to 2.5% of total assessed valuation for unified school districts and 1.25% for elementary and high school districts. (California Debt and Investment Advisory Commission (CDIAC), 2014)

municipal bond A municipal bond is a bond issued by a public entity and bought by investors. The public entity (the debtor) borrows from investors (the creditor). Investors loan money to the public entity, and the public entity pays the investors back over time with interest. (Chen, 2022)

parcel tax A non-*ad valorem* property tax, i.e. not based on the value of the property, but assessed per parcel. (Lu, 2019)

philanthrocapitalism Using a market capitalism approach in non-profits.
(Giridharadas, 2018)

portfolio school district A collection of diverse charter schools managed as a single organization. (Lake & Hernandez, 2011)

property tax A tax based on the assessed value of a property, i.e. an *ad valorem* tax.
(California Board of Equalization (BOE), 2018)

Proposition 13 Passed by California voters in 1978 as a constitutional amendment, Prop. 13 devastated funding to local governments, including school districts by limiting the property tax to 1% of assessed value, increases to a maximum of 2% (unless reassessed because of a change in ownership), and requiring a two-thirds majority to increase property taxes, since lowered to 55% by Prop. 39. (Aguinaldo, Garcia, et al., 2022)

Proposition 39 Passed by California voters in 2000 as a constitutional amendment and state statute, Prop. 39 mandates that public school districts, if requested, must provide reasonably equivalent facilities to charter schools. (Aguinaldo, Garcia, et al., 2022)

Proposition 98 Passed by California voters 1988 as a constitutional amendment and state statute, Prop. 98 defines the minimum funding level of K-14 schools in the state budget. (Aguinaldo, Garcia, et al., 2022)

public school Public schools are funded by taxpayers and are governed by a publicly elected Board of Trustees. Unlike charter schools, public schools accept, at any time of year, any and all students who wish to enroll. They do not discriminate on the basis of race, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, religion, citizenship, ability, disability, or language proficiency. All are welcome. (California Department of Education (CDE), 2023b) (See also Jamie Vollmer's story about blueberries in Vollmer, 2011.)

related party transaction A transaction that is not an “arm’s length transaction”.
(Kenton, 2022)

revenue bonds Tax-exempt bonds guaranteed by a schools revenue instead of by an LEA’s property tax revenue. (Chen, 2021)

unduplicated pupils The State of California augments school district revenue on a per pupil basis for every pupil that qualifies for free or reduced price lunch, or is an English language learner, or is a foster youth, but only an unduplicated basis. Notably, children with special needs are not considered *unduplicated pupils*. Neither are homeless children. (California Department of Education (CDE), 2015)

*Lucius Cassius ille quem populus
Romanus verissimum et
sapientissimum iudicem putabat
identidem in causis quaerere solebat
“cui bono” fuisse.*

The famous Lucius Cassius, whom
the Roman people used to regard
as a very honest and wise judge,
was in the habit of asking, time
and again, “To whose benefit?”

Pro Roscio Amerino, §§ 84, 86
MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO^a

^a[https://en.wikipedia.org/
wiki/Cui_bono](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cui_bono)

Introduction

If, in Harold Lasswell's words, politics is about who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936), then education is surely one of the most consequential—and fascinating—of public policy issues. At stake is the well-being of tens of millions of students on whose behalf federal, state, and local governments spend upwards of three quarters of a trillion dollars annually.¹ The number of stakeholders is huge: every parent and every child is a stakeholder, as are teachers, administrators, legislators, employees of fifty state departments of education, the federal Department of Education, the President of the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court, and state and local courts. Stakeholders exist throughout the United States, in states, counties, cities, towns, villages, and in almost 100 thousand schools in thousands of school districts. The COVID-19 pandemic of the last 2+ years has revealed just how important public education is.

Education is the arena in which parents, legislators, unions, political parties, billionaires, technologists, scholars and educators clash, all vying for influence and reward. Education is where religion, politics, free market neoliberalism, and social justice intersect. One topic in particular has, in the last fifty years, generated a disproportionate share of discord: the privatization of public education, i.e. school choice.²

Formerly sleepy school board elections have attracted national interest, and with that interest, a flood of money. The 2020 Los Angeles school board election cost over \$14M for just four seats and generated articles in the national press. Likewise, a November 2016

¹The 50 states and the federal government spent \$734.9B in 2017–18. Using an inflation rate of 2%, spending for 2021–22 would be just shy of \$800B. (Author's estimate using data from "Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: FY 18", NCES, 2020)

²"School choice" is an Orwellian name designed to mislead, to dress up an otherwise unpalatable reality: privatization takes something that used to be available to all and restricts it exclusively to those who can afford to pay.

statewide proposition in Massachusetts which sought to expand charter schools was covered extensively by national newspapers with one advocacy group spending more than \$15M (not including a \$425,000 fine for violating campaign law).³ Betsy DeVos, U.S. Secretary of Education under the former President Donald Trump, drew fierce criticism from the start of her tenure with her unwavering support of charter schools, criticism which was endlessly reported on. In short, charter schools became nationally visible.

1.1 Schools and Charter Schools

Most schools in the United States are either traditional public schools, charter schools, or private schools, with one catchall category: alternative schools. Only two states, Nebraska and North Dakota, have resisted all forms of school choice; all states have private schools and an extensive public school system. By definition, school choice encompasses charter, private, magnet, and homeschooling, i.e. every kind of school traditional except public schools. But, because school vouchers in particular are becoming more common, school choice now increasingly refers to school vouchers in addition to charter schools (Enlow, 2022).

Schools, under this definition of school choice, take a number of forms: they can, like traditional public schools be in-person, but unlike traditional public schools, they can also be completely online (virtual), or even a blend of virtual and in-person. How school choice is financed varies as well. School vouchers, various types of tax-credits, savings accounts, and tax deductions, have all been used, often augmented by tax dollars. The phrase “school choice” is also associated with 529 savings accounts, student income loans, social impact bonds, and philanthrocapitalism.⁴

³Details of the financing of the Great Schools Massachusetts 2016 ballot committee are spelled out in Cunningham (2021).

⁴The use of a market-based approach in philanthropy.

Regardless of how school choice is financed, school choice complicates what used to be a system of mostly public schools plus a few private schools that had been in place for over 150 years. This new kind of financing has raised some fundamental questions: Who benefits from this new financing? Do the children for whom education is the difference between being poor and flourishing benefit? Is education being turned into a low-risk, profitable investment for hedge funds, private equity firms, investment banks, and the one percent?

The various forms of school choice have waxed and waned, but charter schools were present at the creation of the privatization movement in education and have continued to enroll more and more students, diverting more and more dollars out of the public school system (Lafer, 2017a; Lafer, 2018; Lafer et al., 2021). School choice has spawned an entire industry devoted to marketing school choice: academic departments and institutions, educational associations, think tanks, astroturf⁵ advocacy groups, and political action committees, all of which are examples of the marketing of the privatization of public education.

According to the National Center of Education Statistics in the U.S. Department of Education, there were 7,547 elementary and secondary charter schools in the United States enrolling 3,431,230 students in 2019–20 school year (de Brey et al., 2022, Table 216.90, p.144). This represents 7.7% of the total number of elementary and secondary schools and 6.8% of the total number of students in the United States. The state with the greatest charter school presence was California which had 1,321 schools (12.7% of the total) and 674,652 students (11.0%). Within California, in the 2019–20 school year, charter schools in Santa Clara County enrolled 31,584 students (13.6% out of 231,865) (California Department of Education, n.d.).

⁵Wordnik definition: astroturf: “The disguising of an orchestrated campaign as a ‘grass-roots’ event – i.e., a spontaneous upwelling of public opinion.”

These are notable patterns, and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the growth of charter schools, in contrast to the small decline of recent years. However, this recent growth appears to be almost completely due to the expansion of virtual charter schools (Strauss, 2021). Despite continued growth, charter schools remain controversial and have generated heated debate. Reports and studies from charter school opponents have been answered by reports and studies from charter school advocates. Both sides claim their methodology to be superior and consider the other side's fatally flawed.⁶

What the research indicates – again and again – is that *some* charter schools, under *some* circumstances, for *some* students, seem to do *somewhat* better than traditional public schools. David R. Garcia notes that charter schools start out doing somewhat worse than public schools, but improve over time, with “no discernible difference” (Garcia, 2018, p. 119) after about five years of operation.

On the other hand, the Lubienskis showed after careful and thorough statistical analysis in Lubienski and Lubienski (2014) that public schools out perform charter schools. The Lubienskis used restricted-access 2003 NAEP data from just shy of 300,000 students in 4th and 8th grades in 6041 schools throughout the United States, plus data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten (ECLS-K 98) class of 1998–99.⁷ So, based on the Lubienski’s analyses, there is no evidence that, on the whole, charter schools are superior to traditional public schools in academic performance. Rather, at best, they perform, on average, similarly.

⁶Jeffery Henig in his book *Spin Cycle: How Research is Used in Policy Debates: The Case of Charter Schools* (J. Henig, 2009), offers a detailed examination of the war of words that resulted from just one report and one newspaper article.

⁷The Lubienskis were exceedingly thorough in their statistical analysis and devote over 80 pages in Lubienski and Lubienski (2014) to the details of their two-level hierarchical linear model (three level for the ECLS-K 98 data). Their data is available from the National Center for Educational Statistics to qualified researchers, so that their analysis can be replicated.

If charter schools are on average no better than public schools, why are they so fervently touted as the answer to the perceived ills of American public education? Why are eye-popping sums (10x the usual amounts) spent supporting public school board candidates who favor charter schools? Why are charter schools still growing in both enrollment and in number? Is the profit motive is the overriding goal of charter schools, or are they instead driven by a genuine desire to improve the educational outcomes of the very children who could most benefit from a quality education? My goal in this dissertation is to offer some answers to questions like these by examining in detail the finances and financial structure of a single charter school chain, Rocketship Education, and entities associated with it.

I will use the term *charter school chain* to refer both to for-profit and non-profit organizations that manage more than one charter school since both take both financial and operational control away from schools and centralize it outside of schools, much like public schools are part of a public school district. Charter school chains are essentially franchise operations like McDonald's or Hertz, but in education instead of hamburgers or rental cars. For-profit charter school chains have traditionally been called *educational management organizations (EMOs)* and non-profit charter school chains *charter management organizations*, but since there is little difference between the two, I will use *charter school chains* when the distinction is unimportant.

The remainder of this chapter provides some context for why I conducted this study. The chapter *A Review of the Literature* discusses the extensive literature on charter schools. The following chapter, *Research Design and Methodology*, details what data will be collected, how it will be collected, and how it will be analyzed. The chapter *Findings* provides the results of analyzing that data in context of this study's research questions. The last chapter, *Discussion* considers the limitations and public policy implications of my study and its conclusions. Finally, it makes some suggestions for how current public policy

should be changed to achieve some of the seven goals that the California Legislature set out in *The Charter School Act of 1992*.

1.2 What is the Purpose of this Study?

The goal of this case study is to determine if Rocketship Education is, or might be, profitable and if so, how are these profits generated. It seeks to analyze as carefully and fully as possible the finances of Rocketship Education and of associated entities, concentrating on its real estate dealings.

Real estate, for charter schools, is of special significance because they have no facilities when they submit their initial petition. They do have several ways of obtaining the needed facilities, but because they cannot raise property or parcel taxes, nor can they pass a bond measure that is paid for by property taxes, charter schools must either obtain facilities from their home public school district or they must lease or buy facilities using funds they themselves have raised. Furthermore, since Rocketship Education is incorporated as not-for-profit corporations, any profits must remain as assets of Rocketship Education with one exception: profits may be transferred to another non-profits whose public benefit is similar to Rocketship's.

The non-real estate finances of charter schools — at least in California — are similar to public schools. Both use the same state mandated accounting structure because both have very similar needs. Although a charter school may pay more for this or less for that, fundamentally the revenues and expenses of charter schools are similar to those of traditional public schools. But when leasing, buying and potentially constructing facilities enter the picture, a different calculus ensues since significant sums are at stake. For example, a single transaction might be in the range of tens of millions of dollars.

This study concentrates on Rocketship Education⁸ because its popularity has led to core aspects of its model being adopted by other charter school chains such as the Caliber Public Schools or the Navigator Schools, both in California. It is an exemplar of a popular charter school and has had an outsized influence on public education in Santa Clara County.

This study seeks to determine if Rocketship Education or related entities are generators of profit. Furthermore, if the model that Rocketship Education uses does generate profits, can that model be used by other charter school operators within California or perhaps in other states? Many studies have examined the educational outcomes of charter schools and of charter chains, including one specifically on Rocketship's effect on Milwaukee's public schools had proposed legislation passed, but Rocketship's finances, with its real estate transactions as a focus, have not been studied in detail.

It should be noted that this study will not examine the educational outcomes of Rocketship. All charter schools offer themselves as better alternatives to traditional public schools. Rocketship, for example, claims that its pedagogical model of blended learning

- is more efficient than that of traditional public schools,
- offers personalized learning⁹ through computer-mediated instruction, and
- yet still offers a human connection (at least part of the time) that is similar to traditional public schools.

⁸A note on names: Rocketship Public Schools is name that Rocketship Education is doing business as starting in June 2020, but since it has been known as Rocketship Education for much longer than it has been as Rocketship Public Schools, this study uses (mostly) the former name. Also, this study uses just Rocketship to refer to Rocketship Education and related entities, such as the various Launchpad Development LLCs that are associated with individual schools.

⁹Note that personalized learning is not the same differentiated instruction. All students follow the same path with personalized learning, albeit at different rates, instead of following different paths at different rates, as with properly implemented differentiated instruction.

These claims can and should be tested in other studies by comparing individual Rocketship schools to independent charter schools and to traditional public schools in the same district. The Rocketship chain may be compared to other charter school management organizations, to portfolios of charter schools, as well as to traditional public school districts, but such studies need to be done with care to avoid methodological errors that would reduce the validity of their conclusions.

1.2.1 Research Question

These questions and themes lead to the following research question: Has Rocketship structured itself to earn a return for its founders and investors, focusing especially on its real estate transactions? In order to answer this research question definitively, this study must be as complete as possible, and that entails understanding the finances of public schools in California, those of charter schools in California, and finally, those of Rocketship Education and related entities.

More broadly, there are additional reasons for studying charter school finances. Are we (the states, the federal government) misallocating the money we spend on charter schools? Could we be spending our tax dollars more wisely? What did taxpayers get for these expenditures? These questions, however interesting and appealing they may be, are beyond the scope of this study and remain for future researchers to explore.

This case study is unique in that it examines in depth the finances of a single charter school chain. There have been studies of the finances of aggregations of charter school chains (e.g.. all known charter school chains in the United States,¹⁰ or a selected group of charter school chains). Other studies have explored the effects of charter schools on segregation or academic achievement, or the financial impact of charter schools on their surrounding public school district. But academic studies of the finances of just a single

¹⁰See Miron et al. (2021) for a list of currently known charter school chains.

charter school chain seem to be missing.¹¹ Further, studies focusing on real estate of a single chain do not seem to have been performed. It is hoped that the lessons learned from this case study will be used by policy makers to strengthen charter school law in California and elsewhere in order to increase desired outcomes and to minimize cost and unintended consequences.

As tempting and as important as it might be, this dissertation will not examine the academic outcomes of Rocketship or of other charter schools. This dissertation will restrict itself to the finances of those schools. Much excellent work has already been done evaluating charter school outcomes. Section 2.6 discusses four surveys of charter school research and one overview book.

1.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), creating and understanding the theoretical framework for one's dissertation is "one of the most important aspects in the research process." (p.12) They liken the theoretical framework of a dissertation to the blueprints that define a house. That framework both defines the organization and the structure of a dissertation, as well as what counts as elements and their relationships. A theoretical framework articulates "the researcher's understanding of how the research problem will best be explored, the specific direction the research will have to take, and the relationship between the different variables in the study" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, pp. 16–17).

Further, a "conceptual framework offers a logical structure of connected concepts that help provide a picture or visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another within the theoretical framework" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, pp. 16–17). This dissertation

¹¹I distinguish between academic studies and criminal investigations. Clearly, the grand jury indictment of 11 persons associated with A3 Education was a study of a single charter school chain, but it was a criminal investigation, not an academic study.

uses a case study approach as its conceptual framework within a public policy framework, its theoretical framework.

1.3.1 Public Policy as a Theoretical Framework

A public policy framework provides a rich set of tools and techniques with which to analyze Rocketship's finances. Three factors support using a public policy framework to guide understanding and evaluating Rocketship's finances. First, charter school finance is constrained primarily by public policies set by state legislatures, the creators of charter schools. These laws regulate taxes, grants, borrowing capacity, and reporting requirements of charter schools and charter school chains (Aguinaldo et al., 2020), and by definition, whatever falls within the purview of legislators is public policy. Second, Brighouse et al. (2018), in *Educational Goods*, provide a succinct definition of what public policy analysis is which matches the purpose of undertaking this case study. They use a values, evidence, and decision-making framework "to make judgments about how well specific policies are likely to realize valued outcomes" (Brighouse et al., 2018, p.1). Last, these three concerns — values, evidence, decision-making — are considered the key concerns by academics and researchers in the public policy field (Bueno de Mesquita, 2016; Clemons & McBeth, 2021; Fowler, 2013; Gupta, 2011). Using a public policy framework is appropriate when examining charter school finances.

The discipline of public policy sanctions a wide variety of tools and techniques when analyzing issues. (These tools and techniques will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3 or in Chapter ch:results if and when they are used.) Public policy has been studied for years (there are public policy departments in many universities) and it is a mature area of academic research. As in most academic fields, there are fierce debates about the merits and robustness of a particular approach compared to alternatives, but at a high level, what to do is generally agreed upon. Most identify the following five steps (or variants thereof) that are used when creating public policy:

1. Define the issues and set the agenda.
2. Formulate one or more policies that address the issues identified.
3. Evaluate those policies using tools and techniques like cost-benefit analysis, value analysis, political feasibility, game theory, and economic analysis.
4. Implement those policies by passing legislation, changing practices, or by using the courts.
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the policy changes.

Two keys to identifying alternatives during policy formation and later when evaluating consequences are choosing or creating a model, and forecasting. Models identify what is going to be studied and their relationships, and forecasting is a prediction of the future whose consequences are (hopefully) identified in a model. Page (2018) lists 26 major models that have been used in science, business, and medicine.

The methodology of this dissertation draws on two excellent guides to public policy, Clemons and McBeth (2021) and Gupta (2011). The first presents concepts, tools, and techniques used in analyzing public policy; the second a case study approach to public policy analysis. Fowler (2013) treats public policy in the field of education, but with an emphasis on power, politics, policy actors and the messy process of creating and implementing public policy. Clemons and McBeth concentrate on explicating different theoretical approaches to public policy, whereas Gupta is the most practically oriented.

Since much of the evidence that will be presented will include financial data, the tools and techniques which manipulate and display data play an important role. First and foremost is financial analysis. But, as Epple et al. (2016) show in Chapter 2, being clear on what exactly is being analyzed and what are the inherent limitations of that data is

fundamental. It makes no sense to analyze brilliantly the wrong data or to stretch the right data beyond reasonable bounds.¹²

1.3.2 A Case Study Approach as a Conceptual Framework

Broadly, social science research falls into one of two categories. The research may make many observations with a narrow focus, or may instead adopt a broader focus, but with a correspondingly smaller number of observations. Gerring calls these “large C” or “small C” studies, respectively (Gerring, 2017, p. xvii). Of course, the boundary between large C and small C studies is not sharply defined.

Gerring calls small C studies *case studies*. In this dissertation I study only one entity, Rocketship Education, and only one aspect of that entity, namely Rocketship’s finances. But I consider the topic of Rocketship’s finances look at its finances broadly, examining as many different kinds of financial transactions as are publicly available for the subset of Rocketship schools that are in Santa Clara County. I discuss the elements of what makes a case study a good case study in Chapter 5, *Discussion*.

McCombes (2019) says that case studies are a “detailed study of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon”. They are ‘good for describing, comparing, evaluating and understanding kdifferent aspects of a research problem” and are “an appropriate research design when it allows you to explore the key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the case.” Two papers go into detail about using the case study approach: Crowe et al. (2011) and Rashid et al. (2019). Yin (2018) provides a detailed methodology for doing case study research well.

A case study framework for public policy research is ideal because the theory and practice of case studies is well-known and has been used both for public policy research and in public policy analysis for years. A case study framework formalizes an in-depth

¹²Examples of the former are data which are not representative of the underlying population. Examples of later are studies which fail to recognize confounding variables.

examination of a single topic, in this case, the finances of Rocketship Education and related entities.

This introduction has made the case that public education is important to many stakeholders, but that there is also discord around larger issues like values, ideology, and implementation. Charter schools have been offered as way of disrupting American public education from its hide-bound, archaic, and sclerotic present, driving it, despite opposition, into a dynamic future where education is tailored to each child's real needs. Establishing whether financial gain plays a key or even a primary role in American educational reform by carefully examining Rocketship's finances is both timely and important: Rocketship Education is growing, and with it, Launchpad Development. They have served as a model for other charter school chains in the United States.

A Review of the Literature

This chapter reviews what other researchers and scholars have said about the origins of charter schools, their history, and their ostensible goals before characterizing first the finances of all public schools in California and then the unique aspects of charter school finance. Finally, it reviews the history of Rocketship Education.

American public education has – allegedly – been a failure, at least “[a]ccording to highly publicized NAEP results in the mid 1980s” (Gove & Meier, 2000). Berliner and Glass (2014) in *50 Myths & Lies That Threaten America’s Public Schools* refute those myths which have been advanced to show that American’s schools are in a crisis, and hence, in desperate need of reform. It turns out, this urge for reform has a long history: America’s schools have judged as needing reform ever since the idea of free public education took hold in the early 1800s.¹³ Since then, a succession of educators and reports have documented the abysmal [sic] state of American education.

2.1 The Birth of American Public Education

Prior to the Civil War, Horace Mann introduced widely copied reforms (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007) into the existing system of education which was then not free, not open to all, and not compulsory. Those schools had hardly changed since the founding of the Boston Latin School on April 23, 1635. In the early 1900s, John Dewey, an educational leader of the Progressive Era (1896–1916) preached reform, but it was not until the publication of *Nation at Risk* in 1983 that the modern zeal for education reform took form. *Nation at Risk* was the most influential of roughly 30 major education reform reports listed by Pulliam and Van Patten (2007) starting in 1982 and continuing up until 2005.

¹³Wikipedia has an excellent summary article on *Education in the United States* available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_United_States.

That American public education needed reform was repeated constantly, mainly by conservatives, despite underwhelming evidence of its veracity and substantial evidence to the contrary. Through constant repetition, the need for reform has become accepted wisdom. The answer to this need was to take the government's "monopoly in education" (Milton Friedman's characterization) out of the hands of faceless bureaucrats and subject it to the rigors of free markets which would, it was asserted with scant evidence and with the complete absence of a theory of action, increase efficiency, choice, and quality. Thus vouchers and charter schools were legitimized.

No amount of research, it seems, can dispel the *idée fixe* that American education is in dire straits, and further, piecemeal changes were simply not enough to make substantive changes. No matter what J. R. Henig (1994) or Berliner and Biddle (1997) or Nichols et al. (2007) or Glass (2008) or Berliner and Glass (2014) wrote, the idea that American education needed fundamental, pervasive reform persisted; education reform was an evidence-free endeavor.

Garcia writes in *School Choice* "The four primary arguments put forth in support of school choice are the elimination of government bureaucracies, the interjection of competition into education through market forces, the promotion of parental choice as the most granular form of local control, and school choice as the "new" civil rights issue of our time."¹⁴ (Garcia, 2018, p. 55). What is noteworthy is that none of the four arguments are about student achievement or attainment. A poorly staffed, badly run, charter school located in a dangerous neighborhood is as capable of satisfying the four requirements as is a high quality charter school. Whatever school choice is about, it is not about students and how well they are doing.

¹⁴Lest Garcia be tarred as anti-school choice, he is merely following Anatol Rapoport's Rules for Constructive Criticism, the first of which is to restate the argument of the person you are criticizing better than they themselves have done.

To be clear, it is not the case that every American school is a model for the rest of the world: systematic, persistent, pervasive inequities and injustices abound and have been powerfully written about in Kozol (1992) and again in Kozol (2005), Valenzuela (1999), Heitzeg (2009), and Roithmayr (2014). The Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966) concluded that ten years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, American schools were still segregated and were still unequal. Surprisingly and contrary to the expectations of many, the report laid most of the blame for unequal educational outcomes on systematic, persistent, pervasive inequalities and injustices outside of schools. The report said,

Taking all these results together, one implication stands out above all:
That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. For equality of educational opportunity through the schools must imply a strong effect of schools that is independent of the child's immediate social environment, and that strong independent effect is not present in American schools (Coleman, 1966, p. 325).

The report concluded that family background, the socioeconomic background of a school, and a student's sense that they were in control of their lives were more important than race-based disparities in explaining the black-white achievement gap (Pearce, 2016).

Downey (2020), using two ECLS-K studies, 1998 and 2011, supports this conclusion but in a slightly different way. He finds that academic inequality is reduced when children are in school, and increases when children are not in school, i.e. during the summer, which runs counter to the notion that schools exacerbate the achievement gap.

None of this should be a surprise because it is also clear that those schools have been systematically underfunded for decades; their dismal performance is more likely the result of the poverty of their neighborhoods and their lack of funding than it is the other way around. For example, the California School Boards Association's (CSBA) Education Legal Alliance Adequacy Committee found that there exists a "substantial gap in funding between what K-12 education [in California] receives and what K-12 education needs even to meet the standards prescribed by the state (Bray, 2015, *iii*). B. D. Baker et al. (2018) in their aptly titled report *The Real Shame of the Nation*, develop a *National Education Cost Model* (B. D. Baker et al., 2018) which accounts for regional cost differences as well different funding levels to show that inadequate funding is present throughout the United States. Garcia (2018) says in *School Choice* that the "existence and importance of the issues that reformers believe plague public education are based as much on tradition and reputation as they are on tangible research evidence" (Garcia, 2018, p. 54). Finally, and tellingly, grossly inadequate funding is a characteristic of communities that are racially segregated and which are not white (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Rothstein, 2017).

J. R. Henig (1994)'s book, *Rethinking School Choice*, which came out a mere three years after the passage of the nation's first state charter school law in Minnesota¹⁵ and two years after the second in California¹⁶ lays out a key argument against charter schools. Henig says, "[T]he real danger in the market-based choice proposals is not that they might allow some students to attend privately run schools at public expense, but that *they will erode the public forums in which decisions with societal consequences can democratically be resolved.*" (emphasis added) (J. R. Henig, 1994, *xiii*). Translated, this means that the decisions about public education's form and content are not going to be made by parents

¹⁵Laws of Minnesota 1991, chapter 265, article 9, section 3

¹⁶Education Code, Title 2, Division 4 Part 26.8, §47600 *et. seq*

and teachers, but by people who do not have a stake in the outcome. It is now a matter of badly misaligned incentives.

But even before that, in 1982, Earl Craig, Jr. attached a minority report to *Rebuilding Education to Make It Work* which advocated for vouchers. He says in a paragraph that is as accurate today, forty years later, as it was in 1982:

In conclusion, this report is part of a national movement toward privatization of public services and responsibilities. I believe this movement will have the eventual result of a complete retreat by this society from a societal responsibility for the powerless who are difficult or expensive to educate, house, protect, etc. I believe the committee and board majority when they say that they are committed to equal access and equity. They say, trust that we will do the right thing. I do trust them, I do not trust the societal momentum of which vouchers is a part. It is a very destructive wave that has caught up many good people. It scares me to death. (Citizens League, Education Alternatives Committee, 1982, p. 48)

The belief that American schools were in crisis due to poor academic outcomes, sclerotic teachers resistant to change, ineffective and bureaucratic administrators more concerned with job safety than educating children is simply not supported by the evidence. But the idea that American schools are in crisis has been relentlessly promoted, and sheer repetition has turned fiction turned into fact, and this “manufactured crisis”, to use David Berliner and Bruce Biddle’s turn of phrase (Berliner & Biddle, 1997), has been used to justify school choice in the form of vouchers and charter schools. But charter schools did not actually take off until “education reformers across party lines realized that charter school laws could be crafted in ways that made it possible to open nonunion

public schools, or even allow public schools to be managed by for-profit companies.”
(Goldstein, 2015, p. 172)

This literature review will first examine charter schools, their origins and the early research, before reviewing the types of charters which exist. It then examines the various models of charter schools such as virtual charter schools, charters which use blended learning, and charter management organizations before taking a closer look charter schools in Santa Clara County and in Rocketship in particular. It ends with a consideration of the finances and financing of charter schools.

2.2 A History of Charter Schools

Charter schools (privately run, but publicly financed schools) have an ugly racist origin in the post-*Brown v Board of Education* era as a method of evading the U.S. Supreme Court’s mandate to educate both black and white Americans equally and not separately. Fifty years later, charter schools turned segregation academies into the preferred vehicle for privatizing public schools for profit while maintaining segregation.

2.2.1 The Origins of Charter Schools in Segregation

The first charter schools were not founded for educational or economic reasons. Charter schools had their origin in the aftermath of “*Brown v. Board of Education*”. “[Brown] was the genesis of school choice as a public policy mechanism.” (Garcia, 2018, p. 8) In the Deep South, academies sprung up as part of the massive resistance to the U.S. Supreme Court’s unanimous 1954 ruling which answered the question,

Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race,
even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal,
deprive children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?
(Warren, 1954, p. 9)

with “We believe that it does.” (p.9)

In order to circumvent *Brown*, white parents in eleven states formed thousands of private schools, and until the early 1970's, these segregation academies received public funds (Rooks, 2017). These origins of charter schools have been amply documented, in Frankenberg et al. (2010), Frankenberg et al. (2011), and especially in Suitts (2019) and Suitts (2020). Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* quotes Rosenberg (1991, p. 52) "The statistics from the Southern states are truly amazing. For ten years, 1954–1964, virtually *nothing happened.*" [emphasis in (Alexander, 2011, p. 223)]. She goes on to say,

Not a single black child attended an integrated public grade school in South Carolina, Alabama, or Mississippi as of the 1962–1963 school year. Across the South as a whole, a mere 1 percent of black school children were attending school with whites in 1964—a full decade after *Brown* was decided.

In the years after *Brown*, some localities went further than merely forming segregation academies. Prince Edward County in Virginia closed all of its schools for five years rather than integrate. Other jurisdictions closed pools, parks, zoos, and recreational facilities instead of integrating. This deliberate evasion of racial equality continued until a 1968 Supreme Court ruling put a stop to the practice of closing public facilities to avoid integrating them (Brennan, 1968).

The irony is that while charter schools started life as 100% white, they now serve intensely segregated students of color. Frankenberg et al. (2019, p. 47) noted that,

Nearly three out of four students in the typical black student's charter school are also black. This indicates extremely high levels of isolation, particularly given the fact that black students comprise less than one-third of charter students. Latino isolation is also high, but not as severe as for blacks or whites across all charter schools.

Unfortunately, these segregation academies still exist, but instead of excluding children of color the way segregation academies did, they disproportionately target and enroll children of color. While these schools are no longer referred to as segregation academies, they make up a sizable subset of charter schools and often include the word “Academy” in their name. In Santa Clara County, for example, 11 out of 21 charter schools authorized by the county currently include “Academy” in their name (SCCOE, 2014–2023).

Nikole Hannah-Jones, in her keynote speech at the Network for Public Education’s Fourth Annual Conference, said that it has never been the case that a majority of African-Americans have attended majority white schools (*Keynote at the Network for Public Education’s 4th Annual Conference*, 2017). She then added ruefully, that this was quite a feat considering that African-Americans make up roughly one seventh of the population of the United States. Orfield and Frankenberg note that the percent of African-Americans in majority white schools rose from 0% in 1954 to a peak of 43.5% in 1988 before steadily declining to 23.2% in 2011. (Table 3: Percent of Black Students in Majority White Schools, 1954–2011, Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014, p. 10). Hannah-Jones also commented that American public education does not even live up to the Separate but Equal doctrine espoused in *Plessy v Ferguson* and overturned by *Brown v Board of Education*. More recently, Heilig et al. made the same point using 2015–16 Common Core of Data. They say, “Nationally, we find that higher percentages of charter students of every race attend intensely segregated schools.” (Heilig et al., 2019, p. 205). This segregation has an effect on the achievement of the students thus segregated: it makes the “achievement gap” worse.

Racial segregation is strongly associated with racial achievement gaps, and the racial difference in the proportion of students’ schoolmates who are poor is the key dimension of segregation driving this association. (Reardon, 2016, p. 47)

2.3 Charter Schools, Free Markets and Privatization

Just a year after *Brown*, Friedman (1955) published his article “The Role of Government in Education” in *Economics and the Public Interest* (Friedman, 1955) that reframed charter schools as an economic problem in education instead as a way of evading court-ordered integration. That paper ensured that charter schools would no longer be morally tainted by their association with virulent racism, but rather would take on the honorable task of breaking up what was called a monopoly. Charters, operating in a free market,¹⁷ would allow parents to choose the best alternative from an array of competing choices. Tellingly left unspecified was exactly how the free market would ensure that the array of competing choices actually offered valuable educational alternatives rather than mere alternatives.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan ran and became President of the United States based on a platform of less government is better government. This platform included eliminating the U.S. Department of Education (“The Republican Party Platform of 1980,” 1980). True, eliminating the Department of Education is not the same as shutting down an entire school district the way white parents did in 1964, but the thought is there. Haney-López (2014) expertly dissects how it is possible to voice racist thoughts without actually using racial words, a practice perfected by President Ronald Reagan (Haney-López, 2014).

Now, only liberty and freedom matter, in education, as in other fields. It is school choice or bust; school choice is proffered not only as *the panacea* for all that ails America’s schools, but it is even touted as the morally right thing to do. Without a trace of irony, the former President Donald Trump framed school choice as the “civil rights issue of our time” in a garbled statement at the signing of an executive order on Safe Policing for Safe Communities:

¹⁷No one really wants a free market because a market completely free of regulation would have unenforceable contracts, rampant monopolies, and constant and ruinous market failures. What people really want when they use the phrase “free market” is a heavily regulated market which allows them to profit, unfettered, while restraining or excluding others.

School choice is the civil rights statement of the year, the decade and probably beyond. Because all children have to have access to quality education. A child's zip code in America should never determine their future (as quoted in Lennox, 2020).

Education reformers have latched on to the notion that schools need to be privatized and freed from bureaucratic control for reasons of efficiency, increased flexibility, and accountability (Garcia, 2018). This claim is made despite educational management organizations (EMOs) themselves being high overhead, opaque bureaucracies with scant accountability.

B. Baker and Miron identified four major policy concerns with the privatization of public education:

1. A substantial share of public expenditure intended for the delivery of direct educational services to children is being extracted inadvertently or intentionally for personal or business financial gain, creating substantial inefficiencies;
2. Public assets are being unnecessarily transferred to private hands, at public expense, risking the future provision of "public" education;
3. Charter school operators are growing highly endogenous, self-serving private entities built on funds derived from lucrative management fees and rent extraction which further compromise the future provision of "public" education; and
4. Current disclosure requirements make it unlikely that any related legal violations, ethical concerns, or merely bad policies and practices are not realized until clever investigative reporting, whistleblowers or litigation brings them to light.

(B. Baker & Miron, 2015, p. 3).

In California at least, these policy concerns have not been addressed in the six years since B. Baker and Miron wrote about them.¹⁸

¹⁸Changes in policy to address some of these concerns have been strenuously opposed by charter school advocates. For example, the California Charter Schools Association opposed an accountability bill, AB1316

Charter schools are now just one of the many forms of *privatization*, when public functions are performed by private parties for profit. Privatization is a manifestation of the corporate takeover of the world, first documented more than fifty years ago by Domhoff and elaborated on in seven subsequent editions. Domhoff argues that corporations and the corporate elite really run the United States, and by extension, the world. Kahn and Minnich (2005) make much the same point in their book *The Fox in the Henhouse: How Privatization Threatens Democracy* (Kahn & Minnich, 2005). They list “[s]chools, prisons, welfare, Social Security, water and sewer systems, buses, trains, subways, highways, waterways, sanitation systems” (p. 30) as examples of formerly government run functions that are in whole or part privatized. They could have also listed postal mail, space travel, and now every facet of education, as being wholly or partly privatized. Cohen and Mikaelian (2021) lay out in detail how privatization has infiltrated American life and the consequences of this takeover of public goods by private firms run for profit (Cohen & Mikaelian, 2021). Black in *Schoolhouse Burning* (Black, 2020) focuses on the less tangible but arguably more important consequences of privatization of public schools, the loss of democratic control.

Privatizers make money by turning goods or services that used to be publicly available into private goods and services that must be paid for before they can be used. The canonical example of privatization is the enclosure of the commons in Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries whereby land that previously had been owned collectively by a village was now owned by an individual who charged villagers for the privilege of using that land (Simon Fairlie, 2009). But modern privatizers have many more ways of turning a profit.

They can:

- Obtain tax benefits

School accountability: financial and performance audits: charter schools: contracts. (2021–2022), which merely sought to make charter school finances more transparent.

- Invest in other firms with public monies
- Invest in financial instruments with public monies
- Obtain a monopoly
- Engage in fraud, corruption, or outright theft
- Engage in self-dealing
- Obtain grants or loans on favorable terms
- Sell what does not belong to them
- Avoid paying for externalities
- Pay below market rates for goods or services
- Skew public-private partnerships to create unearned profits
- Engage in pay-for-success contracts
- Offer social impact bonds

Charter school operators have even more options. They can inflate enrollment, charge excessive management fees, mis-characterize expenses, omit or inaccurately report financial data, fail to open a school or close one soon after receiving a grant, or sell their facilities to investors and lease them back, all at potentially inflated prices. Many charter schools have a long history of duplicitous or fraudulent actions (ITPI, 2018; Burris & Bryant, 2020; B. Baker & Miron, 2015).

School choice has been relentlessly marketed and promoted by billionaires who do not send their children to public schools.¹⁹ The Walton family, Eli Broad, Bill Gates, the Koch brothers, the Zuckerbergs, and Laurene Jobs, are all on the list of the 500 richest people in the world. Their collective wealth exceeds half a trillion dollars, and they are busily engaged using that wealth to fix the very problems that their accumulation of wealth caused. Giridharadas (2018) whose book, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the*

¹⁹Ravitch (2010) lumps these billionaires together, calling them the “Billionaires Boys Club”, an epithet first used in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*.

World, says that it is a “Trying-to-Solve-the-Problem-with-the-Tools-That-Caused-It” issue (Giridharadas, 2018, p. 142).

The effects of billionaire spending on education cannot be over emphasized. Bill Gates made \$2B in grants aimed at creating smaller schools (Gates, 2009, p. 11), despite a lack of evidence that they were educationally valuable. These grants were eventually discontinued when the initiative did not produce the intended results. Gates was also instrumental in funding and promoting the Common Core State Standards and associated assessments whose premise was that if we only had high enough academic standards, student outcomes would improve, again without evidence that the reforms were educationally valuable and without evidence of a mechanism of improvement.

2.4 Types of Charter Schools

Charter schools can be broadly classified along three axes. The authorizer/oversight axis has to do with what entity approved their charter and who will exercise oversight. The profit/non-profit axis classifies schools by their intent to generate a profit, or not. Lastly, the in-person/blended/virtual axis characterizes pedagogical approach: Are their classes in-person, virtual, or a blend of the two?

2.4.1 Charter School Authorizers and Oversight

Charter schools in California are potentially subject to a three step process to gain authorization to operate. The first step is to submit a petition to the school district in which the charter wishes to operate. This petition must contain a number of required elements, all of which are specified in Education Code §47605(c)(5)(A–O), the commonly called “15 Required Elements (A-O elements)” (Aguinaldo et al., 2021, p. 89). Besides some technical details, the petition must contain a description of the charter’s annual goals which must align with state priorities, for all pupils and for various subgroups; how these outcomes are to be measured; how the charter is to achieve a racial and ethnic balance

similar to its district, its governance structure, and its finances. All of these elements are captured in “*Charter Petition Evaluation Matrix*” by FCMAT, a document intended to provide a legally sound checklist for authorizers (FCMAT, 2022).

If a petition contains all the required elements, then the public school district may approve the petition, possibly with additional stipulations. If the public school district denies the charter school’s petition, it must state why. The charter school may appeal that denial to that County’s Board of Education (CBOE), and if the CBOE denies the charter school’s appeal, under certain circumstances, the charter school may appeal to the State Board of Education (SBE). A denial by the SBE terminates the process, and the charter school is not permitted to open.

Public school districts (LEAs, local education agencies, in the parlance of the California Department of Education (CDE)) may authorize one or several kinds of charter schools. Table 1, *Attributes of Private, Charter, and Public Schools in California* is a summary of the attributes of the types of schools in California. A public school district may sponsor a charter school directly, in which case the district exercises oversight. These dependent charter schools are authorized by the local public school board and are subject to the board’s jurisdiction. It also is possible for all the schools in a district to convert to charter schools, and then the public school board becomes the charter school board. Lastly, charter schools may be authorized by a public school district or a county office of education with a governing board that is distinct and independent from the authorizer’s governing board.

2.4.2 Profit-Making Status

Until the 2019–20 school year, charter schools in California could be run directly or indirectly by a profit-making organization. California now prohibits profit-making organizations, either a single school or a charter management organization, from submitting an initial charter school petition or a renewal.

Table 1
Attributes of Private, Charter, and Public Schools in California

Attribute	Private	Charter	Public
Funding	parent tuition	tax dollars	tax dollars
Governance	self-appointed	self-appointed	elected board
Duration	unlimited	time-limited	unlimited
Ed. Code	no	no	yes
Taxation Powers	none	none	limited
Facilities Bonds	no	no	yes
Facilities Grants	no	yes	no
Enrollment	limited	limited	not capped
Unionized	rarely	rarely	often
Curriculum	completely flexible	very flexible	flexible
Standardized Testing	no	yes	yes
Accountable	no	authorizer	elected board
Teacher Certification	no requirement	yes	yes
Teacher Pension	perhaps	perhaps	yes

Even though profit-making charters are banned, there are many ways of getting around this restriction. Charter operators can contract with outside firms to provide all or just some services, and those firms may be profit-making firms. Charter operators are able to lease, buy, or sell their facilities, and those transactions might generate a profit. Charter operators can sell their facilities and lease them back from the buyer. This kind of financial transaction converts an illiquid asset (buildings) into a liquid asset (cash) and also generates a revenue stream from the rental income, all of which is ultimately paid for by taxpayers. Charter operators may also charge schools a management fee or an expansion fee. Charter operators are not restricted in the salaries they pay administrators.

However, charter school board members in California have recently become subject to the conflict-of-interest laws specified in Government Code §§1090–1099 and §§87100–87314 (Becerra & Medeiros, 2018). Generally, government officials are prohibited from benefiting financially from their positions as public servants, but it

remains to be seen if these conflict-of-interest laws will prevent profiteering by school board members, administrators, or relatives of either.²⁰

2.4.3 Types of Instruction

Charter schools, unlike almost all public schools, vary in their instructional format. In-person instruction is similar to that in traditional public schools, with one exception: the so-called “no excuses” charter schools (J. Horn, 2016; Torres & Golann, 2018; Golann, 2021). These schools emphasize a highly scripted, rigid code of conduct that relies on fear, intimidation, and Skinnerian behavior modification as foundational elements of their pedagogy. Unlike schools which offer in-person instruction, virtual charter schools have no face-to-face instruction; everything is mediated by some sort of technology, typically, computers running specialized software, paid for by taxpayers. In between in-person instruction and virtual instruction is blended learning. It is simply a mixture of in-person and virtual instruction (M. B. Horn & Staker, 2015).

Since 2013, virtual charter schools have been studied extensively by Alex Molnar, Gary Miron and others and at the National Education Policy Center, University of Colorado, Boulder (*Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2013, 2013; *Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2014, 2014; *Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2015, 2015; Miron & Gulosino, 2016; *Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2017, 2017; *Full-Time Virtual and Blended Schools: Enrollment, Student Characteristics, and Performance*, 2018; *Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2019, 2019; *Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2021, 2021). Their annual reports are depressingly consistent: virtual schools not run by a public school district significantly underperform public schools. Their conclusions are echoed by Woodworth et al. (2015) and Garcia (2018). Yet, despite being clearly academically inferior to public schools, the number of students attending virtual schools has risen year after year. Their

²⁰The law is necessarily complex. Two useful guides (total: 300 pages) are Chaney et al. (2010) and Kevin Ennis et al. (2016). A more general guide to local government ethics is “Understanding the Basics of Public Service Ethics” from California’s Institute for Local Government (Institute for Local Government, 2016).

pre-pandemic growth seems to be slowing, but their performance, compared to public schools, has not measurably improved.²¹ (*Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2019, 2019, p. 11).

Pre-pandemic, charter schools in California were legally deemed classroom-based (e.g. not virtual) if students spent no more than 20% of their time in front of a computer.²² Blended charter schools, on the other hand, offer some sort of face-to-face interaction with a teacher along with online activity without face-to-face interaction. But they too offer only marginally better educational outcomes than fully virtual charter schools (*Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2019, 2019). Rocketship schools use a blended instructional model.

2.5 Charter Schools in the United States

Charter schools are one of several different kinds of school choice that are or have been available in the United States. Vouchers, private schools, home schooling, educational savings accounts, freedom-of-choice plans, magnet schools, and open enrollment are all forms of school choice. Home schooling accounts for less than 5% of all the students in United States. Private schools enroll about 12% of the total. Magnet school account for a few percent. Roughly, the various form of school choice, including charter schools, account for just under a quarter of all American students.

The characteristic that home schooling and private schools share is that they are agnostic about public schools. Not so for charter schools, voucher, and freedom-of-choice plans. Charter schools, voucher programs, parent trigger programs,

²¹ Although *Charter Schools in Perspective: A Guide to Research* is otherwise an excellent summary of the research on charter schools, they incorrectly state (p.117) that there is little research of online or virtual charter schools. The authors must not be aware of the NEPC series on virtual charter schools. However, according to *Virtual Schools in the U.S.* 2019 (2019, p. 117), there is only one study on blended charter schools.

²²The California Education Code §47612.5(e)(1) does not mention computers, but bases its definition of classroom-based on students being physically at the schoolsite with a certificated teacher in charge. Under that definition, a roomful of students behind computers with a teacher in attendance would qualify as classroom-based and not virtual. California's Education Code does not recognize the blended category.

and freedom-of-choice plans explicitly want to supplant or replace public schools (Garcia, 2018).

The first charter schools, other than segregation academies, were founded in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1991, followed by California starting in 1993. Conceptually, charter schools were based on an amalgam of ideas from Milton Friedman, Albert Shanker, and Ray Budde. Milton Friedman came at it from an ideological point of view couched in economic terms. Albert Shanker, in 1988, in a speech at the National Press Club, proposed that *teachers* in conjunction with *parents* be allowed to form a school *within* a school district. Shanker made no mention of competition, or free markets, or even of charter schools. Shanker's speech emphasized curriculum and learning, not governance or finance. Ray Budde first thought of charter schools in the early 1970s, but his proposal generated no interest and it was not until 1988 that he published his ideas (Budde, 1988).

2.5.1 Charter Schools in California

Charter schools, in California as elsewhere in the United States, enter into a contract (the charter) with a chartering authority that specifies what they are to do and how, and in return, are exempt from the entirety of California's Education Code (with the exception of five technical provisions). The California Legislature, when it enacted the *The Charter School Act of 1992*²³ (Ed. Code §47600), spelled out its intent in passing that legislation. The Act has been amended a number of times in its nearly 30 years of existence, but its intent has remained the same. It specifies that charter schools should

- a) Increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving.

²³ Current California law can be accessed at <https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/home.xhtml>. California Regulations are at <https://ccr.oal.ca.gov>. California's Education Code (Ed.Code) is at <https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codesTOCSelected.xhtml?tocCode=EDC&tocTitle=+Education+Code++EDC>

- b) Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.
- c) Provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system.
- d) Hold the schools established under this part accountable for meeting measurable pupil outcomes, and provide the schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems.
- e) Provide vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools.²⁴

It is important to keep these goals in mind because charter schools have contractually agreed to meet these goals in return for funding, independently of whatever other goals they explicitly specified in their initial petition. Note, in particular, that the Legislature said nothing about profitability, and in fact, California enacted in 2018 a prohibition against for-profit charter schools (Ed. Code §47604 et seq.).

2.5.1.1 Rocketship History

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Danner chose to open his first school in the San José Unified School District. Danner prepared a 300 page petition that he submitted to the San José Unified School District on

²⁴This goal was added in 1998.

04 May 2006, which held a public hearing on the matter on 20 June 2006. On 13 July 2006, the SJUSD Board of Education denied his petition, again at a public meeting.

Danner appealed this denial to the Santa Clara County Board of Education and presented a modified petition that – as far as the SCCBOE was concerned – overcame the objections raised by the SJUSD. They conditionally approved Danner's first charter school at their 18 October 2006 meeting. The school opened in August 2007 for the 2007-08 school year.

As of 2023, Rocketship has expanded to 23 schools in California, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Washington, D.C. and Texas, ten of which are in Santa Clara County. Table 2, *Rocketship Schools in Santa Clara County, California* on page 43 lists those ten, when they opened, and when they submitted initial petitions and renewal petitions.

Opening schools did not go smoothly for Danner and Rocketship. Not only was there community opposition, but various organizations also opposed opening one or more Rocketship charter schools in Santa Clara County.

The most consequential opposition was a 2014 lawsuit brought by the Alum Rock, Evergreen, Franklin-McKinley and Mount Pleasant school districts which contended that the SCCOE had exceeded its authority in approving in advance 20 county-wide Rocketship charters, bypassing local school districts as authorizers. At the time of the lawsuit, 3 Rocketship charters had opened under this county-wide authorization, and in a settlement, Rocketship agreed not to seek to open 13 of the 20 charters. In the end, only 5 county-wide charters opened²⁵

2.6 Surveys of Charter School Research

It has been about 30 years since the first charter school law was passed. In the last decade, researchers have published several surveys of the research on charter schools.

²⁵Sharon Noguchi reported that nearly \$500K was spent on this lawsuit(Noguchi, 2015).

The first two decades (1990–2010) were somewhat experimental and different enough that the research that came out of that period is less relevant than more recent research. The first survey of the last decade, is “Beyond Ideological Warfare: The Maturation of Research on Charter Schools.” In it, Smith et al. (2011) reviewed systematically charter school research as it existed in 2011. The authors were interested, not so much in the conclusions of the studies they looked at, but how the research was performed, how it was structured, what facets of charter schools were examined, and what was the subject of the research in order to “separate empirical evidence from politicized conjecture” (p. 460). They reviewed a total of 323 peer-reviewed articles and research center reports and found that student and school outcomes were the most commonly studied topics. They noted many studies were unable to generalize their findings because variations in policy between states and localities. Smith et al. also noted that there was a lack of longitudinal studies which is not surprising due to policy variations. Furthermore, they found that “acceptance into a peer reviewed journal does not always ensure that qualitative research adheres to the standards of providing substantiation that findings are credible and trustworthy or that quantitative research provides evidence of the studies’ validity, reliability and generalizability.” (p.466) Finally, the authors noted that many studies could not draw causal connections. They concluded that more research is needed.

Four years later, Berends (2015) chose as his focus the various theories that researchers used when looking at the social organization of charter schools. In “Sociology and School Choice,” Berends (2015), found, like Smith et al., that most studies concentrated on student achievement and neglected educational attainment such as high school graduation, college admission, and the granting of a degree. He notes that “the effects of charter schools on student achievement are mixed (some positive, some negative and some neutral)” (p. 170) Berends thinks the context in which charter schools operate is important in order to understand the magnitude of any effects and to

understand what we can expect from school reform. He identifies longer school days, a focus on achievement, behavioral policies, teacher coaching and feedback, and data-based decision-making as characteristics most often associated with effective charter schools. Lastly he looks at innovation and distinguishes between curriculum and class-room based changes, and organizational changes, and he found that charter schools mostly innovate on the structural side rather than the academic side. He concluded that more research is needed.

Next, Epple et al. (2016), in *Charter Schools*, did much the same as Berends, but concentrated on the technical aspects of study design (Epple et al., 2016). The authors observed that which the research question being answered by a particular study was often much narrower or significantly different than the research question authors set out to answer or thought they were answering. The heart of their review is an analysis of “the methodological challenges in evaluating charter effectiveness” (p.141), and the strength and weaknesses of the various approaches that have been used. They find that researchers used one of five statistical methods: lottery-based design, fixed-effect approaches, matching procedures, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, and instrumental variable approaches (p. 165), and they evaluate each approach. Epple et al. also discuss the much scrutinized virtual control record method of matching charter school students to public school students that came out of Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) which was criticized on purely statistical grounds in Andrea Gabor (2015). Epple et al. concluded that more research is needed.

In 2015 and then updated in 2018, Public Agenda released a guide to charter school research for non-academics, a review of current charter school research that was written in a way that is accessible to the public. The chapter on finance focused on four questions: how charter schools are funded, how charter schools and traditional schools compare in per pupil funding, what financial effects do charter schools impose on traditional public

schools, and what are, if any, differential spending patterns between traditional public and charter schools (Public Agenda, 2018, pp. 78–89).

The finance chapter revealed that the 48 states with school choice programs had 48 different methods of funding public schools and charter schools. This variation in funding models made comparisons difficult. In addition, each state has likely gone through several iterations of models of charter school funding, and this lack of commonality prevents researchers from conducting valid longitudinal studies. The authors answered their first question on funding by referring to a compilation of state funding amounts.

Their answer to the second question was yes, different levels of funding do exist, and in a few cases, by as much as 40% to nearly 60% less. Their take on whether it matters was hedged because studies differ in their conclusions for a variety of reasons. Likely not published in time to be reviewed by Public Agenda, was B. D. Baker (2018) which emphatically says that money does matter. They answer their third question with an unambiguous yes, charter schools do affect the finances of public schools. More recent research, Lafer (2018), B. D. Baker (2019), and Miron et al. (2021) validates their conclusion. Finally, they conclude that charter schools do spend their revenues differently, in part because charters spend more on administration than public schools do and sometimes more on facilities.

The last of the four academic surveys, Zimmer et al. (2019), considers who was served, racial segregation effects, both academic and non-academic outcomes, management structure, and financial effects of charter schools. Since Zimmer is a co-author of both this survey and of the previously cited Epple et al. (2016), the kinds of study designs analyzed are similar. Zimmer et al. intend to synthesize “the best research to inform the debate [about the value of charter schools]” (p. 2). They go beyond the 2016 study and survey studies on racial segregation, selective enrollment, and student pushout. Zimmer

et al. conclude that charter schools lead to greater segregation for African Americans, but not necessarily for whites or Latino students. They find that charter schools do engage in sometimes subtle forms of selective enrollment and student pushout. Independently, and two years later, Mommandi and Welner document thirteen major ways that charter schools effectively choose who they enroll (Mommandi & Welner, 2021). After summarizing three different kinds of research (fixed effects, lottery-based, and match and other regression), they turn their attention to research on non-cognitive outcomes. Their penultimate chapter looks at research on indirect effects.

Although Garcia (2018) is not explicitly a survey of the existing literature, it contains in Chapter 3 much material on the research evidence which guides (or should guide) school choice policies. His goal is to present general trends that “reflect the weight of the evidence” (p. 93). The weight of the evidence, Garcia finds the research points to the conclusions that “school choice policies are more likely to separate, rather than integrate, students from different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds” (pp. 159–60), “how countries and states structure school choice policies can have a profound impact on how school choice functions at a practical level” (p. 160), “low-income students face obstacles to participating in school choice plans” (p. 161), lastly, “one should expect student achievement gains under school choice plans to be modest at best and inconsistent across subjects and years” (p. 161), and “a major reason for the inability of school choice to have an impact on the academic core of schools—teaching and learning—is that school choice came of age at the same time as high-stakes accountability policies that encourage standardization” (p. 162)

Garcia makes a point that has not been made before: Since both public schools and charter schools are measured the same way (standardized tests), “the incentives to implement innovative pedagogical strategies are curtailed because the methods by which students are able to demonstrate their learning are uniform across all schools and

restricted to the format of the tests." (p. 163) He predicts that school choice in its many forms will continue to expand.

2.6.1 Research on Charter School Finances

Charter schools have been much studied, and the last decade has produced a number of reports examining charter school finances based on carefully collected evidence. For example, in 2014, Lafer (2014), now at In the Public Interest, published an analysis of a proposed law in Milwaukee, WI (Lafer, 2014) that was specifically tailored to benefit a to-be-opened Rocketship school. Lafer went on to author two other studies on charter schools, public policy, and finance: *Spending Blind: The Failure of Policy Planning in California Charter School Funding* (Lafer, 2017b) and *Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts* (Lafer, 2018). Carol Burris, Executive Director of the Network for Public Education, and several co-authors have produced three reports on money and charter schools: Burris and Pfleger (2020), Burris and Bryant (2020), and Burris and Cimarusti (2021). The National Education Policy Center, a research center based at the University of Colorado, Boulder, with over 150 scholars and academics from institutions across the U.S. whose goal is "to produce and disseminate high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions" ("National Education Policy Center," n.d.), has produced hundreds of reviews of research, policy and legislative briefs, some of which are annual surveys of charter schools. The series on profiles of EMOs have been produced annually for fifteen years; the series on virtual charter schools, for ten years.

Bruce Baker's contributions to the NEPC are especially noteworthy. He is an author or co-author of 28 reviews of reports, studies, or articles on school finance, in addition to six policy, legislative, or research briefs. Baker co-wrote with Gary Miron *The Business of Charter Schooling: Understanding the Policies That Charter Operators Use for Financial Benefit*. (B. Baker & Miron, 2015) which introduces many of the tools and techniques for

evaluating how charter schools operate for profit. It will serve as a key resource for this dissertation.

Lafer (2017b)'s report, *Spending Blind: The Failure of Policy Planning in California Charter School Funding* is particularly scathing. He says, "Any time there is a low bar of entry for firms seeking to access government funds, one can expect to find corruption, and the charter industry is no exception." (p.18) But even absent corruption, there is ample opportunity to make lots of money. Lafer documents \$2.5B of Californian taxpayer money spent over fifteen years on charter school facilities, in many cases where there is no documented educational need and where the charter school is of lower quality than nearby public schools. Lafer says, "It's as if legislators turned on a faucet of money and then just walked away." (p.12) It is saddening that in the four years since Lafer's report came out, nothing has fundamentally changed.

2.7 Rocketship

Rocketship is well-known in the charter school world. It even has been the subject of a "biography", *On the Rocketship* (Whitmire, 2014).²⁶ Rocketship's leaders and supporters routinely describe it as "high performing", "deserving of huge credit", "dynamic", and "nationally lauded". Rocketship schools, it is claimed, outperform some of the best public schools in the country. Rocketship "believe[s] that every student deserves the right to dream, to discover, and to develop their own unique talent".²⁷

Rocketship is one of the largest non-profit charter school chains in the United States. They operate 21 schools in the United States; thirteen in California, three in each in Nashville, TN and Washington, D.C., and two in Milwaukee, WI. In Santa Clara County,

²⁶Just two other charter schools share this distinction: Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone (Tough, 2009) and the KIPP schools (Mathews, 2009; J. Horn, 2016)

²⁷Rocketship, like many charter school advocates and privatizers, excel at choosing memorable, compelling names and tag lines that are impossible to argue against but which nonetheless misrepresent—deliberately so—their goals.

CA, they have eight TK-5 elementary schools authorized by the county that served 4,254 students in the 2019–20 school year plus 1,240 students in two district authorized schools, for a total of 5,494 students.

2.7.1 Founders and Supporters

Rocketship was founded by John Danner in February 2006. Danner, Don Shalvey, Jennifer Andaluz, and Eric Resnick are listed as the initial members of Rocketship Education's board of directors. Danner had significant teaching experience (Nashville, TN public schools) prior to Rocketship, as did Shalvey (Aspire Public Schools) and Andaluz (Downtown College Prep). Resnick, the fourth member of the founding group was a hedge fund manager who had a “a deep understanding of financial management and real estate transactions” (Danner, 2006, p. 13). The inclusion of Resnick, an expert in real estate transactions, at the very beginning of Rocketship, is interesting because one of the preferred ways for charter school investors and founders to generate profits is via real estate deals. John Danner eventually left Rocketship in 2013 to found Zeal, an online math tutoring tool, and was replaced by Preston Smith who became CEO. Smith became the first principal of the Rocketship’s first school, Mateo Sheedy, and was subsequently listed as a Rocketship co-founder in the charter petition for Rocketship’s second school.

Matt Hammer, Executive Director of PACT (People Acting in Community Together), brought Danner and Smith together, and has relentlessly promoted charter schools through his advocacy non-profit, Innovate Public Schools.²⁸ Hastings proselytized Rocketship to the larger charter school community and when he promised Rocketship \$250K for each of the first eight Rocketship schools they opened, his donation caught the attention of philanthropic venture funds (Whitmire, 2014, p. 50).

2.7.2 Rocketship History

²⁸<https://innovateschools.org/>

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Opening schools did not go smoothly for Danner and Rocketship. Not only was there community opposition, but various community organizations also opposed opening one or more charter schools.

The most consequential opposition was a 2014 lawsuit brought by the Alum Rock, Evergreen, Franklin-McKinley and Mount Pleasant school districts which contended that

the SC COE had exceeded its authority in approving in advance 20 county-wide Rocketship charters, bypassing local school districts as authorizers. At the time of the lawsuit, 3 Rocketship charters had opened under this county-wide authorization, and in a settlement, Rocketship agreed not to seek to open 13 of the 20 charters. In the end, only 5 county-wide charters opened²⁹

Over the years, Rocketship opened ten schools in Santa Clara County. Of those ten, only two were authorized by a public school district. The remainder were either countywide charters or charter schools whose petitions were denied by the local public school district, but subsequently approved by the Santa Clara County Board of Education. Table 2, *Rocketship Schools in Santa Clara County, California* lists the eleven Rocketship schools that were approved and the ten that opened. Note that only two were approved by the school district in which there were expected to locate. This lopsided result suggests that current charter school laws are tilted in favor of charter schools.

2.8 Rocketship Finances

Charter schools have a number of unique financial needs. They need startup funds, operating funds, and often funds to expand, funds that public schools do without. Rocketship is no exception. The *operation* of charter schools are funded by federal, state, and local governments, but funding *expansion* may or may not be funded with tax dollars, depending on the laws of a particular state. The difference between what is funded at taxpayer expense and what's not must somehow be funded with outside money. Startup money is needed for facilities, desks and chairs, teacher and administrator salaries, legal fees, curriculum materials, etc., all of this before even one student registers. Startup facilities cost vary widely. If the charter school chooses to use public school district

²⁹Sharon Noguchi reported that nearly \$500K was spent on this lawsuit(Noguchi, 2015).

Table 2
Rocketship Schools in Santa Clara County, California

School	Type	Opened	Renewed	Notes
Mateo Sheedy	District appeal	2007	2009, 2015, 2019	Denied by SJUSD, approved by SCCBOE
Sí Se Puede	District appeal	2009	2011, 2017	Denied by ARUSD, approved by SCCBOE
Los Sueños	Countywide	2010	2015	SCCBOE countywide charter
Discovery Prep	Countywide	2011	2016	SCCBOE countywide charter
Mosaic	District	2011	2016	Approved by ARUSD
Brilliant Minds	Countywide	2012	2017	SCCBOE countywide charter
Alma Academy	Countywide	2012	2017	SCCBOE countywide charter
Spark Academy	District	2013	2018	Approved by FMSD
Alum Rock	District appeal	—		Denied by ARUSD, approved by SCCBOE, but withdrawn 2015
Fuerza	Countywide	2014	2018	SCCBOE countywide charter
Rising Stars	District appeal	2016	2021	Denied by FMSD, approved by SCCBOE

facilities under Proposition 39³⁰, their need for funds will be lower than if they choose to lease or build their own facilities. Startup facilities costs might involve the purchase of land and the construction of school buildings, or might just involve lease payments. But since state funding is tied to attendance, some startup funding is necessary. Thus the federal government provides grants, administered by the states, for this purpose.

Rocketship has indicated from the beginning its intent to expand. In 2009, Rocketship announced plans to open six new schools (Cook, 2009). It submitted a petition to Santa Clara County to open countywide charters and within three years had actually opened four. Like many other CMOs and EMOs, Rocketship must expand in order to

³⁰Proposition 39, passed by California voters in November 2000, contains a provision that requires public school districts to provide charter schools facilities “sufficient to accommodate the charter school’s students” (Secretary of State, California, 2000, pp. 38–41) (Smaller Classes, Safer Schools and Financial Accountability Act, 2000). Regulations governing Prop. 39 facilities are in California Code of Regulations, Title 5, §11969.

increase revenue enough to be worth the while of investors. A single school's profit is not enough to satisfy investors, but by using economies of scale, a "portfolio" of charter schools might suffice. A portfolio of charter schools is a collection of schools – almost always charter schools – managed as a whole.

The idea of a portfolio of schools comes from finance where a carefully chosen portfolio of investments can have lower collective risk for a given level of return than a mere collection of individual investments. (See "Markowitz Model," 2021, for an overview of the mathematics of modern portfolio theory). Hill et al. claim to have invented the term *portfolio school district* (Hill et al., 2009, p. 1) and with it a strategy to implement such a district. Just a year later, J. R. Henig et al. define portfolio strategy for schools as

...a loosely coupled conglomeration of ideas held together by the metaphor of a well-managed stock portfolio and its proponents' *unshakable belief* that the first step for successful reform must be to dismantle the bureaucratic and political institutions that have built up around the status quo [emphasis added] (J. R. Henig et al., 2010).

Hill et al. acknowledge, in dry, understated language, that overcoming the objections and criticisms of educators and scholars to their unshakable belief will be difficult: "It is hard to imagine that a portfolio strategy could be introduced into a major city without significant conflict." (p.2) Portfolio strategy is most often associated with Paul Hill and The Center for Reinventing Public Education, which is now located at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University.

2.8.1 Rocketship Expansion Funding

California, startup charter school funding has waxed and waned, in part because federal funding has varied. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education provides startup funds to states under the Charter Schools Program State Educational Agency (SEA) grant

program³¹. The federal charter school funding programs are listed in National Charter School Resource Center (2020). *The Federal Charter Schools Program: 2020 Annual Report* notes that

At the core of the Charter Schools Program are the Grants to State Entities (SE Grants). The State Entity program offers competitive grants to states, which then make subgrants within their states to *open new charter schools and replicate or expand existing charter schools* [emphasis added] (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020).

Funds like the NewSchools Venture Fund³² and the Charter School Growth Fund I & II³³ exist to fund the development and expansion of charter schools and charter management organizations. In 2007, when Rocketship Mateo Sheedy was started, Rocketship used lines of credit and loans to fund its beginning (Danner, 2006, p. 260). Now, charter schools have many more options for funding startup or operations.

Charters have at least three other sources of facilities funding: bonds, tax credits and foundation or individual contributions. Betsy DeVos, who served as Secretary of Education for Donald Trump, has donated \$12.6M to Rocketship. Reed Hastings, a founder and now CEO Netflix has donated more than \$2M. In addition, charter schools can avail themselves of the New Market Tax Credit if they meet certain investment criteria, and if they do, they can get back 39% of their investment in tax credits in seven years. If their investment returns, say, 20%, then combined, they are looking at nearly a 60% return on their investment. A sixty percent return is fantastic. Charter schools and charter school operators can also issue revenue bonds. Revenue bonds are guaranteed by a revenue stream instead of by property tax revenues the way general obligation bonds

³¹<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oiicsp/funding.html>

³²<https://www.newschools.org/>

³³<https://chartergrowthfund.org/>

are. Note that both are tax-exempt. As of 2015, charter schools issued over \$11B in revenue bonds according to Clark-Herrera et al. (2019).

2.8.2 Rocketship Expansion Difficulties

In 2014, the Santa Clara County Office of Education and Rocketship were sued by four Santa Clara County public school districts: Alum Rock, Mount Pleasant, Franklin-McKinley and Evergreen. At issue was the SCCBOE's bulk authorization of twenty countywide Rocketship charter schools. Sixteen months, 17,500 pages of evidence, and an estimated \$435,000 later, Rocketship, the public school districts, and Santa Clara County settled (Noguchi, 2015). As part of the settlement, Rocketship agreed to withdraw 13 of the 20 countywide charters thus far authorized. Since one of the remaining countywide charter had already been withdrawn, that left six potential charters still authorized but as of yet, unopened. So far, it appears that Rocketship has instead attempted to expand in locations beyond Santa Clara County: San Pablo³⁴ and Concord in California, Nashville in Tennessee, Milwaukee in Wisconsin, Washington, D.C. and Fort Worth in Texas.

2.8.3 Charter School Accountability

In California, all K–12 schools, including privately managed charter schools like Rocketship, must submit annual budgets, Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports (CAFR), and since 2014, Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP). LCAPs are three year plans updated in years two and three and which in detail how a school will use its funds to address state priorities, and to improve educational outcomes for foster youth, English learners, and low-income students, along with the metrics which will be used to show progress (Aguinaldo et al., 2021, pp. 66–84). These characteristics make LCAPs particularly interesting from both a financial point of view and from an educational point of view.

³⁴unsuccessfully

2.9 Rocketship and Privatization

Some contend that the central purpose of charter schools is to disguise a money-making operation (Saltman, 2018). Whitmire, who now sits on the board of Rocketship Education and who in 2014 published *On the Rocketship*, makes note of the role that private venture funds played in Rocketship financing (Whitmire, 2014), and it is instructive to remember that private, for-profit venture funds exist to make money. True, they often are “double bottom line” grantors (Clark et al., 2004). As Ball (cited in Tewksbury, 2016, p. 75) makes clear

... particularly with the added case of Rocketship, a blended learning chain of charter schools, is that the NSVF [NewSchools Venture Fund] is using its clout to further blur the lines between for-profit and non-profit educational projects and organizations, thus smoothing the groves [grooves?] for marketizing educational policy and practices. Ball (2012) makes the connections and rationalities clear: “Symbolically, philanthropy provides an ‘acceptable’ alternative to the state in terms of its moral legitimacy. It has also provided a kind of rehabilitation for the forms of capital that were subject of ‘ill repute’ in the public imagination. Strategically, philanthropy has provided a “Trojan horse” for the modernizing move that opened the ‘policy door’ to new actor and new ideas and sensibilities” (Ball, 2012, p. 32).

Privatizers use investment banks, hedge funds, and private equity firms as vehicles for investing (Stowell, 2018). These investment vehicles are called *alternative investments*, in contrast to *traditional investments* like stocks and bonds. Investment banks provide the financial expertise that hedge funds and private equity firms need.

2.9.1 Privatization

Charter CMOs and EMOs appear to be following the lead of prison and health care privatizers. They lobby legislators intensively. They position themselves as being more efficient than the “wasteful” public sector, and they claim to be able to do better than public schools, prisons or hospitals at a lower cost. Since charter schools have positioned

themselves as being in competition with traditional public schools, they need to do at least as well as traditional public schools, or failing that, appear to do so. This calls for creative marketing, and so, to that end, pro-charter advocacy organizations, some university-affiliated institutions, and some think tanks have been harnessed to churn out pro-charter puff pieces that are regularly debunked.³⁵ Evidently even creative marketing is not enough to prod the free market to supply the educational choice that charter school advocates feel is necessary, so pro-choice advocacy organizations also lobby state representatives and fund pro-charter board candidates.

Charter school marketing is extensive. Organizations like The 74 Million, a reference to the 74 million children in America, or Innovate Public Schools, an advocacy organization, produce reports, news items, briefs and what claims to be research that is slanted toward charter schools and away from public schools, teachers, unions, school boards, and anything and anyone who does not buy into the notion that American education is in desperate need of reform. One technique that is used is to fund media outlets to write allegedly unbiased and non-partisan articles and blog postings that promote “successes” while dismissing any harm that charter schools might cause.

These influence techniques are reminiscent of how OxyContin was marketed by the Sackler family, which is not surprising since Jonathan Sackler, now deceased, founded or funded charter advocacy groups like 50CAN, ConnCAN, Families for Excellent Schools, the Northeast Charter School Network, Education Reform Now, Partnership for Educational Justice, and The 74 Million. Dubb (2017) describes the similarities in marketing strategies used to sell oxycontin and those used to promote charter schools,

³⁵The National Educational Policy Center (<https://nepc.colorado.edu>) in the School of Education at the University of Colorado (Boulder) currently has over 150 NEPC Fellows who aim “to produce and disseminate high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussion” on a wide variety of topics. They often review pro-charter school publications which have been presented as academic research even though those publications have not been peer-reviewed and often have serious methodological problems which weaken or negate their conclusions.

where the focus of all communications was to highlight benefits while ignoring or erasing harms. While this is the standard playbook of corporate marketing, we now have public education dollars being spent on such tactics. When a national exposé published by National Public Radio (NPR) documented serious concerns about Rocketship's practices, The 74 Million immediately published an *ad hominem* attack on NPR, accusing the report to have been a "hit piece" on the charter network. The response of The 74 Million addressed some of the issues raised by NPR while leaving unanswered some of the most serious concerns.

Unlike many other forms of privatization, charter schools have competition. When a local government turns over the task of supplying water to a town, for example, there is not another public water company serving the same customers to serve as a comparison. Privatization is often an all-or-nothing proposition. Charter schools, on the other hand, can be and are often compared to the public schools in the same school district. The presence of very visible competition has an interesting consequence: charter schools view public schools as an existential threat, precisely the opposite of the cooperative, synergistic relationship that state legislators envisioned. In fact, the absence of reports on the successful sharing of innovations appear so infrequently that sharing might as well be completely absent.

Given that charter schools in California get the same per pupil funding as do public schools, there are a limited number of ways that charter schools can generate "excess" funds. They can lower operating costs by hiring unqualified teachers and paying them less. They can tap into state or federal facilities grants. They can collect and sell student data. They can contract out to a for-profit management company. They can buy technology from business partners. In all these cases, the net result is always the same: money flows out of the public school system into private hands.

Charter schools employ fewer and less experienced teachers than public schools do. A teacher with 10 or 20 years of experience can easily command a salary that is twice that of a newly minted teacher. Rocketship schools have a student-to-teacher ratio that is officially as high as 36:1 (SCCOE, 2014–2023, pp. 23–30), and if aides are counted as teachers, it is an estimate which understates the number of students per teacher. The combination of fewer and less expensive teachers can reduce the cost of teacher salaries to one-third of what public schools pay for teachers. This reduction is significant because teacher salaries typically account for from one-third to three-quarters of the total expense of running a school. Charter schools that employ a blended pedagogy can further reduce the cost of salaries, with virtual schools dispensing entirely with teachers, effectively reducing the single largest component of running a school to zero.

2.9.1.1 Philanthrocapitalism

Philanthrocapitalism is the term used to describe the approach to philanthropy that prioritizes operating non-profits as businesses, i.e. making money while “doing good”. The epigraph to Giridharadas’s book *Winners Take All* is a quote taken from Leo Tolstoy’s *Writings on Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence* which captures the absurdity of making money while “doing good”:

I sit on a man’s back choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all means possible ... except by getting off his back.

For philanthrocapitalists, the techniques and vehicles used to extract a profit from public education are impressive. Saltman (2018) lists the following in *The Swindle of Innovative Educational Finance* (pp.xii–xiii):

- social impact bonds,
- higher education lending and student income loans,
- charter school real estate, tax credit, and municipal schemes, and

- philanthrocapitalist educational technology schemes.

Marachi and Carpenter (2020), Burris and Cimarusti (2021), Scott (2009), B. Baker and Miron (2015) all make the same point: education has been captured by big business, where profits are hidden, and where the profits are substantial.

Research Design and Methodology

This dissertation is an *exploratory, case study* using a *public policy* lens to examine the *finances* of Rocketship Education. Exploratory means that the precise data that will be collected and the precise methods used to analyze those data are not fully known in advance and will depend on this study's findings as the inquiry evolves. Case studies are in-depth examinations of a single topic that are limited in space or time. Public policy is the set of laws, regulations, rules, and guidelines that affect the actions of an element of society. It is "the decisions, measures, programs, strategies and courses of action adopted by the government or the legislative body" (Knill & Tosun, 2020, p. 3). Public policy mandates, constrains, and abets Rocketship Education's actions and how it structures its finances to meet its goals.

Finance, as it pertains to Rocketship Education, encompasses all transactions of monetary value which involve the legal entities called Rocketship Education (DBA Rocketship Public Schools) and Lauchpad Development, plus other entities with which it has significant financial relationships. An expansive view of Rocketship's finances might also include those of its founders who, perhaps went on to found companies that sold software to Rocketship, and entities focused on real property from whom Rocketship might have bought, leased, or sold real property. The expansive view is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

This chapter contains six sections. The first, Section 3.1, *Process Overview*, describes at a very high level three steps of inquiry this dissertation will follow. Since understanding how schools are financed is essential to understanding Rocketship's finances, a pair of sections, Section 3.2, *Financing Schools in California* and Section 3.3, *Charter School Financing*, will give an overview of school financing in California by describing the

normal, common financial disclosures and reports made by all districts and schools and then the essentials of charter school finance.

The fourth section, Section 3.4, *Charter Schools and Real Estate*, covers the varieties of real estate transactions that charter schools might be involved in. The fifth section, Section 3.6, *Gaps and Anomalies*, discusses how potential gaps or anomalies in the financial data might be discovered.

In order to make what's being analyzed more concrete, Appendix B, *School Financing in California*, contains some example tables drawn from the Los Altos School District (LASD) for the 2019–20 school year. These are standard financial reports taken from LASD's SACS data, but presented in a way that is both visually appealing and informative.³⁶ The high level view is given in Figure 5, *LASD 2019–20 All Funds Summary*. That view is further broken down in five more tables. The final and sixth table is a projection of LASD's finances for the current year (2018–19), the year whose budget is being presented (2019–20), and five years into the future. The first half of the table contains the assumptions used to generate the amounts in the second half.

3.1 Process Overview

Explaining the real estate-related finances of Rocketship Education is the heart of this dissertation. Where do Rocketship's revenues come from? Where are they spending that revenue? Are there investors who make money off of Rocketship? And, critically, if Rocketship takes in more money than it spends on education, where does that money go?

To respond to these questions, the basic process steps for this dissertation will include the following:

³⁶LASD's annual budgets have consistently won the Meritorious Budget Award for Excellence from the Association of School Business Officials International for the quality and comprehensiveness of its financial statements for each of the last 15 years. Both LASD's annual budget and its CAFR exceed 100 pages. That information and data, although available elsewhere, is truly informative and serves as a record, a history if you will, of LASD's past, its actions, and the data which guided those actions.

1. Gather financial data for the Rocketship schools being studied. The initial set of data being analyzed is discussed in Section 3.3, *Charter School Financing* later in this chapter.
2. Identify any gaps or anomalies in the data. This is where triangulation is useful and is discussed further in Section 3.6.1, *Triangulation*.
3. Analyze the flow of money in and out of Rocketship which will try to determine where Rocketship funds come from, where is that money being spent, and what public policies (or lack thereof) account for Rocketship's actions.

Analyzing the finances of Rocketship Education means, for example, determining the attributes of a particular bond. Are these bonds general obligation or revenue bonds? Are they obligations of Rocketship Education or Launchpad Development and funded their revenues, or are they conduit bonds issued by a government agency and obligations of that government agency that are intended, by not guaranteed, to be funded by Rocketship's revenues? Have the bonds been purchased by entities that are related to Rocketship, i.e. they are not arm's length transactions?

3.2 Financing Schools in California

In California, primary and secondary schools (grades TK–12), community colleges (grades 13–14), and charter schools (TK–12) are financed with a combination of federal, state, and local funds as seen in Figure 1, *California 2019–20 K–12 Funding by Source*.³⁷ From the point of view of the current fiscal year, there are three budgets: The prior year's budget, the current year's budget (the approved annual budget), and next year's budget.

In June of every year, the California Legislature passes a budget for the next fiscal year which runs from (July 1st – June 30th). The Governor signs this budget into law and it is

³⁷Since federal funds account for only 8% of total funding for California's elementary school children (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2021), the federal contribution will not be considered further. Note that federal facilities grants to charter schools are not part of this 8%.

then called the enacted budget. This version of the budget describes the *intent* of the Governor and the Legislature, but might not provide any actual money. Often funds for programs authorized by the enacted budget are appropriated in *trailer bills* that are passed piecemeal in the months following the adoption of the budget. Starting July 1st, the enacted budget becomes the current budget. During the course of the fiscal year, revisions are made to the current budget, either because circumstances or priorities have changed. At the end of the fiscal year, this current and possibly modified budget becomes the revised budget, and during the following year, technical adjustments can be made. Exactly how much money was spent, or what was misclassified and improperly allocated will change the revised budget numbers. This modified and corrected budget becomes the final budget. The upshot of this is that there are actually multiple versions of California's budget and one should be precise when one refers to "the budget". Usually, one means the current budget, except during "budget season" which starts when the Governor releases a budget proposal in January, continues through May when the Governor revises that proposal, and ends in June when it is enacted into law. Once the Governor and the Legislature have negotiated their differences, and a budget has been passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor, it becomes the enacted budget. Starting July 1st the enacted budget becomes the current budget.

Figure 1, *California 2019–20 K–12 Funding by Source* shows what money California uses to fund its primary and secondary educational system, i.e. grades K–12. This money is then allocated to local educational agencies (LEAs), through a formula known as the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).³⁸ LEAs include individual charter schools, county offices of education, and local public school districts. The total amount of money for K–12 funding is allocated using a formula that was enacted by voters in 1988 (LAO, 2017):

³⁸The LCFF actually funds transitional kindergarten and community colleges as well as public primary and secondary educational institutions, so it ought to be known as funding grades TK-14. Approximately 89% of LCFF funding goes to grades TK-12.

Figure 1
California 2019–20 K–12 Funding by Source

K-12 Funding by Source

(*Dollars in Millions*)

	2017-18 Final	2018-19 Revised	2019-20 Enacted	Change From 2018-19	
				Amount	Percent
Proposition 98					
General Fund ^a	\$47,194	\$48,327	\$49,322	\$994	2.1%
Local property tax	19,644	20,645	21,921	1,276	6.2%
Subtotals	\$66,839	\$68,973	\$71,243	\$2,270	3.3%
Other State					
Other General Fund	\$6,879	\$9,749 ^b	\$10,503 ^b	\$754 ^c	7.7%
Lottery	\$1,382	\$1,305	\$1,304	-\$1	-0.1%
Special funds	\$75	\$79	\$228	\$149	189.0%
Subtotals	\$8,336	\$11,133	\$12,036	\$903 ^c	8.1%
Other Local^d					
	\$12,023	\$12,712	\$11,814	-\$898	-7.1%
Federal					
	\$7,435	\$8,190	\$8,284	\$94	1.1%
Total	\$94,633	\$101,008	\$103,377	\$2,369	2.3%
Students ^e	5,960,120	5,944,769	5,933,407	-11,362	-0.2%
Proposition 98 funding per student	\$11,214	\$11,602	\$12,007	\$405	3.5%
Total funding per student	\$15,878	\$16,991	\$17,423	\$432	2.5%

^a Consists of funding for K-12 education, preschool, and other agencies serving K-12 students.
^b Includes \$3.9 billion in additional retirement payments authorized in the 2019-20 budget package (\$2.8 billion attributed to 2018-19 and \$1 billion attributed to 2019-20).
^c These year-to-year comparisons are notably affected by how the administration attributed the additional retirement payments authorized in the 2019-20 budget package across fiscal years.
^d Includes revenue from local fees, property taxes collected in excess of the Local Control Funding Formula allotments, parcel taxes, and reimbursements.
^e Reflects average daily attendance.

Legislative Analyst's Office (2021).

Proposition 98. Prop. 98 was originally meant to be a minimum guaranteed funding level, but has evolved into a ceiling. The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), which serves as an independent, non-partisan research arm of the California Legislature in much the same way that the Congressional Research Service serves the U.S. Congress, calls Prop. 98 "A Tale of Complexity" (p.5) and says that "A Plethora Tests and Rules Govern the Minimum Guarantee" (p.5), and that "State Has Made Myriad Adjustments to the Proposition 98 Calculations" (p.5). Undoubtedly LCFF is complex, but LCFF is more transparent, has fewer rules, is more equitable, and is more responsive to the needs of public school districts that have a high proportion of under-served students than the Revenue Limit System that came before it. The Revenue Limit System was also complex, but in a completely difference way; it had many separately funded programs, called categorical programs, each with their own set of requirements, rules, durations, and funding levels. Each passing year saw more programs being added to the set of categorical programs until the entire collection became both unwieldy and inequitable.

The most succinct summary of how LCFF amounts are calculated is given by the California Department of Education (CDE) (2023c):

Funding entitlements under the LCFF consist of:

- Grade span-specific base grants based on ADA, that reflect adjustments for grades K–3 class sizes and grades 9–12 (school districts with qualifying schools may receive a necessary small school (NSS) allowance in lieu of the base grants);
- Supplemental grants equal to 20 percent of the adjusted base grants multiplied by the LEA's unduplicated percentage of English learners, income eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and foster youth pupils;

- Concentration grants equal to 65 percent of the adjusted base grants multiplied by an LEA's percentage of unduplicated pupils above 55 percent;
- Two add-ons equal to the amounts school districts received in 2012–13 for the Targeted Instructional Improvement Block Grant and Home-to-School Transportation programs;
- An Economic Recovery Target add-on; and
- Beginning in 2022–23, an add-on for current year Transitional Kindergarten ADA.
- Base, supplemental, and concentration grants, as well as necessary small school allowances, receive cost-of-living adjustments as provided through the annual budget. Beginning in 2023–24, transportation related add-ons and the Transitional Kindergarten add-on will also receive cost-of-living adjustments.”

The intricacies of LCFF funding are covered in more detail in Chapter 3 of Aguinaldo.etal (2022),

As seen in Figure 1, *California 2019–20 K–12 Funding by Source*, Proposition 98 funding accounts for nearly 70% of California’s K–12 funding, with the remainder coming from local property taxes and fees, and from various other federal and state sources. This money is distributed to county offices of education which then distribute it to public school districts. Districts then distribute funds to charter schools.

Some districts are funded outside the LCFF system. These used to be called “basic aid” districts, but since the term is confusing, they are now called “community funded” districts. These are districts where their share of their county’s annual property tax revenue is greater than their annual LCFF entitlement. They get only “basic aid”, i.e. the constitutionally required minimum funding (the greater of \$120 per pupil or \$2,400 per

district) from the state. For districts which are not community funded, the state contribution is the difference between a district's LCFF entitlement and its share of district property taxes. In other words, the state ensures that each district gets at least its LCFF entitlement, the total amount which is determined by Prop. 98.³⁹

3.2.1 Budgets & Interim Reports

For a given fiscal year, the annual budget is the first of four important financial documents produced. Since budgets must be approved before the start of a fiscal year, budgets are actually produced and approved in the prior fiscal year.⁴⁰ The next two financial documents are two (unaudited) interim reports, one in December, and another in March, which track how well the school or district is adhering to the approved annual budget, and finally, after a certified public accountant has audited the school or district, a comprehensive annual financial report (CAFR) is produced in the fiscal year following the period it covers. State law requires that an independent auditor certify this retrospective account of the school or district's financial activity as being an accurate representation of the school's finances for the previous fiscal year.

3.2.2 Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs)

An important, recurring, non-financial report of schools is the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). Although the LCAP is a three-year plan, it is updated annually. The focus of an LCAP is on the programs that a school (public or charter) is going to implement, finance, and monitor that will allow it meet the goals that the state has set. These are goals that the California Department of Education sets periodically,

³⁹An invaluable and comprehensive description of K-12 funding in California, for both public school districts and charter schools, can be found in Aguinaldo, Fry, Garcia, Gray, Heckler, Herrera, Hyland, et al. (2022), an annual publication.

⁴⁰Since a school's budget must be approved before the state budget is finalized, it is nearly certain that a school's budget will need to be modified after it has been approved.

primarily to ensure that students with the greatest needs are in fact served and are in addition to the seven goals that the Legislature set for charter schools in general.

Typically, LCAP goals remain the same over their three year lifespan, but their financing may change if the metrics used to measure progress toward achieving those goals are not showing progress. In unusual circumstances, how the goals are to be achieved might change. LCAPs are California's way of ensuring that all public schools, including charter schools, meet the same set of priorities or goals. Apparently, some LCAPs have been on the order of 500 pages long, although the norm is much less.

For each activity or group of activities, schools must indicate what goal is being met, if the goal includes increased services for disadvantaged student, how well the school or district has met that goal, and how much money has been allocated to achieving and reporting those goals. (The reality of what the Department of Education wants is an order of magnitude more complicated than this description, but it is accurate as far as it goes.)

Unlike budgets and CAFRs, LCAPs do not have to “add up”, nor do they have to offer a complete financial picture, but they do have to be consistent with other financial data. Expenditures have to be budgeted, and the amounts in a school’s budget must agree with what’s in the LCAP. The charter or public school’s board must approve an LCAP at the same time as it approves its annual budget.

3.2.3 Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports

The final major source of financial data from charter schools is an annual, independently audited, financial statement called the Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports (CAFRs). These are sent to the California Department of Education (CDE) and to a charter’s County Office of Education (COE) annually. They cover the previous fiscal year and are similar to annual budgets because they report the same information, perhaps in a different format. CAFRs are retrospective whereas budgets are prospective. The major

difference between budget and CAFRs is that CAFRs are independently audited and budgets are not.

Similarly to bond underwriters, financial auditors are liable for “omitting, misstating, or obscuring [items which] could reasonably be expected to influence decisions that the primary users make on the basis of those financial statements” (Cayamanda, 2020), and this requirement tends to increase the diligence of the auditors. However, potential liability does not always result in truly comprehensive financial statements; sometimes the lure of accounting fees overwhelms any misgivings, as was the case with Enron and Arthur Andersen in 2001. Errors and sloppiness may exist, but in general, fraud is thankfully rare, in part because fraud on the part of auditors would likely result in the loss of the auditor’s license, effectively ending their business.

3.3 Charter School Financing

In California, charter schools are financed the same way as public schools are, from the same pot of money, using the same set of rules, except for one significant difference: how they finance facilities. Unlike public schools, charter schools have no taxing authority, so they cannot pass bond measures or parcel taxes. This lack of a taxing authority means that charter schools must either occupy existing public school facilities (potentially displacing existing public school students) or seek grants and donations to fund non-district facilities, either leased or purchased. The federal government provides significant amounts of facilities grant money and delegates to the states the administration of the program and the disbursement of the actual grants.

An in-depth analysis of charter school finances requires a broader lens than one used for public schools because, in addition to all of the financial dealings of traditional public schools, almost all of which also apply to charter schools, charter schools have large and immediate needs for facilities that traditional public schools do not have. This brings into

the picture bonds, loans, grants, leases, construction, and the purchase and sale of real estate. Traditional public schools do issue several kinds of bonds, levy parcel taxes, and buy real estate on which they build schools, but they do so infrequently. Usually public schools have done this years ago, but charter schools have an immediate and reoccurring need for facilities. They face these needs once when they start up, and whenever they outgrow their facilities because of increased enrollment. The needs of charter schools for facilities and the financing associated with obtaining those facilities is more pressing, more immediate, and more common than the corresponding needs of traditional public schools whose enrollment doesn't fluctuate as much.⁴¹

3.3.1 Charter School Financial Documents

The challenge for this inquiry will be to organize the financial documents and data collected so that gaps and anomalies can be identified, interesting and valid comparisons can be made with public schools and other charter schools, and the flows of money in and out of Rocketship can be identified. One way of organizing charter school data is chronologically from when they appear.

Table 3, *Charter School Financial Documents*, summarizes the official, publicly available, and required financial reports about charter school finances, in chronological order. Note that budgets, interim reports, LCAPs, and CAFRs are also required of public schools. Table 3, *Charter School Financial Documents* enumerates the various financial documents that are produced by charter schools.

The first financial statement from a charter school is contained in their initial petition. The purpose of the initial petition is to provide an authorizer with data on the

⁴¹Usually a public school district sees a change in enrollment because of significant demographic changes like immigration or emigration, birth rate increases or declines. Charter schools can see large enrollment changes absent any demographic change, even if the total number of students residing in a district stays the same. In some instances, increased enrollment in charter schools comes from public school students switching from the public school system to charter schools. This is what is happening to Oakland, CA and it produces simultaneous but opposite changes in enrollment.

Table 3
Charter School Financial Documents

Name	Description	Frequency	When
Initial Petition	Comprehensive description	Once	Before opening
Renewal Petitions	Similar to initial petition	Every 5 years	Years 5, 10, 15, ...
Budget	Complete financial plan	Annually	Before June 15 th
LCAP	How to meet state priorities	Every 3 years	With budget
Interim Reports	Current spending	Twice yearly	December, March
CAFR	Audited financials	Annually	In the following year

charter school's educational program, pupil outcomes, methods to measure these outcomes, the charter school's governance structure, methods of racial and ethnic balancing, teacher and student health and safety, and among other measures.⁴²

Subsequent charter school data makes their appearance during the school year, and then finally when a certified audit is completed.

All of Rocketship's schools have both initial petitions, renewal petitions. These are voluminous, but fortunately the financial part is only a small portion of the total number of pages. In addition, each petition (usually) has a corresponding staff report prepared by authorizers which evaluates the petition. These six kinds of documents are reviewed in the sections which follow.

3.3.1.1 Petitions & Renewals

Before a charter school may legally begin operations, they must present to a chartering authority a petition which must contain certain required elements, and that petition must be accepted (with or without stipulations.) The absence of one of these elements is grounds for denying the charter's petition to operate. For example, what is the intent of the charter school? How is the charter school going to measure its success or failure? What population is it targeting? And, what are its financial projections?

⁴²Ed. Code §47605 (c)(5)(A–O)

One of the required elements of any petition is a financial projection. Although no one expects a charter school (or any public school district for that matter) to prepare and adhere to a budget that exactly matches what's been projected, budgets are expected to be a reasonable approximation of future revenues and expenses.

Petitions run anywhere from a hundred or so pages to over a thousand and they contain a wealth of financial data. Fortunately, these documents are all publicly available and could, if needed, be the subject of a California Public Records Act (CPRA) request. The CPRA is the California equivalent of the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Many of the documents mentioned in this dissertation are available from the California Departments of Education and Finance, or from the Santa Clara County Office of Education.⁴³

Since Rocketship schools are all operated by a single entity, (currently) Rocketship Education, DBA Rocketship Public Schools, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, their financial statements and those of their affiliates are rolled up into a single document, for example, "Rocketship Education, Inc. and Its Affiliates, Consolidated Financial Statements and Supplementary Information, Year Ended JUNE 30, 2022 (with Summarized Financial Information for the Year Ended June 30, 2021)". Every school is included in this single document, as are separate Launchpad Development LLC's that actually own the facilities leased to individual schools, plus two other non-profits that provide specialized service to the individual schools.

3.3.1.2 Authorizer Staff Reports

Another set of documents that are related to initial and renewal petitions are the staff reports which usually accompany the agenda item which considers the charter school's

⁴³Since these documents are required to be publicly available and may be freely copied, no copyright is applicable.

petition for approval. In these reports, the authorizer's staff presents the findings and rationale for their recommendation to approve or not the petition of the charter school.

3.3.1.3 Budgets, Interim Reports, and CAFRs

Once a charter has been granted the right to operate, it must file annually with the California Department of Education, just like public school districts, certain forms that detail its revenues and expenses. State law also mandates an annual audit by an independent accounting firm which charter schools must file with their County Office of Education. All together, these forms should provide a complete picture of a charter school's finances, and crucially, everything should be in agreement. Charters must approve and publish at a public meeting their annual budget, and they, just like traditional public schools, cannot spend unbudgeted money unless the governing board approves any changes at a public meeting.

Interim reports detail the differences between a school's budgeted revenue and expenses and actual revenue and expenses. Interim reports are filed twice each year in January (covering July - December) and April (covering January - March). As with the annual budget, deviations must be approved at a public meeting.

CAFRs (Comprehensive Annual Financial Report) are audited by an independent public accounting firm and are the definitive record of actual revenues and expenses. They are submitted to the school's county office of education (COE) to be forwarded the state Department of Education.

3.3.1.4 LCAPs,

Like public schools in California, charter schools must submit an Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) that details how the charter school will meet the eight state LCFF priorities in the following areas

1. basic services and school conditions
2. state academic standards

3. parent engagement
4. student achievement
5. student engagement
6. access to a broad program of study
7. outcomes of a broad program of study

The intent of the LCAP is for schools to identify what they need to improve, paying particular attention to underserved groups, and how they plan to improve, and how they will measure improvement.

3.3.1.5 Board and Committee Supporting Material

Another source of financial data is not official in character are, as mentioned, staff reports, but also background material, presentations, and other documents that serve as input to board and committee meetings of both public schools and charter schools.

Rocketship publishes on their website, as required by California's Brown Act, agendas and supporting material for its board meetings and for certain committee meetings.⁴⁴ Currently, Rocketship only provides meeting agendas and supporting material going back to February 2017. However, they previously had made available material going back to their founding in 2006, and that data will be part of this study.

3.4 Charter Schools and Real Estate

The last major financial topic of interest has to do with real estate. Since charter schools in California must obtain the facilities they plan to occupy before they receive any per-pupil state funding, real estate looms large in charter school finances. Charter schools have some leeway to choose whether to own or lease, and how to finance the acquisition of facilities.

⁴⁴The Brown Act requires board-appointed committee meetings to be open if they are standing meetings whose subject matter is within the jurisdiction of Rocketship's board, or if a majority of Rocketship's board are members of the committee.

3.4.1 Facilities Options

As shown in Table 4, *Charter School Facilities Options*, charter schools have three options: co-locate, lease, or purchase (with or without construction of bespoke facilities).

Table 4
Charter School Facilities Options

Option	Description
Co-locate	The charter school occupies “reasonably equivalent” facilities provided by the public school district in which the charter school is located.
Lease	The charter school occupies facilities that it leases.
Own	The charter school buys existing facilities or buys land and builds their own.

Real estate transactions entail numerous, detailed documents, as anyone who has bought a house is painfully of. Many of these documents are publicly available. If a charter school co-locates, then the terms have to be approved at a open meeting of the public school district in which the charter is located, and those are public documents. If the school’s facilities are leased, and SB740 funds are used to pay part of the rent, then appraisals and the amount of rent should be available from the administrator of the SB740 program. Ownership, with or without construction, has even more documents associated with the facility.

3.4.1.1 Co-Locating

The least costly option for charter schools is to co-locate in an existing school. Proposition 39 and enabling regulations⁴⁵ require that school districts furnish facilities for all in-district charter school student that are reasonably equivalent to those of students in the district in which the charter school resides. Facilities include regular and specialized classrooms, administrative offices, playgrounds, and athletic fields. It does not matter if the school district has unused space or not. It does not matter if the charter school grows in enrollment year over year. School districts are required to furnish

⁴⁵Ed. Code §47614 et seq. and 5 CCR § 11969.1

reasonably equivalent facilities under Proposition 39. However, districts and charter schools may enter agreements outside of Proposition 39 concerning what facilities districts will provide to the charter school. Many districts and charter schools choose this path.

In theory co-locating is the least costly and most timely option for charter schools to obtain facilities, but often there is litigation over the extent or appropriateness of the facilities that the district has provided. Sometimes these lawsuits can drag on for years, often at a considerable expense for both the charter school and the public school district supplying the facilities.

3.4.1.2 Leasing

Charter schools may lease their facilities from either a related party, or at arms length, from an unrelated party. Terms and length of leases vary. If the lessor is an unrelated party, the charter schools may take advantage of grants offered by the Charter School Finance Authority⁴⁶ which are authorized by Ed. Code §47614.5 et seq. and CCR §10170⁴⁷ “to offset annual on-going facility costs for charter schools that service a high-percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM) or located in a public elementary school boundary serving a similar demographic” (California State Treasurer, 2023). The amount of the grant is the lesser of the school’s ADA \times \$1,420 or the annual rent \times 75%.⁴⁸ To be eligible, charter schools must “service a high-percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM) or [be] located in a public elementary school boundary serving a similar demographic” (California State Treasurer, 2023).

⁴⁶Originally administered by the Department of Education; now administered by the California State Treasurer.

⁴⁷aka SB740

⁴⁸This is the basic calculation. As expected, there are variations and permutations, and these are enumerated in Section 6, Grant Award Calculations of the program’s FAQ. The principle limitation is that the charter school must serve.

If the charter school is leasing from a related party, usually SB740 grants are not available. However, the definition of *related party* does not include non-profit entities whose only business is supporting charter schools. For example, a non-profit charter school may lease a property from a related non-profit entity whose only business is owning and maintaining that property. This is the relationship that Rocketship Education has with the owners of the facilities they lease. The structure of Rocketship Education is diagrammed in Figure 2, *Rocketship's Corporate Structure for Santa Clara County Facilities*.

3.4.1.3 Owning

The third way of obtaining facilities is to own the needed facilities, or to have a related party own the facilities. These might be purchased, or the land purchased and the facilities constructed. Most public school districts own their own facilities, but since these were likely bought and built using bond money derived from taxes, charter schools, lacking taxing authority, are unable to pay for their facilities this way.

3.4.2 Funding Facility Ownership

If a charter schools decides they should own their own facilities, there are a number of ways they can go about this, as shown in Table 5, *Charter School Options for Paying for Facilities*.

3.4.2.1 Private Funding: Loans and Foundation Grants

Individuals or non-public entities often loan or give money to charter schools, including Rocketship. Some are outright grants; others are expected to be paid back; still others may be partially paid back and then forgiven. Each grant has its own set of terms and interest rate.

3.4.2.2 Venture Funds

The NewSchools Venture Funds, the Charter School Fund, and the Charter School Growth Fund are just a few examples of venture funds that specialize in charter schools. Since it is unlikely that investors will invest in a fund that does not return a profit,

Table 5*Charter School Options for Paying for Facilities*

Option	Source of Funds
Private grants or loans	Private entities (individuals or foundations) may make a grant or a loan to a charter school.
Venture funds	Venture Funds which ostensibly intend to make money often loan money to charter schools.
Federal or state grants	Both the federal government and states have programs which offer funds that may be used to pay for existing facilities or for new construction.
Tax credits	The federal government offers tax credits for investors whose investments meet certain criteria.
Bonds	Charter schools may use the commercial or municipal bond markets to obtain funds, but property or parcel taxes may not be used to pay them off.

establishing exactly how these funds turn a profit is going to be a goal of this study's explorations.⁴⁹

3.4.2.3 Tax Credits

Tax credits are often used as a source of funds to buy or construct facilities. For example, the New Markets Tax Credit is a 39% tax credit, usable over seven years, available to those who make an investment in specified economically depressed neighborhoods. A 39% tax credit is roughly twice the current corporate tax rate (21%) which means that this credit wipes out the taxes on gains equal to twice the initial investment (which may itself also have a return).

3.4.2.4 Bonds

⁴⁹It is interesting that none of the web sites of these funds mentions that fund's return on investment (ROI). The absence of any indication of a return on investment is either an innocent mistake or much more likely, an attempt at obfuscation.

All bonds are risky to some extent, some more than others, and purchasers of those bonds are compensated for taking on that risk by being paid interest on the amount borrowed. So, when a bond is issued, the terms (e.g. interest rate, repayment schedule, collateral, etc.) are described in great detail in a prospectus. These prospectuses, in addition to the terms, contain financial information relevant to assessing the risk associated with purchasing that bond. Bonds, after all, are loans, and when millions of dollars are being loaned, those making the loans want to be assured of getting paid back and paid back on time, particularly since charter schools are known to close abruptly.

Bond prospectuses can be mined for data that might not appear in petitions or financial statements because bond underwriters are “potential liability for any material misrepresentations or omissions contained in a registration statement or prospectus” (Block et al., 2008). This liability, of course, is not unlimited. If bond underwriters exercise due diligence or the misrepresentation is not material, the underwriters are probably not liable. Crucially, the definitions of *material misrepresentation* and *due diligence* depended on both statute and case law, so a bond underwriter can only make a reasoned guess at their exposure to liability. The result is that bond underwriters are likely to be more diligent than is absolutely necessary.

3.5 Other Data

Various other data pertaining to Rocketship exists:

- numerous datasets
- state and federal filings
- curated social media

3.5.1 Datasets

Vast amounts of data are available from the federal, state and local governments, easily over half a million datasets each containing anywhere from a hundred elements to

a hundred thousand elements. Unfortunately these data have been collected in different formats, over different time periods, using different inclusion criteria, more or less carefully. Picking a subset of educational data to use and then cleaning it is a huge endeavor well beyond the scope of this dissertation. That being said, a very small subset of available datasets will be consulted, based on an immediate need. The most likely datasets to be consulted are those maintained by:

- California Department of Education and State Board of Education
- The County of Santa Clara and the Santa Clara County Office of EducationSanta
Clara County
- The California Open Data Portal
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the Institute for Education
Sciences (IES)
- Stanford Educational Data Archive (SEDA)
- School Finance Indicators Database
- EdSource, Ed-Data, and other aggregators of educational data specific to
California

3.5.2 State and Federal Filings

Two filings are of particular interest, one with the state, and one with the federal government: FPPC Form 700, Statement of Economic Interests, and IRS Form 990, Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax. Both forms force the disclosure of personal financial information (Form 700) or personal financial information and business financial information (Form 990).

Some officers of Rocketship may be required to submit annually to the California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) Form 700, Statement of Economic Interests. This

particular requirement of charter school officers is not settled law,⁵⁰ but if Form 700 is filed, it will list the submitter's assets and income that are related to the position they hold in Rocketship Education or Launchpad Development. The intent is to prevent related-party transactions by enumerating an officer's economic interests so that a school can avoid doing business with entities that might indirectly benefit an officer. (Of course, direct benefit is absolutely not permitted, and if it occurs, is graft.)

The federal Internal Revenue Service grants income tax exemptions to organizations that meet the requirements of §501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.⁵¹ These organizations must file Form 990 annually that provides some minimal financial data.⁵²

3.5.3 Curated Social Media

Some web sites maintain data related to Rocketship. For example, the Scoop.It topic, Charter Schools & “Choice: A closer look” Marachi (2016–2023) is devoted to charter schools in general, but also has much material on specifically on Rocketship. The now extinct web site, [[<http://www.stoprocketship.com>][Stop Rocketship Education Now!]], was created and maintained by community volunteers.

3.6 Gaps and Anomalies

No financial statement is perfect, and not all are in agreement. But there is a difference between an innocent mistake or omission and one designed to deceive and mislead. Triangulation can be used to capture gaps and anomalies.

3.6.1 Triangulation

⁵⁰Rocketship's initial petition for Mateo Sheedy states that Form 700, Statement of Economic Interest, shall be filed by all board members, candidates for board membership, corporate officers, principals and assistant principals, among others.

⁵¹26 USC 501, i.e. Title 26, Subtitle A, Chapter 1, Subchapter F Part I § 501(c)(3)

⁵²Tax returns of for-profit organizations are not public documents and their contents do not have to be disclosed; however, in order to sell stock to the public, i.e. to be listed on a stock exchange, firms are required to publish various financial documents, which like bond prospectuses, are required to be informative and complete.

Triangulation is the process of comparing different documents from different sources. The greater the number of sources, the greater the chance of catching gaps and anomalies.

Questions one might ask are

- Does everything add up?
- Are there important, missing documents?
- How much do these gaps or anomalies matter?
- Are the oddities long-standing or fleeting?

Examples of triangulation might be comparing Rocketship's LCAPs to their budget, or comparing IRS Form 990 data to their audited financial statements.

Chapter 4, *Findings*, the next chapter will present the results of exploring the data which has been identified in this chapter. The last chapter, Chapter 5, *Discussion*, will evaluate those findings.

Findings

This chapter presents the results of investigating Rocketship's finances using the approach outlined in Chapter 3, *Research Design and Methodology* whose goal was answering this dissertation's research question:

Has Rocketship structured itself and its finances, to earn a return to investors, focusing especially on real estate transactions, and if so, how?

The first section presents Rocketship's corporate structure, a structure that separates Rocketship schools from Rocketship facilities. The next section, Section 4.2, *Rocketship Locations and Property Information*, details what facilities Rocketship has in Santa Clara County, where those facilities are located, when they were acquired, and what real estate rights Rocketship has in those properties. Then, given Rocketship's real estate holdings, the third section characterizes the finances of Rocketship that were used to fund the purchase of those properties. The penultimate section reviews what gaps, anomalies and discrepancies were found in Rocketship's financial data. The final section, Section 4.5, *Issues of Equality and Equity*, looks briefly at issues of fairness.

Note that Rocketship financial data is not available for all years, and starting in 2014, annual financial statements are for all of Rocketship Education, i.e. schools in California, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Washington, D.C., and Texas.

4.1 Rocketship's Corporate Structure

One of the original four members of Rocketship's board of directors was Eric Resnick, a specialist in real estate finance. He was expected to "provid[e] a deep understanding of financial management and real estate transactions" (Danner, 2006, p. 13), so it appears that Rocketship's corporate structure was designed with real estate transactions in mind. From the start, Rocketship has kept schools and their facilities separate. This structure is

diagrammed in Figure 2, *Rocketship's Corporate Structure for Santa Clara County Facilities* on p.77 for Rocketship facilities in Santa Clara County.

The parent corporation, Rocketship Education, Inc. (RSED) was formed in California on February 16, 2006 as a 501(c)(3) public benefit corporation under California's Nonprofit Public Benefit Corporation Law (California Corporation Code §§5000–10841). RSED owns all the Rocketship schools and Launchpad Development Company, a 509(a)(3) nonprofit public benefit corporation.⁵³ RSED plus the schools plus Launchpad Development Company are known collectively as Rocketship Education and Its Affiliates (RSEA). RSEA is not a recognized corporate entity. It's just a convenient way of referring to all things Rocketship.

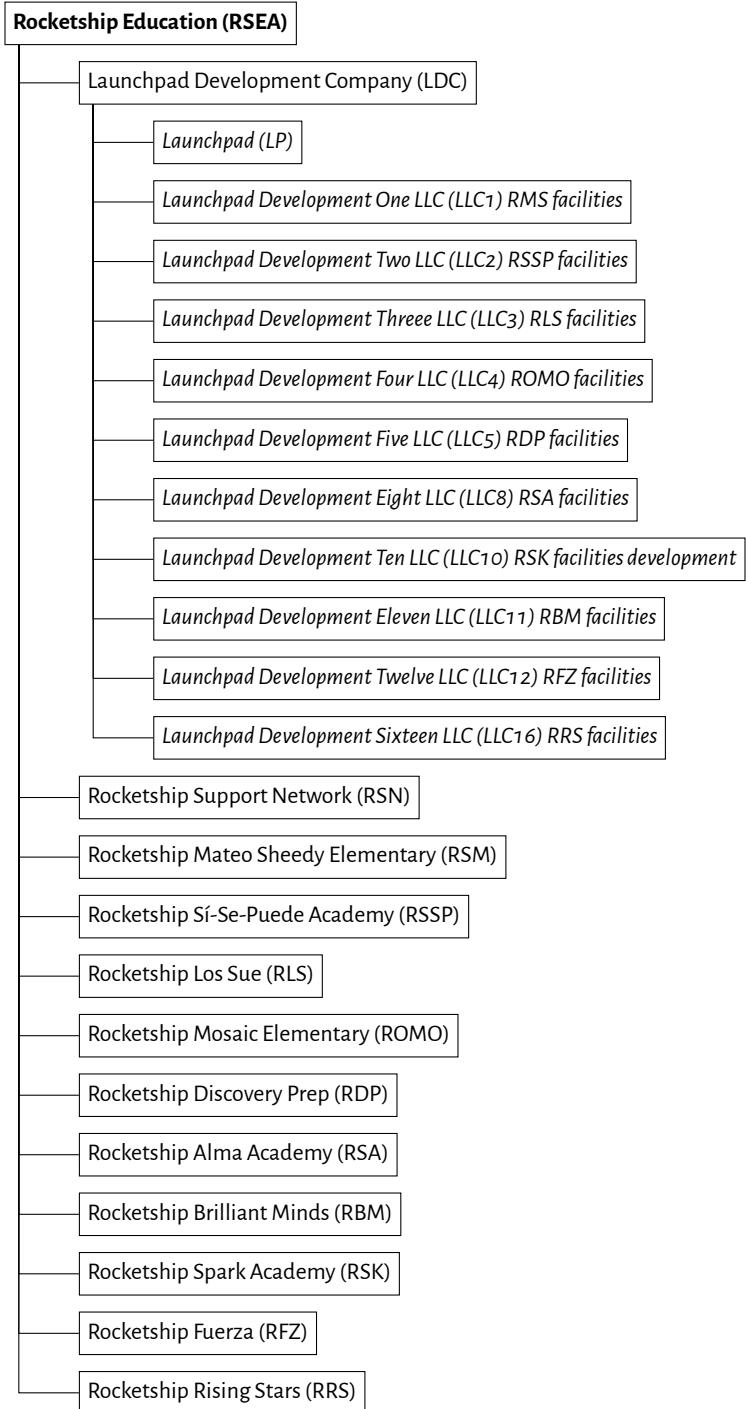
Launchpad Development Company owns one nonprofit public benefit corporation LLC for each school, generally named "Launchpad Development <number> LLC", and that entity owns the actual school facilities. In addition, Rocketship has two functional divisions:

- Rocketship Support Network (RSN) which provides resources for management, back-office support, and organizational strategy to Rocketship schools, and
- Launchpad (LP) which provides investment and asset management, and administrative services to Launchpad LLCs.

This separation between the operation of schools from the funding of their facilities raises the question of why Rocketship has chosen this structure. Jennifer Reuting in *Limited Liability Companies for Dummies* is unequivocal, "LLCs are the best entities for holding real estate, no doubt about it. They offer the most liability protection of any entity

⁵³A 509(a)(3) corporation is a "charity that carries out its exempt purposes by supporting other exempt organizations, usually other public charities" and "has a relationship with its supported organization sufficient to ensure that the supported organization is effectively supervising or paying particular attention to the operations of the supporting organization." (IRS, 2023, accessed 29 Sep 2023)

Figure 2
Rocketship's Corporate Structure for Santa Clara County Facilities



type out there, and when you're looking to protect valuable assets, this peace of mind is priceless." (Reuting, 2023, p. 292)

Rocketship itself gave four reasons for this corporate organization:

1. The need to eliminate RSED liability. Without Launchpad and its LLC's, RSED is taking on several liabilities
 - developing financing deals
 - lawsuit related to CEQA
 - financial risk from financing

With Launchpad and LLCs, RSED will have no liability associated with real estate.

2. The need to manage RSED's cash flow which fluctuates whenever a new school is financed. These fluctuation are large and lead to unnecessary speculation.⁵⁴
3. The need to allow RSED to focus on "Great Schools" and to let Launchpad focus on building "Great Sites".
4. The need to increase the market for developers of charter facilities.

At a Board offsite on 23 Jun 2009, Rocketship expanded significantly on these reasons in an 18 page presentation, RSED (2009b).

4.2 Rocketship Locations and Property Information

Before the formation of Launchpad, the Rocketship board chose sites for its schools according the following criteria:

- Location: Within 1 mile of a PI⁵⁵ or otherwise low performing school,
- Qualifies under the New Market Tax Credit Criteria (75% FRL).

In September 2009, they added

⁵⁴What that speculation is, was not specified.

⁵⁵A PI is a school under Program Improvement, a designation under Title I, that indicates that the school has failed to show adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years and is therefore subject to improvement or corrective action measures

- Financials: Less than \$8M for 30 years at 5% interest.
- Enrollment: For a school with 450 K-5 students, at least 3× that number within 1 mile or compensating interest from families outside the 1 mile radius.

These selection criteria appeared very early on in September 2009(RSED, 2009c) and they demonstrate that Rocketship was aware of the NMTC criteria and choose schools which would qualify.

Details of the Rocketship schools listed in Table 6, *Rocketship Property Information* are given in Appendix C, *Rocketship's Santa Clara Properties* on p.154.

Table 6
Rocketship Property Information

School	Address	Property Information
Mateo Sheedy	788 Locust St., San José, CA 95110	Section C.1, <i>Mateo Sheedy</i>
Sí Se Puede	2249 Dobern Ave, San José, CA 95116	Section C.2, <i>Sí Se Puede</i>
Los Sueños	331 S. 34th St, San José, CA 95116	Section C.3, <i>Los Sueños</i>
Discovery Prep	370 Wooster Ave, San José, CA 95116	Section C.4, <i>Discovery Prep</i>
Mosaic	950 Owsley Ave, San José, CA 95122	Section C.5, <i>Mosaic</i>
Brilliant Minds	2960 Story Rd, San José, CA 95127	Section C.6, <i>Brilliant Minds</i>
Alma Academy	198 West Alma Ave, San José, CA 95110	Section C.7, <i>Alma Academy</i>
Spark Academy	683 Sylvandale Ave San José, CA 95111	Section C.8, <i>Spark Academy</i>
Fuerza	70 S. Jackson Ave, San José, CA 95116	Section C.9, <i>Fuerza</i>
Rising Stars	3173 Senter Road, San José, CA 95111	Section C.10, <i>Rising Stars</i>

4.3 Rocketship's Finances

4.3.1 Rocketship Financial Documents

Every year, as required by law, Rocketship issues an independently audited financial statement for the preceding school year. Rocketship, rather than issuing a separate financial statement for each of its affiliates, consolidates them into a single document, typically called *Rocketship Education, Inc. and Its Affiliates Consolidated Financial Statements*

and Supplementary Information Year Ended June 30, <year>. Four annual financial statements are reported:

- Financial Position, which corresponds to a business's balance sheet
- Activities, which corresponds to a business's income statement
- Cash Flows, which corresponds to a business's cash flow statement
- Functional Expenses, which is usually only used by non-profits

The four different financial statements for the years 2010–2022⁵⁶ have been collected and the data summarized in Table 33, *Consolidated Financial Position, Years Ending 2010–2022*, Table 34, *Consolidated Activities, Years Ending 2010–2022*, Table 35, *Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006–2022*, and Table 36, *Consolidated Functional Expenses (2019–2022)*, in Appendices D – G, and online in this dissertation's *Data Dashboard*, a Google spreadsheet.⁵⁷

These four annual financial statements allow a detailed view of how Rocketship finances its facilities. Financing charter schools in California is more complicated than the financing of traditional public schools because charters need to obtain facilities often independent from the public school district in which they are located. Table 7, *Charter School Financing* on p.83 describes what facility financing options a charter school has compared to a traditional public school. Note that ending up with facilities that satisfy a school's needs may require the purchase of land, the construction of new facilities, or the modification of existing facilities in addition to operating those facilities. Each of these alternatives may require different financing methods.

To illustrate the variety of financing options that may be used, Rocketship states that they used three different financing options for nine schools as of 2015.

⁵⁶The years ending 2006–2008 were rolled up as single year that was not reported on until 2009. That year included all previous years and was restated in 2022. That makes the year 2009–2010 the first “normal” year

⁵⁷https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1c4akEKFj9bmVfLFQwi7ewMifSjRbrw5xpjh_Uj04oYY/edit?usp=sharing

Launchpad successfully financed four of the nine Bay Area Rocketship projects with New Market Tax Credits, four projects by issuing long term tax exempt bonds, and one project through short term private financing. Rocketship also prepared a detailed spreadsheet of their financial model, *Current RSED Financial Model 061909* (RSED, 2009a), that extrapolates some data to 2045.

This spreadsheet contains a huge amount of data. Although the mass of documents asked for by FCMAT (Fiscal Crisis and Management Team) is much larger, the depth of analysis by Rocketship is significantly deeper. The entire spreadsheet is available at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1e5j8nn20fg6l5Bl0aPi_qcByGH_0At232RrvTk0Jy2Q. Rocketship maintains an archive of its board agendas, materials, and minutes at <https://www.rocketshipschools.org/about/board-of-directors/>, but it has removed agendas, meeting materials, and minutes prior to 2017. Any meeting material used here prior to that date was collected before Rocketship removed those files.

Also revealing of Rocketship's early financial thinking is "Financial Narrative" (RSED, 2010) (The first author's last name is not specified). In it, Rocketship describes the parameters of a typical school (see the sheet "RSGen" in RSED, 2009a) from one year before opening to year 10. Some noteworthy observations:

- Rocketship expects each school to reach breakeven in year 1 of operation. (RSED, 2010, p. 1)
- Rocketship predicts that student demographics in years 1–8+ will be 70% Free and Reduced Lunch with 50% below the federal poverty level. English Language Learners (ELL) will drop from 70% in year 1 to 50% in year 8+ (RSED, 2010, p. 1).
- The first seven schools are to pay 25% of revenue (less food service sales and reimbursements) in management fees in the year before opening (year -1), dropping to 15% in years 0–3+. Facilities fees start in year 1 and are 20% of revenue

(less food service sales and reimbursements). For schools 8+, there are no fees in years -1 through 1

- Rocketship expects each school to receive \$1.1M total in grants in its early years.

In addition to the annual consolidated financial statements, Rocketship Education and Launchpad Development must file an IRS Form 990, a form that tax-exempt entities must file annually. This form is public information which provides a different point of view than the annual financial statements because they concentrate (mostly) on what a nonprofit did rather than accounting for revenues and expenses.

Form 990, according to Stephen Fishman in *Every Nonprofit's Tax Guide: How to Keep Your Tax-Exempt Status and Avoid IRS Problems* is intended to "... provide a complete picture of your nonprofit—including its activities, finances, governance, compensation, and tax compliance." (Fishman, 2022, p. 84) In addition to Form 990 itself (12 pages) there are potentially 16 additional schedules for a total of 80 pages. Instructions run 300 pages. Rocketship Education and Launchpad Development Company Form 990s are available at <https://apps.irs.gov/app/eos/> and on the GuideStar web site.

4.3.2 *Financing of Charter Schools*

In addition to needing revenue to finance operations, charter schools will likely need money to finance the purchase or lease of facilities if they don't avail themselves of district facilities via Prop. 39. Table 7, *Charter School Financing* below lists the major sources of revenue that fund both operations and facilities.

The first four sources of financing listed in Table 7, *Charter School Financing* are considered ordinary revenue which are available to both public and charter schools, although the amounts and timing of the distributions vary. The remaining four are not necessarily present for a given charter school or public school district and typically are not used to fund operations. Entries with a checkmark are explained below.

4.3.2.1 LCFF

Table 7
Charter School Financing

Type	Available to		Notes	
	TSPs	Charters		
<i>State funding</i>				
✓ LCFF		Yes	Yes	State minimum guarantee
✓ Local property tax		Yes	Yes	Reduces LCFF amount
Categorical programs		Yes	Yes	All state funding outside of LCFF is categorical. Some federal programs exist.
<i>Local funding</i>				
✓ Local parcel tax		Yes	No	district-wide election
✓ Bonds		Yes	Yes	Public schools: district election Charters: private or gov't sponsored
<i>Federal, state, or private funding</i>				
✓ Private grants		Yes	Yes	Much more common with charters
✓ Venture fund loans		No	Yes	May use New Market Tax Credits
✓ Rent subsidies		No	Yes	By the state (SB740)
COVID-19 PPP loans		No	Yes	Paycheck Protection Program

The Local Control Funding Formula is the principal way California funds both charter schools and public schools. County Offices of Education receive from the California Department of Education funds calculated using the Local Control Funding Formula (with adjustments) and those funds are distributed to all public school districts in the county. In turn, public school districts pass through an amount to charter schools in their district, also calculated using the LCFF.

All schools have the same base grant which varies by grade span. If a school, charter or public, has students who are in one or more of the following categories (1) eligible for free or reduced price meals (FRPM), (2) are English Learners (EL), or (3) are foster youth, the school receives a supplemental grant of 20% of its base grant for each such student. If

the qualifying population of students⁵⁸ exceeds 55% of the total number of students, a school receives a concentration grant of 65% of the base grant for every student above the 55% threshold. All Rocketship schools are located in high-poverty areas and all have more than 55% of their students in at least one of the three categories that qualify for concentration grants. In sum, Rocketship gets LCFF base grants, supplemental grants, and concentration grants as part of its total LCFF funding.

Rocketship reports LCFF money as “LCFF State Aid & Property Tax Revenue” or “Apportionment revenue” in its Consolidated Statement of Activities for the years 2010–2022 in this dissertation’s Data Dashboard.⁵⁹ Note that the definitions that Rocketship uses for these two categories of state revenue are not comparable because California changed funding models from the Revenue Limit system (1973–1974 to 2012–2013) to LCFF (2013–2014 to the present).

4.3.2.2 Local Property Taxes

In California, commercial and privately owned properties are taxed, unless exempt, typically because they are religious organizations or are charities. School districts receive about 40% of the property tax collected from properties in their home district and this tax replaces an equal portion of LCFF revenue. (If a district’s property tax revenue exceeds what they would have gotten in LCFF funding, they receive no LCFF funding. These districts are called *community-funded districts*, previously known as *basic aid districts*.) Note that the amount that districts pass through from their LCFF allotment to charter schools is independent of how much property tax is collected; it is always the full LCFF amount. The Data Dashboard sheet “Consolidated Activities” lists the property tax revenue that Rocketship received from each school’s home district.

⁵⁸These are unartfully called “unduplicated pupils” because schools do not get extra money for students in more than one category, as perhaps they should.

⁵⁹<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bnBIUkx7EPZU2UEUxi5M4BwkSgVjmKYVaZTnBZgIq8I> in the “Consolidated Activities” sheet.

4.3.2.3 Local Parcel Taxes

Traditional public school district may assess a non-*ad valorem* tax, usually a per parcel tax⁶⁰ if voters approve. Charter schools do not have taxing authority, so they may not assess parcel taxes. However, Public school districts may agree to share some portion of their parcel tax revenue with charter schools within their boundaries, but are not required to do so. Rocketship has no parcel tax revenue.

4.3.2.4 Bonds

Bonds, as far as educational institutions are concerned, come in just a few forms⁶¹.

These are:

- General Obligation (GO) bonds are backed by the full faith and credit of the issuer, here a public school district or a charter school. Normally, bonds are secured by assets owned by the borrower, such as real estate, personal property (e.g. an airplane or an oil well), or some other physical asset. Lenders (the purchasers of a bond) are naturally reluctant to lend based on an ephemeral asset like a revenue stream because of the chance that the revenue stream might dry up. The solution for charter schools is conduit borrowing described below.

Unlike public school districts that can pass a bond measure based on the value of the entire district's assessed property, charter schools have either no real property (if they are leasing) or a very small amount (if they own their facilities), so even if they were allowed to put a bond measure to the voters, the GO debt limit of 1¼% of their facility's assessed value would provide very limited funds. For example, an \$80M valuation would be required to be able to issue a \$1M bond.

⁶⁰A 2023 court decision allowed a tax based on square footage because it is also a non-*ad valorem* tax.

⁶¹A complete discussion of the various forms, constraints on, and capabilities of governmental debt in California can be found in “California Debt Financing Guide” (The California Debt and Investment Advisory Commission, 2023)

- Tax and Revenue Anticipation Notes (TRANs) and Revenue Anticipation Notes (RANs) are backed by specific forms of revenue. These bonds are normally issued to smooth out state and local revenue streams and are of short duration.
- Conduit Bonds are a type of tax-exempt municipal bond issued by a government agency (the conduit lender) that is neither the borrower nor the purchaser. The government entity or agency functions merely as a conduit between a borrower (often called the conduit borrower) and the purchaser of the bond (i.e. the lender). The conduit lender administers an offering by loaning to the borrower money it has received from issuing the bond. Often the funds come from a government agency (e.g. California Municipal Finance Authority, California School Finance Authority). The bond is an obligation of the borrower, not the conduit lender. The borrower's payments to the conduit lender are sized to meet the payments that the conduit needs to repay the purchaser(s) of the debt. The IRS publication "Publication 5005: Your Responsibilities as a Conduit Issuer of Tax-Exempt Bonds" details has some helpful information on conduit bonds and tax compliance.

This dissertation's Data Dashboard shows that Rocketship issued bonds totaling over \$200M from 2011 to 2022. In the years ending 2008 through 2011, Rocketship borrowed at least fifteen times before actually issuing a bond. Table 8, *Rocketship Bonds* on p.98 lists all the bonds issued by Rocketship or Launchpad from 2011 through 2022.

Lines 64-86 of this dissertation's Data Dashboard (<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bnBIUkx7EPZU2UEUxi5M4BwkSgVjmKYVaZTnBZgIq8I>) show that as of June 30, 2022, the total that Rocketship Education and Affiliates owed was \$186,550,566, or just over \$32K per child.

4.3.2.5 Private Grants

Rocketship lists a total of \$78,387,835 as “Contributions” from 2010 through 2022 (see line 11 of Table 34, *Consolidated Activities, Years Ending 2010–2022* in Appended E on p.182). Unfortunately, the details of what those contributions actually consist of are mostly not available. It is difficult to tease out what is an unrestricted grant, what is a restricted grant, what is a forgiven loan, and what has been rolled over or consolidated given what data is publicly available. But, what is known is that Reed Hastings and the Walton Family Foundation each promised \$250K per school for schools two through seven. An additional \$600K, again per school, of federal funding through Title V was available. Each school thus gets \$1.1M in startup grants.

4.3.2.6 Venture Capital Funding

Rocketship has made heavy use of loans and grants from venture capital funds. Most of these loans were forgiven, in one way or another, turning them into grants. To be forgiven, some benchmarks need have been met and almost always were.

4.3.2.7 Rent Subsidies

The last big source of revenue for Rocketship are the rent subsidies that the State of California offers through SB740. Lines 113–232 of this dissertation’s Data Dashboard list 12 years (2011–2022) of subsidy that total over \$43M. In recent years, SB740 adds over \$5M annually to Rocketship’s revenue stream. Note that SB740 subsidies continue until either the law is changed or Rocketship goes out of business; subsidies do not stop when a facility is fully paid off.

4.3.3 Debt

Rocketship has borrowed over 50 times since its founding in 2006⁶² and their annual, consolidated financial statements provide debt summaries starting in 2012. The totals are shown in Table 10, *Total Debt, 2012–2022* on p.99 below.

⁶²Full details of Rocketship’s borrowings are in this dissertation’s Google spreadsheet (see the previous footnote) in the tab *Dashboard* starting on lines 10–63.

The annual increase (or decrease) in debt year-over-year is shown in Table 10, *Total Debt, 2012-2022*. One can immediately observe that the changes in debt year-over-year are quite pronounced. The annual changes range from a low of 86% to a high of 155% with an average of just over 100% per year. (An increase of 86% means that the absolute amount of debt decreased. An increase of 155% means that debt increased one and a half times the previous year.)

4.3.4 The New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) Program

One form of debt that Rocketship has used numerous times is the New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) program. This is one of six programs offered by the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund (CDFI Fund) of the U.S. Department of the Treasury. In essence, the NMTC program offers a 39% tax credit on qualified investments in “Low-Income Communities”. The credits are spread out over 7 years: 5% of the amount invested for the first 3 years, and 6% for the remaining 4 years. These credits can be applied to federal income taxes due from other investments.

Charter schools operating in economically depressed areas qualify for tax credits. It is incentives like these incentives make the NMTC popular, coupled with reduced risk. The tax credit investment is nearly without risk because the tax credit is guaranteed as long as the charter school remains open. If the school stays open for seven years, the risk is nearly zero.

An example will help make it clear how the NMTC works. Suppose we have a high wealth individual with a marginal tax rate of 37% (the highest bracket), and suppose that this high wealth individual gets a return 10% per annum on their investments. Further, suppose this individual has \$2,351,000 to invest. The investor could divide that amount into a \$1,000,000 NMTC investment and \$1,351,000 investment in something other than a qualified NMTC investment.

In the NMTC case, every year for the first three years, the investor has $\$1,000,000 \times a 10\% \text{ return} \times 37\% \text{ income tax} = \$37,000$ tax due on $\$100,000$ profit. The investor gets back their original amount plus profit on the original amount minus taxes on the profit or $(\$1,000,000 + (\$1,000,000 \times 10\%)) - (\$1,000,000 \times 0.37) = \$1,063,000$ after taxes, in addition to a $\$1,000,000 \times 5\% = \$50,000$ tax credit. The last four years, the tax credit rises to $\$60,000$.

In the non-qualifying investment, the investor has $\$1,351,000 \times 10\% \text{ return} \times 37\% \text{ income tax} = \$50,000$ tax due, which is exactly equal to the tax credit of the NMTC case. The investor also has the return on the investment whose tax due was equal to the NMTC tax credit: $\$1,351,000 + (\$1,351,000 \times 10\%) = \$1,486,000$. In years 4–7, the investor can invest $\$1,622,000$ which generates a $\$60,000$ tax due.

Combining the returns from the NMTC case with those from the non-NMTC case, the investor gets back $\$1,063,000 + \$1,486,000 = \$2,549,000$ for an investment of $\$2,351,000$, a 8.47% net return after taxes. In years 1–3, the after tax return to the high wealth individual is 6.3%, $((\$2,549,000 \div \$2,351,000) \times 100)$ so the NMTC after tax return is 33.3% higher than investing $\$2,351,000$, but at much lower risk. In years 4–7, the net return is slightly less (7.3%) and the investment needed slightly higher ($\$2,622,622$).

4.3.5 Rocketship's Worth

When all is said and done, Rocketship's (including Launchpad Development Company's assets) net assets are how much it is worth. So, it is instructive to look at how Rocketship's worth has varied over the years.

- Rocketship's net assets from 2010 to 2022 have always been positive as seen in Table 11, *Net Assets, 2010–2022* on p.100, although they have risen in some years and fallen in others, sometimes considerably so.
- Rocketship's Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) started with a stratospheric 300+% and then gradually fell to a merely excellent 25–30% starting in 2017, a rate of return that would be the envy of any venture fund or private equity firm.

- This CAGR has been obtained with very little funding from the founders, and very little might actually be zero. This makes their rate of return on investment theoretically infinite.

4.4 Gaps, Anomalies, and Discrepancies

This section is concerned with what wasn't found during this dissertation's investigation. Gaps are where data were expected, but none were found. Anomalies are where data were found, but differed from what were expected, and discrepancies are where data were found but conflicted with other data.

In an enterprise as large as Rocketship is now (with a \$190M+ budget in 2022), there are bound to be unintentional gaps, anomalies, and discrepancies without any implication of nefarious intent. Further, as Berman and Knight emphasize, accounting involves making assumptions, estimates, and judgment calls; it is not an exact science.

The art of accounting and finance is the art of using limited data to come as close as possible to an accurate description of how well a company is performing.

So, the mere existence of gaps, anomalies, and discrepancies is not an indication of fraud. Fraud is deliberate, but gaps, anomalies, and discrepancies occur because of differing assumptions, simple oversight, recording errors, or (unfortunately) incompetence.

4.4.1 Gaps

Gaps are where data were expected, but not found. No significant gaps were found.

4.4.2 Anomalies

Anomalies are where data were found, but were not what was expected. Several anomalies were found.

- It appears that the Rocketship Business Committee only reviews and approves already signed checks in excess of \$100,000 rather than reviewing and approving purchase orders (i.e. before signature). It is not known if those checks have been sent to their respective payees.
- The audited financial statements use a level of materiality (\$300K) that is three times higher than that used by a public school district (LASD) whose budget is half the size of Rocketship's, i.e. Rocketship's level of materiality is 50% higher than expected.
- Administrative expenses, compared to total expenses, seem unusually high. Using functional expenses from the 2021-2022 school year as an example, Rocketship spent \$151,416,849 on educational programs, \$33,683,700 on program support, and \$46,401,574 on management and general expenses. The management and general expenses are thus approximately 30% of what was spent on educational programs. In a Business Committee presentation, Mukhopadhyay (2013, p. 28), Rocketship says that the fees they charge individual schools are 35% of revenue, consisting of a 15% management fee and a 20% facility fee, so 30% is in line with what the Business Committee expects.
- The functional expenses that Rocketship has chosen to use in their financial statements differ from the list used in IRS Form 990, Part IX. This makes it nearly impossible to cross check (triangulate) data from Form 990 and the audited annual financial statements.
- For the years ended 2019–2022, accounting expenses were \$166,059 in 2019, more than doubling to \$423,683 in 2020, roughly halving to \$264,784 in 2021, before more than tripling to \$848,221 in 2022. No mention is made of these substantial swings in accounting expenses in the *Notes to Consolidated Financial Statements* for 2022.

- In 2022, a total of \$2,635,011 was spent on travel which is over \$200,000 per month. This represents perhaps 50 cross-country business class flights per month (\$1500 flight with a five day stay at a five-star hotel at \$500/night). More modest flights and hotel ($\$500 + 5 \times \300) allow 100 trips per month. No explanation either for the need for this much travel or nor its cost was provided in the *Notes to Consolidated Financial Statements*, especially in this day and age of Zoom. An argument could be made that swings this large are material and so must be explained.
- In general, Rocketship spends more per student than their comparable home public school district in Santa Clara County does. This is unusual because, again in general, Rocketship schools have a higher student-to-teacher ratio than surrounding districts. Unexplained is why Rocketship has a higher cost per student. Charter schools were supposed to be more efficient than public schools because they did not have to adhere to bothersome and costly regulations that public schools did.

4.4.3 Discrepancies

Discrepancies are where two or more sources of the same data differ when they ought to agree.

The following discrepancies were found:

- Annual Financial Statements and Form 990s

The annual audited financial statements have several entries which also appear in the IRS Form 990, the federal tax return for organizations exempt from income tax, i.e. charities, religious organizations, private foundations, some political organizations, and other non-profits. For example, on June 30, 2015, the Consolidated Statement of Financial Position for 2014-2015 shows net assets to be \$10,562,747 (p.3) whereas the Form 990 (2014) show them to be \$13,968,882, a 32% difference. Analysis of this discrepancy is limited and is insufficient to determine if

the difference is the result of differing accounting practices or is a reflection of a more serious underlying problem.

Similar discrepancies also exist for functional expenses, among other categories.

- For year 2018–2019, salaries are shown as \$54,294,263 on the audited statement of functional expenses. Yet, adding lines 5 (executive compensation), 7 (other salaries), 8 (pension plan), and 9 (other employee benefits) from Form 990 (2018–2019) yields \$54,516,782 which is close, but not quite the same as the amount shown in the audited statements. Further, it is not even clear that those lines and only those should sum to the same amount as “Salaries” in the audited statement of functional expenses. For example, should pensions be counted as part of salaries?
- The total contributions (i.e. donations, grants) for all Rocketship schools in 2021-2022 is listed as \$7,075,182. The sum total of Object Codes 8980-8999 (Contributions) for all ten Santa Clara County Rocketship Schools is \$3,326,893. These two numbers are clearly not the same, but neither are the schools covered. The first consists of all 23 Rocketship schools in the U.S.; the latter consist only of ten schools in Santa Clara County. Considerable work beyond the scope of this investigation would be needed to determine if all the reported contributions agree.

The SACS Object Codes 8980-8999 are where contributions are recorded in Rocketship's unaudited actuals (and reported to the California Department of Education). The Department of Education makes available a Microsoft Access database with data for specific object codes or groups of object codes for every charter school in California. Summing each school's Object Code 8980-8999 for a test year (YE2020) does not agree with what's is reported on line 11 of Rocketship's Consolidated Statement of Activities for that year, nor does it agree with what was reported on Rocketship's IRS Form 990 that year.

Several questions remain: Are the differences merely differences in accounting standards of the California Department of Education and the IRS? Or, are the differences choices that Rocketship has made? And if so, why? One final question: the entries for Object Codes 8980-8999 are the only entries which have the form of a positive number under “restricted” and an identical number, but negative, under “unrestricted”. The total is naturally zero, which begs the question of what exactly is being reported.

4.5 Issues of Equality and Equity

Ostensibly, equality and equity are at the heart of why Rocketship exists. Their vision is to “eliminate the achievement gap in our lifetime” (RSE, 2017).⁶³ Their mission is to “catalyze transformative change in low-income communities through a scalable and sustainable public school model that propels student achievement, develops exceptional educators, and partners with parents who enable high-quality public schools to thrive in their community.” (*ibid.*) These are laudable goals, but not unique to Rocketship. Other charter schools, and even public schools have similar goals.

At a high level, Rocketship spent in 2021-22 (based on the *Santa Clara County 2022-2023 Annual Charter Schools Data Book* which is the latest available) on its eight Santa Clara County authorized schools between \$16,128 and \$23,995 per pupil which is from \$2,090 less than that school’s comparable district to \$5,777 more. Six out of eight schools spent more per student than their comparable district does (SCCOE, 2014–2023).

Rocketship locates all of its schools in high poverty areas⁶⁴ where chronically underfunded public schools struggle to provide a quality education to all. Had they not

⁶³Uncharitably, depending on whose lifetime Rocketship is referring to, the elimination of the achievement gap could be 30–60 years out. Included in this span of years is at least one pandemic, one major earthquake, several depressions or recessions, several wars, and numerous government shutdowns.

⁶⁴High poverty areas are defined as areas where 20% live in poverty or where the median family income less than 80% of the area median family income(CDFI, 2020, pp. 13–14)

done so, investors would not have been able to take advantage of the NMTC program. Despite being located in high poverty areas, Rocketship claims that its elementary schools are among the best in the nation (Abousalem, 2021) because their API or CAASPP test scores are higher than their surrounding district and higher than the California average. However, an argument can be made that all Rocketship can actually claim is that their students are among the best standardized test takers in the nation; there is no evidence that Rocketship students who continue their education (middle school, high school, college, university) do any better than public schools students. As previously mentioned, Lubienski and Lubienski (2014) have shown that the NAEP test results of public schools are higher than those of charter schools, all things considered. Of course this does not mean that Rocketship couldn't be an outlier whose students do better in the long run than those of other public or charter schools, but the only evidence that has been presented is Raymond et al. (2023). Like other CREDO publications, the findings of Raymond et al. (2023) have been disputed.⁶⁵

The evidence that children learn more when in front of computers is decidedly mixed. Some meta-analyses report positive outcomes, but small effect sizes. It has, however, been known for years that virtual charter schools (100% computerized) almost universally fail to perform better than schools using a blended approach or those with 100% teacher-led instruction. These issue were discussed in Section 2.4.3, *Types of Instruction* on p.29.

⁶⁵Stanford University's CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes) makes the case that "from 2015 to 2019, the typical charter school student in our national sample had reading and math gains that outpaced their peers in the traditional public schools (TPS) they otherwise would have attended". Reviewing the lastest CREDO report for the NEPC, Joseph Ferrare said, "[This] CREDO report compares charter school students' learning in reading and math to students in traditional public schools. The report should be approached with caution by policymakers given the nonexperimental design that renders it unable to fully account for the factors that drive families to choose charter schools. In addition, the report presents its findings using an unconventional metric that makes it difficult to understand the policy implications, potentially misleading policymakers. The magnitude of the main findings fails to meet the minimum threshold experts consider to be a meaningful educational intervention." (Ferrare, 2023)

In 2023, Rocketship teachers, on average, have barely more than three years of teaching experience (SCCOE, 2014–2023). In comparison, San José Unified School District (SJUSD) has 81.1% of its teachers with more than three years of experience (U.S. News and World Report, 2023). Further, no Rocketship school authorized by the Santa Clara County Board of Education (SCCBOE) has an average teacher salary that exceeds \$70,000, whereas SJUSD's average salary is just shy of \$90,000. SCCBOE-authorized schools have on average a 30% annual teacher attrition rate (SCCOE, 2014–2023). In 2014–2015 and 2015–2016, Rocketship reported in a bond prospectus that roughly one-third of its teachers didn't return the following years (CSFA, 2017). Given these figures, it would indeed be extraordinary if Rocketship schools did substantially better than their home district. A more likely reason for their (initial) successes is that the early cohorts at a school have the most engaged and supportive parents who have high expectations for their children's academic achievement. One would expect that over time that both scores and enrollment would regress to the mean, and that's exactly what happened (SCCOE, 2014–2023).

Rocketship, whose explicit goal is to close the achievement gap, claims on their web site, that their students "... receive 5-7 Additional Months of Learning" [emphasis added] (RSED, 2023), but this is not what is reported in Raymond et al. (2023). *Appendix A: Average Annual Academic Growth of CMOs and Networks, Reading and Math* Raymond et al. (2023, p. 132) shows Rocketship's estimated annual growth in reading and math to be 0.166 and 0.239 respectively. For a standard 180 day year (in California), this is just under 30 days growth in reading and just over 43 days in math, neither are anywhere near the 5 to 7 months as claimed.

The CREDO report also claims that Rocketship is a "Gap Buster" CMO, where "Gap Buster" is defined as "moved their achievement ahead of their respective state's average performance." (Raymond et al., 2023, p. 14). The report claims that "... more than 1,000

schools [in the U.S.] have eliminated learning disparities for their students” (Raymond et al., 2023, p. 14) which may or may not be true because the comparison is not an all-else-equal comparison, i.e. it is not commensurable. As Ashworth et al. (2021, p. 16) say, “Failure to respect all-else-equal conditions is the most important source of incommensurability.” The claim is only true if the demographics of a charter school and its home district are the same, and there are valid reasons to believe they aren’t (citation)

Table 8
Rocketship Bonds

Name	Amount	Interest Rate	Due Date
Series 2011A	\$9.600M	8.5%–9%	Dec 2041
Series 2011B	\$0.515M	8.5%–9%	Dec 2018
Series 2012A	\$9.105M	6.25%	Jun 2042
Series 2012B	\$0.355M	8.5%	Jun 2016
Series 2014A	\$31.935M	6.00%–7.25%	Jun 2018,24,35
Series 2014B	\$0.920M	6.00%–7.25%	Jun 2016
Series 2015A	\$6.135M	4.25%	Mar 2028
Series 2015B	\$0.250M	4.25%	Jun 2016
Series 2016A	\$28.080M	4.25%	Mar 2046
Series 2016B	\$0.525M	4.25%	Jun 2016
Series 2017A	\$23.098M	4.50%–6.25%	2027–2052
Series 2017B	\$3.665M	4.50%–6.25%	2025
Series 2017C	\$7.160M	4.50%–6.25%	2040
Series 2017D	\$0.250M	4.50%–6.25%	2019
Series 2017E	\$7.740M	4.50%–6.25%	2047–2052
Series 2017F	\$0.250M	4.50%–6.25%	2019
Series 2017G	\$15.560M	4.05%–6.00%	2025–2053
Series 2017H	\$0.665M	4.05%–6.00%	2022–2025
Series 2019A	\$28.075M	5.0%–5.3%	2029–2056
Series 2019B	\$0.935M	5.0%–5.3%	2020–2023
Series OG2021A	\$14.780M	4.0%	2022–2035
Series OG2021B	\$0.465M	4.0%	Jun 2022
Series OG2022A,B	\$27.990M	4%–4.5%	Jun 2022–2042
Total 2010-2011	\$218.053M		

Table 9
Venture Capital Funding

Year	Name	Amount	Interest Rate
2010	Charter School Growth Fund	\$3.400M	3.25%
2012	Charter School Growth Fund	\$1.000M	4.00%
2013	Charter School Growth Fund	\$0.125M	1.00%
2013	Charter School Growth Fund	\$0.500M	1.00%
2013	CSGF Revolving Facilities Loan	\$0.125M	1.00%
2014	Charter School Growth Fund	\$0.500M	1.00%
2014	CSGF Revolving Facilities Loan	\$7.000M	3.75%
2016	Charter School Growth Fund	\$0.300M	1.00%
2016	CSGF Revolving Facilities Loan	\$2.700M	3.75%
2017	Charter School Growth Fund	\$1.000M	1.00%
2019	Charter Impact Fund	\$7.300M	4.40%
Total		\$23.95M	

Table 10
Total Debt, 2012-2022

Year	Total Debt	Year-Over-Year Increase
2012	\$47,046,048	
2013	\$57,078,166	121.32%
2014	\$88,383,082	154.85%
2015	\$75,904,098	85.88%
2016	\$104,857,696	138.14%
2017	\$136,652,562	130.32%
2018	\$129,391,897	94.69%
2019	\$163,598,844	126.44%
2020	\$168,701,124	103.12%
2021	\$196,416,045	116.43%
2022	\$186,550,566	85.89%

Table 11
Net Assets, 2010–2022

Year	Net Assets	Year-Over-Year Increase	CAGR
2010	\$2,218,964		
2011	\$9,212,140	315.16%	315.16%
2012	\$11,933,099	29.54%	103.75%
2013	\$15,881,210	33.09%	92.71%
2014	\$13,356,528	-15.90%	56.63%
2015	\$10,562,747	-20.92%	36.62%
2016	\$16,931,464	60.29%	40.31%
2017	\$17,536,163	3.57%	34.36%
2018	\$20,883,606	19.09%	32.36%
2019	\$24,084,572	10.12%	30.34%
2020	\$24,617,294	2.21%	27.21%
2021	\$38,231,318	55.30%	29.54%
2022	\$33,442,645	-12.53%	25.37%

Discussion

This chapter addresses this dissertation's research question:

Has Rocketship structured itself to earn a return for its founders and investors, focusing especially on its real estate transactions?

The chapter looks more closely at the research question and summarizes the key findings of this research. It then discusses what kind of evidence would confirm or disconfirm the research question. It looks at three well-known approaches to making arguments for or against a proposal or policy and uses those approaches to make the case that Rocketship has in fact organized itself to make money and that real estate is the vehicle it uses. The two final sections discuss what policy issues are raised during the examination of the data and the evidence, what further research is warranted. Lastly, this dissertation makes a brief conclusion.

5.1 The Research Question

This dissertation's research question, is really asking three questions:

1. Has Rocketship structured itself to make money?
2. If so, is real estate Rocketship's chosen vehicle?
3. Is this Rocketship's intent?

5.2 Key Findings

This dissertation's epigraph is *cui bono?*, who benefits? In particular, who benefits from Rocketship's structure and activities?

After a careful examination of Rocketship's finances, a key finding is that no evidence of illegal activity was uncovered in Rocketship's *publicly available* financial documents. This is fortunate, because California is notorious for charter school fraud. Nine years ago,

Center for Popular Democracy et al. (2015) found \$81M in fraud, and in 2019, a single online charter school was discovered to have defrauded the State of \$400M. The report, *Risking Public Money-California Charter School Fraud* estimated in 2015 that “[t]he vast majority of this fraud perpetuated by charter officials will go undetected because California lacks the oversight necessary to identify the fraud” (Center for Popular Democracy et al., 2015, p. 2). With tens billions of dollars of funding for charter schools in California alone coupled with lax oversight, the temptation for fraud must be great.

Rocketship does have some questionable expenditures, namely \$7.5M spent on travel in 2019–2022. This is a large sum, and should be investigated.

If no illegal activities were detected, who actually benefits from Rocketship’s growth in net assets?

5.3 Arguments For Answering the Research Question

The next two sections each present a different style answer to this dissertation’s research question. The first follows rules defined by Anatol Rapoport, a [mathematical] game theorist, who sought to increase understanding and avoid defensive responses. Daniel Dennett reformulated them in his book *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (Dennett, 2013). These are referred to in the literature as Rappaport’s Rules. The second style was created by Stephen Toulmin, a British philosopher interested in moral reasoning. He developed a method for making practical arguments where ethics and morality played a role. Arguments made in this style are called Toulmin arguments.

Note that neither Rappaport nor Toulmin claim that their argument styles are logically rigorous; they are just a way articulating a point of view in a cohesive manner which fosters understanding and an exchange of ideas rather than descending into shouting, *ad hominem* attacks, or a shutdown of communication.

5.3.1 Rappaport’s Rules

Rappaport's rules for arguing are:

1. Re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says,
“Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way.”
2. List any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. Mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then present your criticism.

Rocketship, following the Rappaport model, could potentially argue:

1. Public schools, in areas of poverty, for whatever reason(s), fail to educate their students well, and they educate students of color especially poorly. We (Rocketship) aim to change this by a combination of focus, targeted intervention, and technology. We are focused on doing whatever it takes to raise the educational attainment of our students, and we focus day in and day out on this one goal. Our pedagogy has two major aspects: We monitor and target with specialized intervention students who are not doing as well as we would like, and we use technology (computer-aided instruction) to tailor instruction to a specific child's needs at exactly the time they need intervention.

We believe that, by controlling our facilities, we can remove a serious distraction that comes with sharing facilities with a public school district. Not only are we not beholden to the whims of the public school district, but we do not have to spend time preparing year after year a Proposition 39 facilities request. We are never embroiled in petty disputes about interactions between public school students and our students because they simply never arise. Our results speak for

themselves. All of our schools do better than their surrounding district and do better than the California average.

A response to Rocketship's argument, again following Rappaport's model might be:

2. Although it is true that some public school districts have failed in their primary duty to educate children, this could be attributed to chronic underfunding and to local and state governments tolerating, and often abetting conditions that do not exist in suburbia. Staying the course, however, is not an option because doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is not likely to be successful, now or ever. Further, providing separate facilities for children as Rocketship does rather than forced sharing is more likely to be successful than otherwise. Being able to control the school environment brings stability the classroom.
3. Starting and operating a charter school is not for the faint of heart. Funding for both operation and for facilities is hard to come by, and must be procured before a single student arrives on campus. Facilities need to be constructed or modified well before classes begin. Children need to be enrolled, and parents need to be persuaded to help out. Juggling priorities, contingencies, and expectations is a full-time task, and it shows when the topics of board committee (executive, business, achievement, development) meetings are looked at.
4. However, even given items 1–3 above, there are some areas where criticism, some of it quite severe, is warranted.
 - Even taking into consideration the acknowledged need for independent facilities, Rocketship spends an inordinate amount of time on topics that are

not academic in focus. One can see this in the topic areas of its board committees, where only one of four has to do with academic achievement.

- Rocketship short-changes current students in order to create future students by allocating 20% of revenue to facilities. Although this is legal, I suspect that the California Legislature did not expect one charter school to be begetting another, just as the Legislature didn't anticipate the damage that for-profit charter school chains or virtual charter schools would do. The percentage of revenue that Rocketship spends on administration (i.e. management), is unusually high at 14% in 2022 (RSEA, 2022, p. 38). General administrative expenses in public school districts are in the 5% to 10% range. So, immediately 35% of revenue is siphoned off and does not go directly to educating children.
- Teachers at Rocketship schools in Santa Clara county have much less experience and are paid substantially less than, say, teachers in the San José Unified School District. If we believe that teachers are a key factor in delivering a quality education, then what kind of teachers Rocketship hires and how much it pays them are important determinants of the quality of the teaching staff and hence how well Rocketship educates its children. The evidence is not encouraging.
- Rocketship has exaggerated how well its students do compared to public school students. The size of the discrepancy is 4× to 5× larger than what is reported in the literature. A possible explanation for this difference is that Rocketship is trying to convince people that they are both committed to “eliminating the achievement gap in our lifetime” and more importantly, successful at it.

According to the latest *Santa Clara County Annual Charter Schools Data Book*, comparing the percentage of Rocketship students who “met/exceeded

standards” on the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments (SBAC) test in English Language Arts (ELA) during the 2021–22 school year, only a single Rocketship school (out of eight Santa Clara County authorized schools) did better than public school students in Santa Clara County. In mathematics, the number of schools who did better was actually less than one; it was zero.

Moving on to comparing how Rocketship schools did against state public schools, only one school exceeded the state average in ELA—by a single percentage point. Rocketship did better in mathematics: Five schools exceeded the state average in Mathematics. Granted, these results are not as bad as ACE Empower that managed only 19% met or exceeded standards in ELA and 11% in Mathematics, but for a chain of schools whose explicit goal is to close the achievement gap, Rocketship’s scores are not encouraging (SCCOE, 2014–2023).

Also discouraging is the trend in the last five years. In five schools, the percent of students who met/exceeded standards has fallen in ELA and all but one have fallen in mathematics. However, a deeper investigation into the scores is needed to determine if this because parents with children who were not doing as well as hoped for enrolled and thus brought the average scores down, or whether this is truly a reflection on the effectiveness of Rocketship’s pedagogy.

- Rocketship’s policy of owning its facilities has led to over \$185M⁶⁶ in debt, which comes to roughly \$32K per child. If that debt costs 3% yearly to service, that is another \$5.4M per year that is not going toward educating children.

⁶⁶This figure is for all Rocketship schools, i.e. those in California, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Washington, D.C. and Texas.

5.3.2 A Toulmin Argument A Toulmin argument has six components, of which the first three are most commonly used. They are:

1. Claims are statements or conclusions which must be justified.
2. Grounds are the evidence (facts, data) that provide the basis for making the claim.
3. Warrants are the connection between the claim and the evidence which backs up the claim.
4. Backings buttress warrants.
5. Rebuttals are counter-arguments, made in advance, to potential objections.
6. Qualifiers express the degree of certainty about the claim.

Figure 3, *The Toulmin Argument Schema* below diagrams the relationship between the parts of a Toulmin argument.

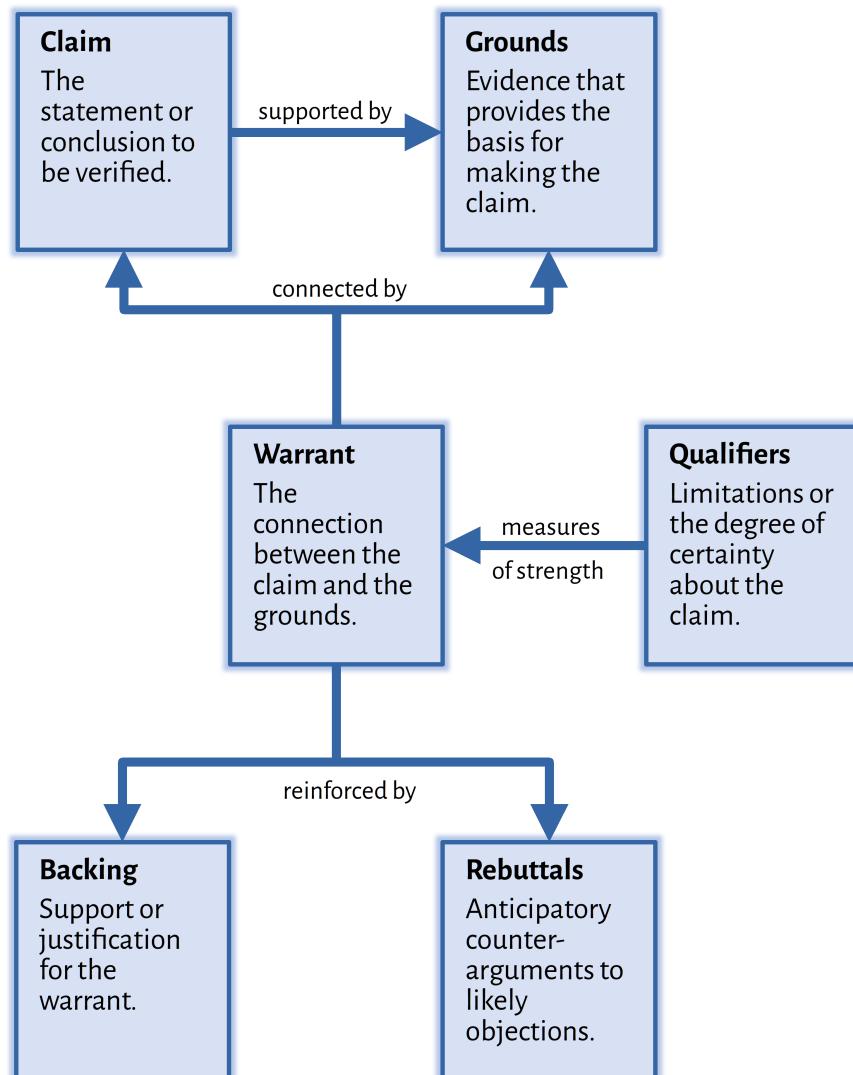
Claim Rocketship is structured and operates to leverage various kinds of government funding (loans, grants, credit repair) to increase their real estate holdings which then allows it to open more charter schools.

Grounds Rocketship's main focus is not on academic success, but on acquiring real estate that is paid for by someone else. Several observations point in this direction.

- How they have structured themselves, and how they have funded themselves.
- What California law, their Articles of Incorporation, and IRS Code say about individual enrichment.
- How they spend their time and where they spend their money.

Right from the beginning, Rocketship separated the financing, acquisition, and operation of their facilities from the running of a school; they borrowed heavily and made

Figure 3
The Toulmin Argument Schema



Adapted from “Toulmin Argument”, Kalyca Schultz, Virginia Western Community College, CC-BY-SA in “Toulmin Argument Model” by Liza Long, Amy Minervini, and Joel Gladd is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

extensive use of government programs to fund their real estate projects. Rocketship has not availed itself (except in one instance) of alternative ways of acquiring facilities. They have not used Proposition 39 to obtain classrooms and fields from a school's home district. They have not tried to convert commercial office space into classrooms. They have not modified existing buildings to serve as schools or classrooms. Instead they bought land and built a suitable school.

Since Rocketship and Launchpad, as nonprofit public benefit corporations, cannot distribute their income or assets according to law and to their Articles of Incorporation, they must have a different goal than enriching individuals. Rocketship Education's and Launchpad Development Company's Articles of Incorporation both contain language that is similar to, but more clearly expressed in "Summit Public School's [Restated] Articles of Incorporation":

Article III: The property of this Corporation is *irrevocably* [emphasis added] dedicated to charitable purposes and no part of the *net income or assets* [emphasis added] thereof or to the benefit of private persons except that the Corporation shall be authorized and empowered to pay reasonable compensation for services rendered and to make payments and distributions in furtherance of the purposes set forth in Article II of these Articles of Incorporation. (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 2)

The Articles of Incorporation for both Rocketship and Launchpad are possibly equivalent to the first paragraph of Article III of Summit's Articles of Incorporation quoted above, but they are not as explicit or definitive, and they are spread out over several articles and paragraphs.⁶⁷ California and IRS code forbid distribution of income or assets to anything

⁶⁷Since both Rocketship and Summit make an exception to the prohibition of private gain for services rendered in their articles of incorporation, and entirely reasonable exception, and Launchpad's articles of incorporation do not, this raises the question of whether the \$300K salary of Launchpad's CFO ("2020 LDC 990.Pdf," n.d., p. 7) in 2019–2020, for example, violates Launchpad's Articles of Incorporation.

but another public benefit corporation (see Section 5.5.2, *Real Estate Conversion* below), individual enrichment is illegal.

Lastly, judging by the number of board committees devoted to non-academic topics, Rocketship leadership has spent most of their time on real estate issues.

Warrant The best indicator of a firm's real goals is not on what it says its goals are, but how it actually spends its time and on what it actually spends its money.

Backing Time and money are both in limited supply, so firms must decide how to allocate their time and money, and this allocation reveals the firm's preferences and its goals.

Rebuttals A possible objection is that the three grounds given are neither necessary nor sufficient to prove the claim; there could be reasons other than the expansionary reasons given for Rocketship to have structured themselves the way they did. True, and also true, the way they spend their time and money could be not their choice, but instead due to outside constraints or being forced upon them. It is nonetheless hard to wish away governing law and the tax code. The first and third grounds are usually good indicators, but the second is unavoidable.

A second potential objection is that the warrant only addresses the third ground for making the claim, and doesn't support the first two grounds. True, but that objection overlooks the element of choice, one optional and one mandatory. Implied in the claim, the grounds and the warrant is that Rocketship had some level of choice in how they organized themselves. They could have chosen to make RSED (the parent organization) a 509(a)(3) supporting charity for individual 503(c)(3) nonprofit public benefit corporations that only provided requested services instead of forced management, or they could have even done away with RSED completely and just had a loose collection of independent

charter schools. Instead they chose an organization that made RSED the decision maker and Launchpad the accumulator of value. As for the second ground for supporting the claim, Rocketship has no choice, unless their officers and members are willing to risk fines and potential jail time. Given the opposition and accompanying media exposure that some of their schools generated, that would be quite a bold risk to take.

5.4 Answering the Research Question

As indicated above, this dissertation's research question is actually three sub-questions:

1. Has Rocketship structured itself to make a profit?⁶⁸
2. If so, is real estate the vehicle that Rocketship uses to make money?
3. Is this Rocketship's intent?

The arguments given above indicate that the answers are: yes, yes, and yes.

Two questions remain: How and Why? It is not known how the owners and investors of Rocketship could convert the assets of Rocketship and Launchpad into transferable wealth. Perhaps they do not intend to. Table 12, *Type of Conversion* below lists some of the forms and restrictions on converting real estate assets owned by a non-profit charter school.

That then begs the question of why Rocketship is accumulating assets. According to California law and to IRS Code, charter schools are not allowed to transfer money to a for-profit entity or to private individuals. The option which makes the most sense in explaining Rocketship's structure and activities given the investments of Reed Hastings, Andre Agassi, the Walton Family Foundation, and others, all strong charter school

⁶⁸Public benefit corporations (nonprofits) are allowed to make a profit, i.e. revenue exceeds expenses; they are, however, not allowed to *distribute* that profit. Any profit must be used to further its public benefit purpose identified in their articles of incorporation.

Table 12
Type of Conversion

Conversion Type	OK?	Notes
Excessive salaries	No	Listed in Form 990. Monitored by the IRS
Sale of assets to a private entity or for-profit corporation	No	Prohibited by CA Government Code, IRS Code, Articles of Incorporation. Requires AG notification
Arms-length transactions	Yes	Allowed by conflict of interest laws
Conversion of property to condos or apts.	No	Non-profits restricted to charitable purposes

supporters, is that Rocketship wants to become a self-sufficient pipeline of new charter schools for the entire United States. They have already expanded into Washington, D.C., Texas, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

5.5 Public Policy Issues

There are at least three major public policy issues that are raised by Rocketship's growth in assets and presumed expansion goals. First, are charter schools or charter school chains a net benefit to Californians? Secondly, is there too much opportunity for fraud, and lastly, should charter school chains in California use their assets (paid for by Californians) to create charter schools in other states? This last public policy issue could be more broadly construed to ask if any Californian tax dollars should leave the state with no benefit to Californians.

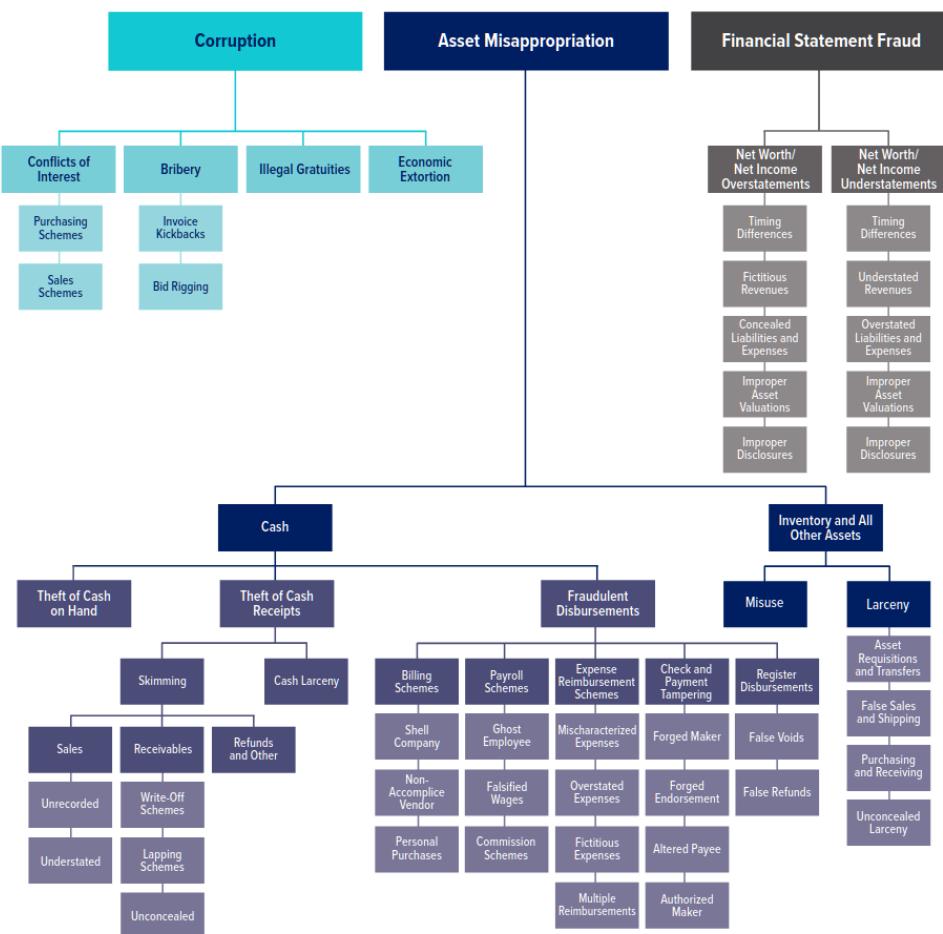
The first of these public policy issues, the net benefit of Californian charter schools to California, is beyond the scope of this dissertation because it would require a thorough analysis of not only the finances of charter schools, but also of the costs and benefits of the education they offer, their impact on public schools, and their impact on the

communities they serve. The second and third issues—opportunities for fraud and creating charter schools in other states—are discussed in the sections below.

5.5.1 Fraud

The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners issues an annual *A Report to the Nations* which is a global study on occupational fraud. Of interest is a diagram of the types of occupational fraud, reproduced below. The reason the Fraud Tree is interesting is because

Figure 4
The Fraud Tree



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public policy should make sure that laws or regulations are in place to prevent all types of

fraud from occurring. The diagram shows three major categories, eight immediate subcategories, and 47 specific types of occupational fraud, fraud that occurs in the context of employment. Note that much of this fraud can be eliminated by mandating robust internal controls and thorough, independent audits, neither of which are completely in place for charter schools. This should be an active area for new or modified legislation.

Current California law and regulations are clearly insufficient to prevent massive fraud. The largest case so far involved the A3 Charter Schools in San Diego. The San Diego County District Attorney filed an 235 page indictment (San Diego County District Attorney, n.d.) alleging a \$400M scheme to defraud the State of California. The two principle defendants pleaded guilty (Taketa, 2021). Seventeen years earlier, the California State Auditor found that not only did authorizers and the California Department of Education fail to meet the student outcomes their charter required, but fiscal oversight was insufficient (CA State Auditor, 2002). In 2021, the Network for Public Education issued a report on how charter schools across the United States profit from lax oversight and regulations (Burris & Cimarusti, 2021). Essentially, CMOs “sweep” all of the revenues of a charter school chain in return for administration, management, and marketing services. These CMOs may be for-profit corporations in other states. In 2016, Kamala Harris, then the California Attorney General, announced a settlement with K12 of \$168.5M because misleading advertising and misreported attendance numbers (agpressoffice, 2016).

Another area which is extremely difficult to monitor, as Justice Clarence Thomas has shown (Murphy & Mierjeski, 2023), is gifts which do not involve the exchange of money, such as luxury vacations, private jet travel, and VIP passes to sporting events. These illegal gratuities leave no financial traces and it may be hard to establish that a *quid pro quo* exists.

Some activities that are actually conflicts of interests can be masked so they appear as perfectly legal and normal. For example piloting EdTech software (Dreambox, Clever, Zeal Learning) is an activity that many public, private, and charter schools do, and this (in theory) improves the educational outcomes of students. But, if the founder of two EdTech companies (John Danner) was also the founder of Rocketship, there exists the possibility of an appearance of a conflict of interest.⁶⁹.

With billions of dollars in funding every year in California alone, with little accountability, it is not surprising that fraud occurs in California's charter schools. Despite this, there is no indication that Rocketship or its principals engaged in fraudulent activities. However, as noted below, unaccounted for expenditures leave open the possibility of private gain.

5.5.2 Real Estate Conversion

In the Public Interest, a national research and public policy organization says in ITPI (2018, p. 6)

Due to a loophole in [California] law, some private groups have used this public money to buy private property. While charter schools constructed with general obligation bonds cannot be sold or used for anything other than the authorized school, schools constructed with tax-exempt conduit bonds become the private property of the charter operator. Even if the charter is revoked, neither the state nor a local school district can take control of this property. Additionally, schools constructed with private funding subsidized by New Market Tax Credits or acquired with private funds but whose mortgage payments are reimbursed through the Charter Facilities Grant Program (known as "SB740") are typically owned without restriction. In the

⁶⁹California conflict of interest law is complex and is beyond the scope of this dissertation (Chaney et al., 2010)

event that such schools close down, their owners may be free to turn the buildings into condominiums or retail space, or sell them at a profit. In such cases, neither the school district nor any other public body is entitled to recoup the public dollars that have gone toward creating the facility. (ITPI, 2018, p. 6)

However, this is likely no longer correct because a plain reading of current law doesn't allow nonprofits to benefit private individuals.⁷⁰ Consequently, income and assets, during the lifetime of the nonprofit, or at dissolution, can only be transferred to other nonprofits, and at dissolution, a 20-day prior notice must be given to the California Attorney General. The prohibition of private gain and the requirement to notify the CA Attorney General rule out Rocketship converting its properties to condominiums or retail

⁷⁰Here are a few excerpts from IRS regulations and California law.

- The IRS says this about 501(c)(3) organizations under the heading "Exemption Requirements":
To be tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, an organization must be organized and operated exclusively for exempt purposes set forth in section 501(c)(3), and none of its earnings may inure to any private shareholder or individual. ...
The organization must not be organized or operated for the benefit of private interests, and no part of a section 501(c)(3) organization's net earnings may inure to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual.
- The California Attorney General says in *Attorney General's Guide for Charities* (2021):
Under California law, a public benefit corporation must be formed for public or charitable purposes and may not be organized for the private gain of any person. A public benefit corporation cannot distribute profits, gains, or dividends to any person. (p.3)

and

Although public benefit corporations may qualify for important benefits, including exemption from income tax, they are subject to important legal restrictions. One critical restriction is that the assets of a public benefit corporation are considered irrevocably dedicated to charitable purposes, and cannot be distributed for private gain. (p.7)

Finally, the AG says on p.14,

In addition, the founding document must require the organization to expressly dedicate its assets to exempt purposes in the event of dissolution.

- California Code, §§ 5130, 5237, 5410. Section 5410 says "No corporation shall make any distribution."

space. Lease payments under SB740 do continue even after any debt used to purchase real estate or to improve a property which has been paid off. This is an income stream that does not benefit Rocketship's children because it merely increases the value of Rocketship itself without funding any academic programs.

5.6 Changes to Public Policy

It is clear that public policy for the entire charter school sector needs to be updated with new or amended law and regulations to counter the innovation that people have shown in creating mechanisms to make money even when they should not. Only a few of these public policy changes are due to Rocketship and how it operates; the majority are due to other charter schools and charter school chains. If one believes that best disinfectant is sunshine, then the following changes which increase transparency should be considered:

- Eliminate “sweeps”
- Hold charter schools and charter school authorizers accountable
- Require a board to have at least one unaffiliated member
- Require auditors to express an opinion on the effectiveness internal controls.

5.6.1 *Eliminate Sweeps*

Sweeps are when all revenue is “swept” into a non-profit charter management organization (CMO) or a for-profit educational management organization (EMO). These management organizations are then responsible for all of the school’s finances. Sweeps into EMOs are ripe for abuse because their operations are opaque, invisible to the public whose taxes fund charter schools. If one believes that publicly funded organizations should be answerable their funders, the public, then their finances should be publicly visible, completely so. In addition, annual public audits of EMOs should be conducted by

an independent accountant, in exactly the same way that non-profit CMOs and public school are.

5.6.2 Hold Charter Schools To Their Charter

Charter schools exist because the state has granted them a charter to operate based on a petition submitted to an authorizer. The charter lays out the purpose and goals of the charter school and the ways that those goals will be met. In the last three years, the California Department of Education recorded just 6 out of 57 closures ($\approx 10\%$) that were not voluntary. In 2022-23, there were “more than 1,300 charter schools”⁷¹ in California, so less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1 percent of charter schools closed involuntarily. It beggars the imagination that 1294 charter schools were substantially meeting their charter obligations. What is much more likely is that authorizers were simply not holding the charter schools accountable.

As previously noted, in 2021-22, just a few Santa Clara County authorized Rocketship charter schools did better than the state average on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) English Language Arts (ELA) tests that are part of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CASPP) and none did better than the average for all Santa Clara County schools. The results for Mathematics (Math) are better, but still not stellar.⁷²

If charter schools are doing poorly compared to public schools in their districts, then they are not fulfilling a key premise of why they were created in the first place: They were granted exemption from onerous [sic] laws and regulations in return for better

⁷¹“Charter School Closures” <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ch/cefcharterschools.asp>

⁷²Standardized tests reveal remarkably little about how well a child is doing in school. For example, totally absent from measurement are 4 of the 6 C's of 21st century learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020): collaboration, communication, creative innovation, and confidence. Giving standardized tests the benefit of the doubt, one might claim that content and critical thinking are measured. Of course the 6 C's are just one way of viewing a child's education. Many alternatives views exist, none of which are captured by standardized tests.

performance than public schools. Laws and regulation should be changed to make clear what happens if a charter school performs poorly over a number of years, and authorizers should have clearly spelled out responsibilities. At stake is not only the education of children, but millions if not billions of dollars annually in subsidies, grants, and loans.

5.6.3 Unaffiliated Board Member

School boards consider both high level strategy and tactical minutia. They are responsible for every aspect of starting and running of a charter school, but currently there is no requirement that charter school boards contain an unaffiliated member. (Unaffiliated in this contexts means that they have no connection or relationship with the charter school, board members, staff, i.e. their relationship is at arms length. Parents of children who attend the charter school would not be unaffiliated under this definition.) If visibility and transparency is a goal, having an unaffiliated board member is necessary because board meetings are where decisions are made and the rationale for those decisions are articulated. Thus the law should require at least one unaffiliated board member.

5.6.4 Effective Internal Controls

It appears that routinely, independent auditors include a statement similar to

In performing an audit in accordance with GAAS and Government Auditing Standards, we [...] Obtain an understanding of internal control relevant to the audit in order to design audit procedures that are appropriate in the circumstances, but *not for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of RSEA's internal control*. Accordingly, no such opinion is expressed.

[Emphasis added]

in every audit report. This is curious because auditors are uniquely positioned to express an opinion on the effectiveness of internal controls because they have seen many examples, both good and less good. If auditors do not evaluate the effectiveness of

internal controls, who would be in a position to perform such an evaluation, fairly and comprehensively? The law should be extended to require auditors to express an opinion on the effectiveness of internal controls.

5.7 Areas for Future Research

This dissertation has discovered the need for future research. Some areas are Rocketship-specific; others are applicable to charter schools in general.

Rocketship records \$7.5M spent on travel in the four years of 2019–2022 and \$2.6M in 2022 alone. These are significant sums, so a future investigation should ask for details to substantiate the propriety of those expenditures. Details like who traveled, what class did they travel in, where did they go and where did they come from, and was the travel justified. Since these travel expenditures appeared in an annual financial statement, the investigation might ask what object codes went into each of the categories listed in Table 36, *Consolidated Functional Expenses (2019–2022)* on p.200.

As far back as 2002, the California State Auditor found that “Chartering entities lacked policies and procedures for fiscal monitoring and have not adequately monitored their charter schools.” (CA State Auditor, 2002) In other words, internal and external controls are lacking.

A study of what happened to a charter’s assets when a charter dissolves is needed because, although the law says that nonprofits cannot benefit individuals, and nonprofits must notify the Attorney General at dissolution, there is no effective monitoring nor is any enforcement mechanism. The result is that we have no idea of what happened to the assets of the hundreds of charter schools which have closed since 1992.

Another area for future research is calculating the net benefit of charter schools. Many studies have been made that examine the academic performance of charter schools vs public schools, and some studies have been made which quantify some of the costs to

public schools when a charter school opens, but I am not aware of any study that incorporates *all* of the costs and benefits of charter schools, even for a single school district, much less for an entire state or for all of the United States.

One area that has not been adequately explored is the 26 sheet Excel spreadsheet that Rocketship used for forecasting and planning in 2009 (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1e5j8nn20fg6l5Bl0aPi_qcByGH_OAt232RrvTk0Jy2Q). Some of its sheets forecast out to 2040, so it is clear that Rocketship is playing the long game. Understanding what Rocketship is thinking of doing would be revealed by a deep dive into this spreadsheet.

5.8 Conclusion

The conclusion this dissertation reaches is that Rocketship's finances do not and are not designed to benefit private individuals, but they are intended to benefit other nonprofit corporations, in particular, charter schools in states other than in California. If this is the case, then Californian taxpayers are effectively subsidizing charter schools in other states, a use of Californian tax dollars that I expect Californians would overwhelmingly reject.

Further, the differences in finances and especially accountability between public schools and charter schools admit the possibility for fraud in charter schools, a situation which is much less likely with the public school system because of their much greater transparency. It is difficult to prove that fraud has occurred, but it is even more difficult to prove that fraud has not occurred. Given the history of fraud in charter schools, and the amount of money which is sent to charter schools annually, and the lack of substantive financial controls and oversight, it would indeed be surprising if charter schools in California and Rocketship in particular were not engaged in some form of fraud.

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Appendix

A Note on Data Sources

Source data has been gathered from several places:

- Rocketship Education financial statements from its founding to the present are available from Rocketship's web site: <https://www.rocketshipschools.org/about/board-of-directors/financial-statements/>
- Rocketship Education's real estate holdings were first identified from Rocketship's financial statements and then details of each holding were obtained by searching the Santa Clara County Assessor's Office property records: <https://www.sccassessor.org/online-services/property-search/real-property>
- Financial data derived from Rocketship's annual consolidated financial statements is at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1c4akEKFj9bmVfLFQwi7ewMifSjRbrw5xpjh_Uj04oYY/edit?usp=sharing. Much of that data is also in this dissertation's appendices.
- The California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Department of Finance make available much of the data they collect from charter schools. Financial data is at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/fd/fd/index.asp> and <https://www.treasurer.ca.gov/csfa/csfgp/awardees.asp>.
- The Santa Clara County Office of Education, Charter School Department makes its files available at <https://www.sccoe.org/supoffice/charter-schools-office/documents/forms/allitems.aspx>.

Appendix

School Financing in California

This appendix presents an example of public school financing in California.⁷³ Understanding the normal, usual, default financing of schools in California is necessary in order to be able to identify where Rocketship's might differ. The description which follows is necessarily high-level; the budget document for 2022–23 that LASD submits to SCCOE and hence to the state runs to 118 pages of unadorned tables derived from accounting spreadsheets.

First, the highest possible level look at a LASD budget is presented. This is the *All Funds Summary*. Next are five tables that delve one level down from the *All Funds Summary*. Each of those tables can be further decomposed until individual SACS accounting (object) codes are reached. SACS code reflect exactly one kind of expenditure or revenue. For example, money received from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is recorded under SACS object code 8281 and nowhere else. How that money is spent is recorded under object code 8285. The lowest level of accounting is money received or money paid. All money received goes into at least one fund and is recorded under at least one object code. Payments are handled correspondingly. The intent of this process is to record unambiguously and completely every monetary transaction.

⁷³For a more detailed look at what a complete budget document looks like, see “LASD 2022–23 Annual Budget” of Item H.4 of the June 13, 2022 LASD Board Meeting (<https://tinyurl.com/lasd-2022--23-annual-budget>). Note that most public school budget documents are not as comprehensive or as well put together as LASD’s are.

Public school districts and charter schools receive funding from the state and the federal governments which most often goes into a district's or school's General Fund. A portion of funding is restricted to particular programs, and sometimes that money goes into a specialized and restricted fund, but the norm is for the General Fund to account for the majority of transactions.

The first table to look at is the aggregate of all funds as shown in Figure 5, *LASD 2019–20 All Funds Summary*. It is a very high-level summary of a school's or a district's budget. It's a snapshot of what the district's revenues are expected to be, roughly where that revenue is expected to come from, what the district's expenses are expected to be, and whether revenue and expenses are expected to be in balance. It is the rough equivalent of a business income statement.⁷⁴

Because Figure 5, *LASD 2019–20 All Funds Summary*, is a snapshot, detecting unusual changes year-to-year is not possible. Changes are detectable using Figure 6, *LASD YE 2020 Summary of Net Position* which compares fiscal two years. However, with just a budget summary, one can nonetheless note some interesting ratios, for example, the percentage of expenses spent on salaries and benefits. For LASD in 2021–20, this is 80.18% which is in line with what is typical of elementary school districts in California. One can calculate the state-wide average for all districts for 2019–20 using the Data Table at www.ed-data.org/state/CA, and that comes out to 83.71%. So, LASD spends a little less on salaries and benefits than the average elementary school district in California does.

Calculating this ratio brings up a general issue: What is an appropriate comparison group? In this particular case, the Ed-Data web site does not have county-level financial

⁷⁴Schools group their finances by funds. Most of their revenue goes into the general fund, and most of their expenses come out of the general fund. Some transactions must by law be accounted for in different funds. The three largest funds are the General Fund, the Special Revenue Fund, and the Capital Projects Fund, and together they account for virtually all of the financial activity of LASD. Other schools may have a different set of funds, but all contain a General Fund that is the primary fund for their day-to-day financial activities.

Figure 5
LASD 2019–20 All Funds Summary

	General Fund	Special Revenue Funds	Capital Project Funds	Total All Governmental Funds
REVENUES				
LCFF/Revenue Limit Sources	43,551,141	300,174	-	43,851,315
Federal Revenue	1,155,694	-	-	1,155,694
Other State Revenue	3,417,200	-	-	3,417,200
Other Local Revenue	16,387,903	22,500	1,243,180	17,653,583
TOTAL REVENUES	64,511,938	322,674	1,243,180	66,077,792
EXPENDITURES				
Certificated Salaries	25,965,289	-	-	25,965,289
Classified Salaries	10,606,613	-	-	10,606,613
Employee Benefits	16,904,698	-	-	16,904,698
Books & Supplies	1,526,084	-	-	1,526,084
Services & Other Operating Expenditures	8,453,291	300,000	1,428,474	10,181,765
Capital Outlay	162,342	-	43,000	205,342
Other Outgo	341,064	-	-	341,064
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	63,959,381	300,000	1,471,474	65,730,855
Excess (Deficiency) of Revenues Over Expenditures	552,558	22,674	(228,294)	346,938
OTHER FINANCING SOURCES/USES				
Interfund Transfers In	-	-	-	-
Interfund Transfers Out	-	-	-	-
TOTAL OTHER FINANCING SOURCES/USES	-	-	-	-
NET INCREASE/(DECREASE) IN FUND BALANCE	552,558	22,674	(228,294)	346,938
BEGINNING FUND BALANCES	107,727	3,603,040	1,745,439	5,456,206
ENDING FUND BALANCES	660,284	3,625,714	1,517,145	5,803,144

\$1 dollar difference in General Fund Ending Fund Balance due to rounding error.

Kenyon (2019, p. 38).

data, so the only comparison which can easily be made is at the state level. But should the state-level comparison group be all districts, or just elementary school districts? Should “basic aid” districts, also called “community-funded” districts, districts whose property tax revenues exceed their LCFF entitlement, be included or not? Again, the Data Table tab on www.ed-data.or/state/CA does not filter by type of district (although the Graph tab does), so, in this case, using just the Ed-Data data, our choices are forced since we cannot use state-level data.

The other common financial business report is the balance sheet, which identifies assets and liabilities. In the educational world, this is the statement of net position. Figure 6, *LASD YE 2020 Summary of Net Position* shows LASD's assets and liabilities at the end of the 2019–20 school year. Note that unlike a balance sheet, a statement of net position for schools (and other governmental entities) does not balance; assets are not exactly equal to liabilities.⁷⁵

As an example of a number which stands out and is therefore worth investigating, is the large increase in Capital Assets, year over year, an increase of \$132M (line 3 of Figure 6, *LASD YE 2020 Summary of Net Position*). In “Comprehensive Annual Financial Report FY 2020,” six notes appear immediately after Figure 6, and these provide an explanation for the increase: LASD purchased a property whose cost was \$134.9M net of \$2.7M in depreciation. This purchase shows up again in line 1 of Figure 9, *LASD YE 2020 Capital Assets* and explains the enormous 9052% increase in the value of LASD’s largest asset in FY2019, land.

In addition, the “Comprehensive Annual Financial Report FY 2020” contains a section, on pp. 19–45, called *Notes to the Basic Financial Statements*. These notes are an integral part of the certified, audited annual statement, just as they are in audited financial reports in the business world; they cannot be omitted, and must be accurate and complete. Note 7B of Kenyon (2021a, p. 7), General Obligation (GO) Bond Anticipation Notes (BANs), explains how LASD uses a common technique to convert general obligation bonds into cash: issue BANs, backed by general obligation bonds, and payable when those GO bonds are issued.⁷⁶

⁷⁵Business accountants achieve this seemingly low probability equality by adding a fudge factor, *owner's equity*, so that *assets = liabilities + equity* always, exactly.

⁷⁶One reason this makes sense is that interest rate on BANs is less than the interest rate of GO bonds, so LASD makes money by issuing BANs to pay off GO bonds. In a different situation, school districts issue tax revenue anticipation notes (TRANS) because property taxes are paid by taxpayers semi-annually and salaries are paid monthly, so districts often and predictably do not have the cash on hand to pay their

It's important to remember is that although changes in finances can be complicated, they should also be adequately explained in a transparent and complete CAFR. When the documents are incomplete or opaque is when serious concerns should be raised.

Within a CAFR are five summaries of financial tables that go one level deeper than the All Funds Summary. These are

- Summary of Net Position (*Figure 6, LASD YE 2020 Summary of Net Position*)
- Change in Net Position (*Figure 7, LASD YE 2020 Change of Net Position*)
- Net Costs of Services (*Figure 8, LASD YE 2020 Net Cost of Services*)
- Capital Assets (*Figure 9, LASD YE 2020 Capital Assets*)
- Long-term Liabilities (*Figure 10, LASD YE 2020 Long-term Liabilities*)

LASD rolls up its detailed financial data into a single multi-year summary, as shown in *Figure 11, LASD 2019–20 Multi-Year Projection*. In addition to purely financial data, the multi-year summary includes the key assumptions that were behind the numbers. In fact, the first section of *Figure 11* is only assumptions, and it is those assumptions which drive the numbers in Sections 2–4. The value of this summary is that it captures in one table the key data needed to make budgetary decisions and thus might serve as a template for what data is important.

employees. The solution is to issue TRANs backed by anticipated revenue, and are paid off when the school or district receives the funds.

Figure 6
LASD YE 2020 Summary of Net Position

Table 1: Summary of Net Position					
	June 30, 2019	June 30, 2020	Change	Percentage Change	
Assets					
Current and Other Assets	\$ 20,044,318	\$ 65,493,755	\$ 45,449,437		227%
Capital Assets	89,045,541	221,076,448	132,030,907		148%
<i>Total Assets</i>	<i>\$ 109,089,859</i>	<i>\$ 286,570,203</i>	<i>\$ 177,480,344</i>		<i>163%</i>
<i>Deferred Outflows of Resources</i>	<i>\$ 22,094,579</i>	<i>\$ 19,321,134</i>	<i>\$ (2,773,445)</i>		<i>13%</i>
Liabilities					
Other Liabilities	\$ 2,665,639	\$ 22,680,079	\$ 20,014,440		751%
Long Term Liabilities	141,558,936	269,006,215	127,447,279		90%
<i>Total Liabilities</i>	<i>\$ 144,224,575</i>	<i>\$ 291,686,294</i>	<i>\$ 147,461,719</i>		<i>102%</i>
<i>Deferred Inflows of Resources</i>	<i>\$ 5,549,865</i>	<i>\$ 9,680,588</i>	<i>\$ 4,130,723</i>		<i>74%</i>
Net Position					
Net Investment in Capital Assets	\$ 37,623,977	\$ 64,225,229	\$ 26,601,252		71%
Restricted	7,726,718	6,825,216	(901,502)		12%
Unrestricted	(63,940,697)	(66,525,990)	(2,585,293)		4%
<i>Total Net Position</i>	<i>\$ (18,590,002)</i>	<i>\$ 4,524,455</i>	<i>\$ 23,114,457</i>		<i>124%</i>

Kenyon (2021a, p. 6).

Figure 7
LASD YE 2020 Change of Net Position

Table 2: Change in Net Position					
	June 30, 2019	June 30, 2020	Change	Percentage Change	
Revenues					
Program Revenues:					
Charges for Services	\$ -	\$ 446,710	\$ 446,710	100%	
Operating Grants and Contributions	10,052,323	7,968,769	(2,083,554)	-21%	
Capital Grants and Contributions	-	23,000,000	23,000,000	100%	
General Revenues:					
Property Taxes	63,216,247	65,285,688	2,069,441	3%	
Grants and Entitlements - Unrestricted	3,933,401	2,511,734	(1,421,667)	-36%	
Other	7,347,728	7,498,513	150,785	2%	
<i>Total Revenues</i>	<i>84,549,699</i>	<i>106,711,414</i>	<i>22,161,715</i>	<i>26%</i>	
Program Expenses					
Instruction	52,349,163	54,025,994	1,676,831	3%	
Support Services:					
Instruction-related services	7,219,873	7,282,281	62,408	1%	
Pupil services	4,381,022	4,334,692	(46,330)	-1%	
General administration	4,658,051	4,519,337	(138,714)	-3%	
Plant services	8,526,753	8,569,628	42,875	1%	
Payments to other agencies	-	7,036	7,036	100%	
Interest and Fiscal Charges	2,893,333	4,857,989	1,964,656	68%	
<i>Total Expenses</i>	<i>80,028,195</i>	<i>83,596,957</i>	<i>3,568,762</i>	<i>4%</i>	
Change in Net Position	4,521,504	23,114,457	18,592,953	411%	
<i>Beginning Net Position</i>	<i>(23,111,506)</i>	<i>(18,590,002)</i>	<i>4,521,504</i>	<i>20%</i>	
<i>Ending Net Position</i>	<i>\$ (18,590,002)</i>	<i>\$ 4,524,455</i>	<i>\$ 23,114,457</i>	<i>124%</i>	

Kenyon (2021a, p. 7).

Figure 8
LASD YE 2020 Net Cost of Services

Table 3: Net Cost of Services					
	Net Cost of Services for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2019	Net Cost of Services for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2020	Change	Percentage Change	
Instruction	\$ 43,345,309	\$ 24,008,344	\$ (19,336,965)	-45%	
Support Services:					
Instruction-related services	6,608,564	6,681,271	72,707	1%	
Pupil services	4,033,498	4,019,853	(13,645)	0%	
General administration	4,568,746	4,444,973	(123,773)	-3%	
Plant services	8,526,422	8,162,012	(364,410)	-4%	
Payments to other agencies	-	7,036	7,036	100%	
Interest and Fiscal Charges	2,893,333	4,857,989	1,964,656	68%	
<i>Total Expenses</i>	<i>\$ 69,975,872</i>	<i>\$ 52,181,478</i>	<i>\$ (17,794,394)</i>	<i>-25%</i>	

Kenyon (2021a, p. 9).

Figure 9
LASD YE 2020 Capital Assets

Table 5: Capital Assets					
	June 30, 2019	June 30, 2020	Increase (Decrease)	Percentage Change	
Land	\$ 1,488,885	\$ 136,262,476	\$ 134,773,591	9052%	
Site improvements	1,225,056	1,225,056	-	0%	
Buildings and improvements	129,573,748	130,339,280	765,532	1%	
Equipment	4,636,939	3,871,407	(765,532)	-17%	
<i>Total</i>	136,924,628	271,698,219	134,773,591	98%	
<i>Less: Accumulated Depreciation</i>	47,879,087	50,621,771	2,742,684	6%	
Net Capital Assets	\$ 89,045,541	\$ 221,076,448	\$ 132,030,907	148%	

Kenyon (2021a, p. 10).

Figure 10
LASD YE 2020 Long-term Liabilities

Table 6: Long-term Liabilities					
	June 30, 2019	June 30, 2020	Increase (Decrease)	Percentage Change	
Long-term Debt:					
General obligation bonds:					
Current interest bonds	\$ 40,665,000	\$ 95,850,000	\$ 55,185,000	136%	
Unamortized bond premium	4,596,243	9,376,755	4,780,512	104%	
Bond anticipation notes	10,000,000	79,000,000	69,000,000	690%	
Lease-leaseback obligations	2,405,645	2,185,036	(220,609)	-9%	
Subtotal long-term debt	57,666,888	186,411,791	128,744,903	223%	
Other Long-term Liabilities:					
Net pension liabilities	64,535,048	65,113,381	578,333	1%	
Net OPEB obligation	18,914,928	16,922,035	(1,992,893)	-11%	
Compensated absences	442,072	559,008	116,936	26%	
Subtotal other long-term liabilities	83,892,048	82,594,424	(1,297,624)	-2%	
Total Long-term Liabilities	\$ 141,558,936	\$ 269,006,215	\$ 127,447,279	90%	

Kenyon (2021a, p. 11).

Figure 11
LASD 2019–20 Multi-Year Projection

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
% Change in Prop Tax Collections	7.06%	4.00%	4.00%	4.00%	4.00%	4.00%
Enrollment	3,574	3,669	3,725	3,761	3,792	3,813
In-district students @ charter school	1043	1061	1061	1061	1061	1061
Total Enrollment, LASD + BCS	4,617	4,730	4,786	4,822	4,853	4,874
Transfer of Prop Tax to BCS	9,187,469	9,926,004	10,210,982	10,494,976	10,785,723	10,450,068
Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA)	0.00%	4.05%	2.98%	3.05%	3.00%	3.00%
Foundation Funding	2,400,000	2,500,000	2,500,000	2,500,000	2,500,000	2,500,000
Parcel Tax	820	820	820	820	820	597
Class Size, K-3	19	22	22	22	22	22
Class Size, 4-6	25	25	25	25	25	25
Class Size, 7-8	25	26	26	26	26	26
Teachers, FTE	226	220	222	223	225	226
Raises (across-the-board)	2.00%	2.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Cost of Step/Column Movement	355,034	355,276	357,641	358,823	361,188	362,370
Step/Col (converted to % salary inc.)	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%
Health Benefit rate increases	5.0%	7.5%	7.5%	7.5%	7.5%	7.5%
Health Benefits (converted to % salary inc.)	0.9%	1.4%	1.4%	1.4%	1.6%	1.7%
STRS rate increases	-1.0%	0.8%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total Comp (as % of salary)	3.2%	5.4%	3.7%	2.6%	2.8%	2.9%
LCFF Sources	47,831,288	48,960,469	50,930,778	52,994,478	55,150,308	58,023,166
Federal Sources	2,966,976	1,128,389	1,162,015	1,197,456	1,233,380	1,270,382
Other State Sources	7,460,221	3,799,074	3,848,990	3,863,445	3,874,123	3,881,107
Other Local Sources	14,942,614	15,253,502	15,910,684	15,977,729	16,049,330	13,308,736
Total Revenues	73,201,099	69,141,434	71,852,467	74,033,108	76,307,141	76,483,390
Certificated Salaries	28,473,085	26,804,421	27,081,223	27,286,386	27,563,386	27,771,946
Classified Salaries	12,146,432	11,964,000	12,072,253	12,178,439	12,284,470	12,390,750
Employee Benefits	16,708,058	17,877,672	19,185,547	19,853,541	20,542,397	21,163,633
Retiree Benefits	934,490	960,791	1,001,625	1,044,194	1,088,572	1,134,836
Books & Supplies	3,926,089	1,508,677	1,542,077	1,573,747	1,607,611	1,640,136
Contract Services	9,782,495	8,879,712	8,999,752	9,143,511	9,308,868	9,477,329
Capital Outlay	251,893	235,312	240,835	246,658	253,080	259,653
Other	8,262	8,262	8,262	8,262	8,262	8,262
Total Expenses	72,230,804	68,238,847	70,131,574	71,334,737	72,656,646	73,846,545
Net Change	970,295	902,587	1,720,892	2,698,370	3,650,495	2,636,845
Adjusted Beginning Balance	4,469,801	5,440,096	6,342,683	8,063,576	10,761,946	14,412,441
Ending Balance	5,440,096	6,342,683	8,063,576	10,761,946	14,412,441	17,049,286
Encumbrances	5,000	5,000	5,000	5,000	5,000	5,000
General Fund Reserves	5,435,096	6,337,683	8,058,576	10,756,946	14,407,441	17,044,286
Reserves, Special Reserve Funds	3,590,562	3,630,562	3,690,466	3,760,585	3,839,557	3,920,188
Total Reserves	9,025,657	9,968,245	11,749,042	14,517,531	18,246,998	20,964,474
% of Expense	12.50%	14.61%	16.75%	20.35%	25.11%	28.39%

Kenyon (2021b, p. 137).

Appendix

Rocketship's Santa Clara Properties

Each of the 10 existing Rocketship schools in Santa Clara County which were listed in Table 6, *Rocketship Property Information* are described in this appendix.

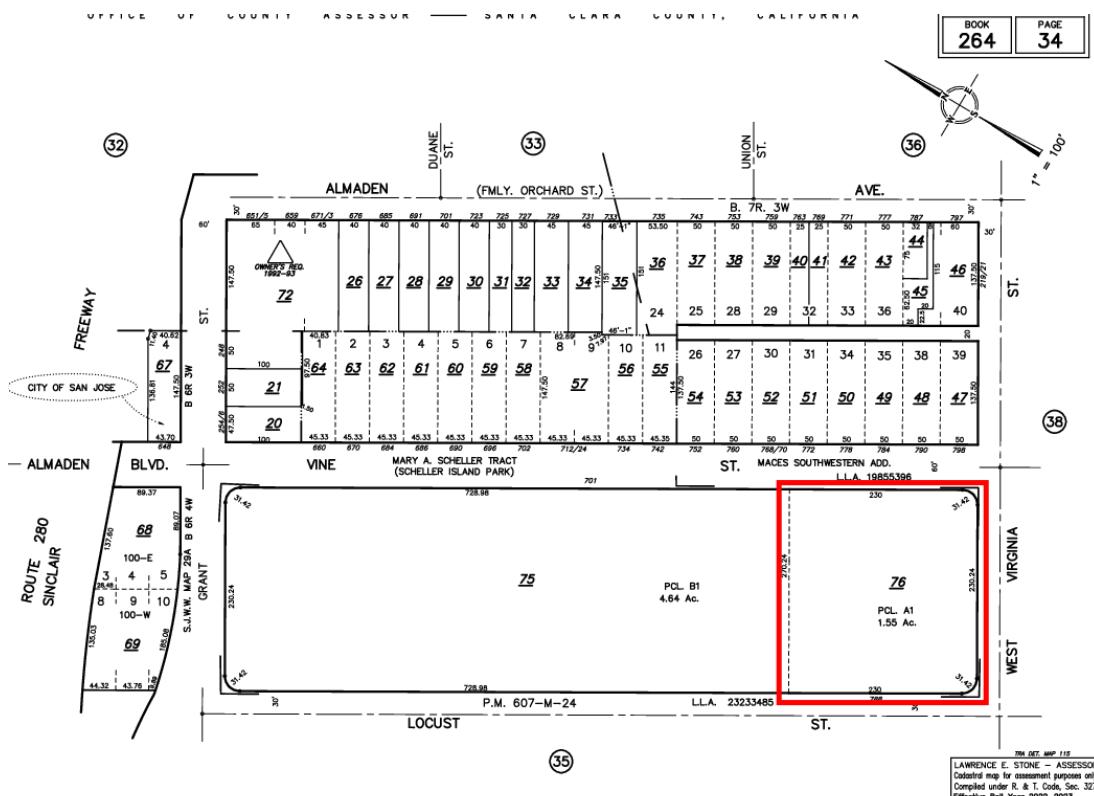
Except for the photos, all of the information presented in this appendix is available from the web site of the Office of the Assessor, County of Santa Clara, under the heading “Real Property Search” (<https://tinyurl.com/assessors-office-santa-clara>).

C.1 Mateo Sheedy

Table 13
Mateo Sheedy: Property Information

Property Address 788 Locust St., San José, CA 95110
Assessor's Parcel No. 264-34-076
Size (acres) 1.55
Date of Last Sale 11 Mar 2016

Figure 12
Mateo Sheedy Plat Map



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 22 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/mateo-sheedy-plat-map>.

Table 14
Mateo Sheedy: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$3,011,899	\$780,861	\$3,792,760
2021	\$2,952,843	\$765,550	\$3,718,550
2020	\$2,922,566	\$757,701	\$3,680,267

Figure 13
Mateo Sheedy Satellite Photo



Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 19 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/mateo-sheedy>.

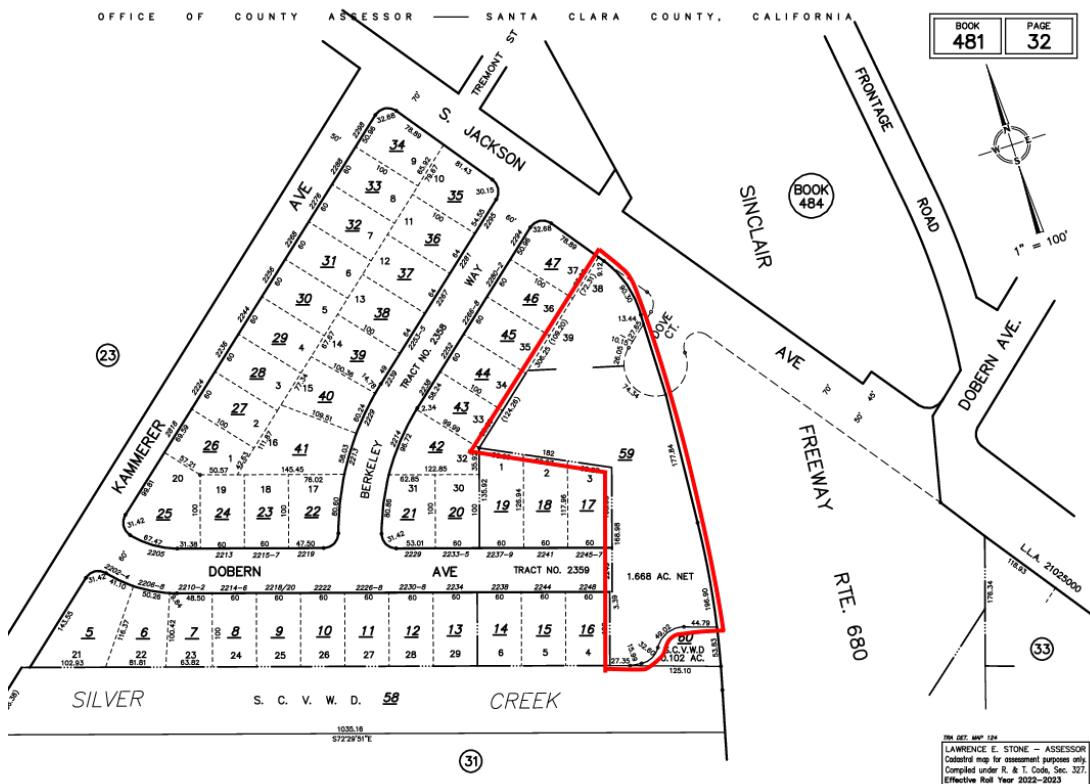
C.2 Sí Se Puede

Table 15

Sí Se Puede: Property Information

Property Address	2249 Dobern Ave, San José, CA 95116
Assessor's Parcel No.	481-32-059
Size (acres)	1.668
Date of Last Sale	20 Mar 2014

Figure 14
Sí Se Puede Plat Map



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. retrieved 22 dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/si-si-puede-plat-map>.

Table 16

Sí Se Puede: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$5,545,914	\$5,411,914	\$10,957,828
2021	\$5,437,171	\$5,305,799	\$10,742,970
2020	\$5,381,420	\$5,251,395	\$10,632,815

Figure 15

Sí Se Puede Satellite Photo



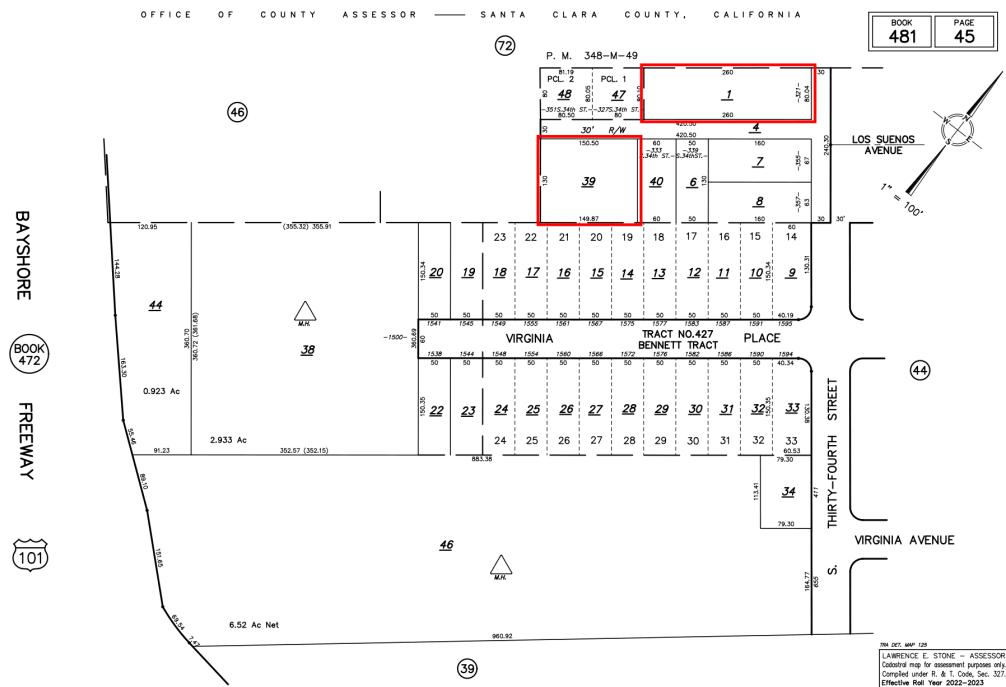
Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 19 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/si-si-puede-v2>.

C.3 Los Sueños

Table 17
Los Sueños: Property Information

Property Address	331 S. 34th St, San José, CA 95116
Assessor's Parcel Nos.	481-45-001 481-45-039
Size (acres)	0.482 + 0.449 = 0.93
Date of Last Sale	19 Apr 2010

Figure 16
Los Sueños Plat Map

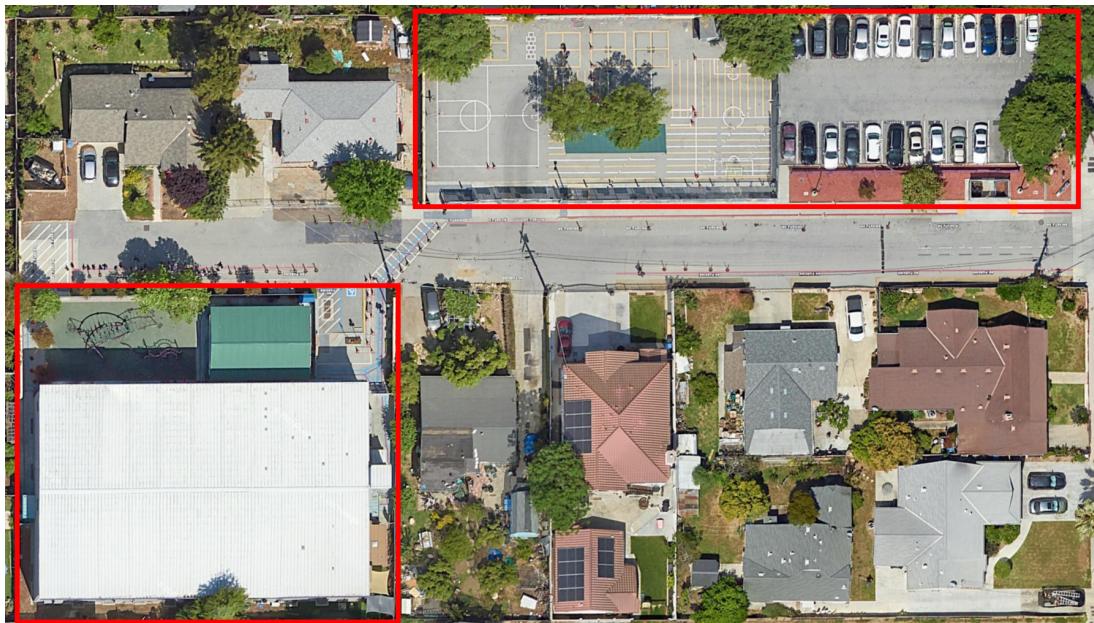


Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 23 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/los-suenos-plat-map>.

Table 18
Los Sueños: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$486,545	\$6,510,874	\$6,997,419
2021	\$477,005	\$6,383,210	\$6,860,215
2020	\$472,114	\$6,317,759	\$6,789,873

Figure 17
Los Sueños Satellite Photo



Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 23 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/los-suenos-v4>.

C.4 Discovery Prep

Table 19
Discovery Prep: Property Information

Property Address	370 Wooster Ave, San José, CA 95116
Assessor's Parcel No.	249-65-079
Size (acres)	1.652
Date of Last Sale	30 Mar 2011

Figure 18
Discovery Prep Plat Map

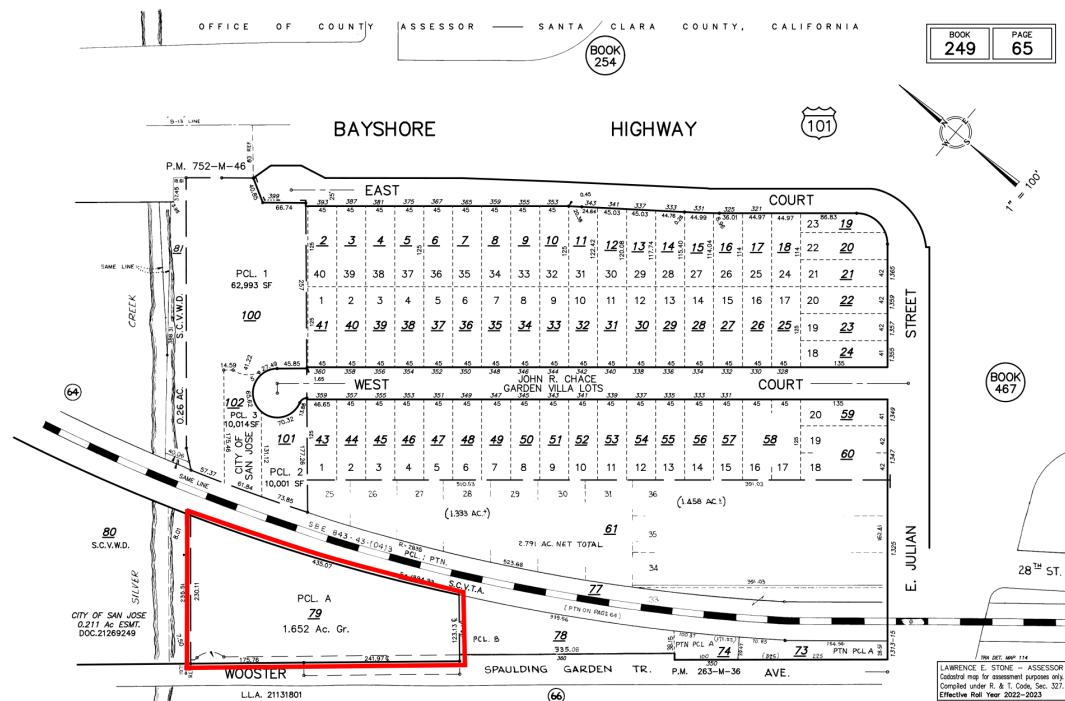


Table 20

Discovery Prep: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$2,414,563	\$4,289,318	\$6,703,881
2021	\$2,367,219	\$4,205,214	\$6,572,433
2020	\$2,342,947	\$4,162,095	\$6,505,042

Figure 19

Discovery Prep Satellite Photo



Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 23 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/discovery-prep-v2>.

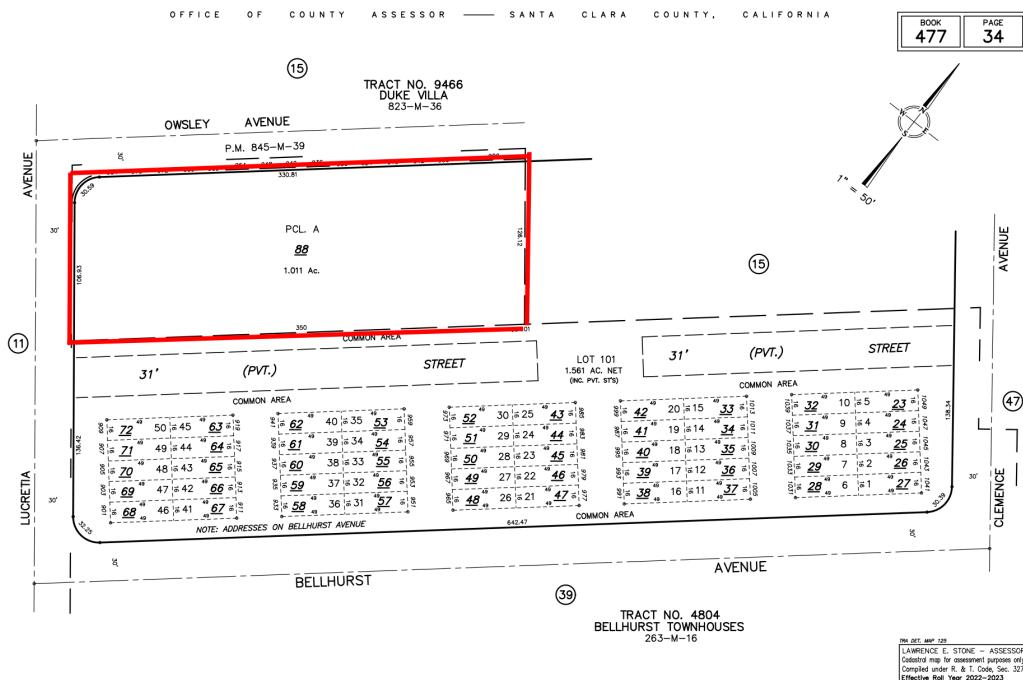
C.5 Mosaic

Table 21
Mosaic: Property Information

Property Address 950 Owsley Ave, San José, CA 95122
Assessor's Parcel No. 477-34-088
Size 1.011ac
Date of Last Sale 24 May 2011

Figure 20

Mosaic Plat Map



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 23 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/mosaic-plat-map>.

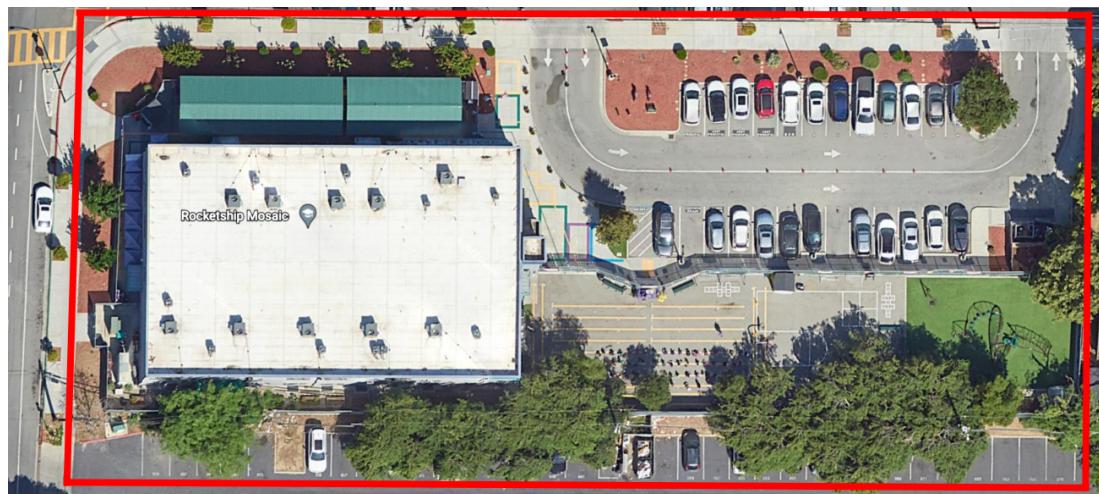
Table 22

Mosaic: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$1,851,242	\$4,971,161	\$6,822,403
2021	\$1,814,944	\$4,873,688	\$6,688,632
2020	\$1,796,334	\$4,823,715	\$6,620,049

Figure 21

Mosaic Satellite Photo



Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 23 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/mosaic-v3>.

C.6 Brilliant Minds

Table 23
Brilliant Minds: Property Information

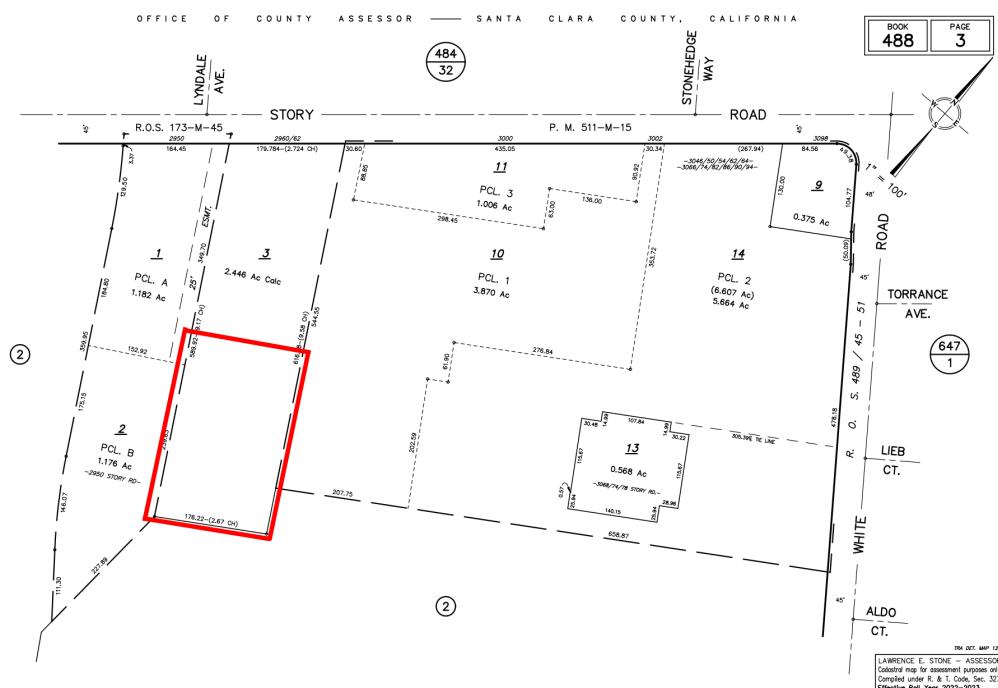
Property Address	2960 Story Rd, San Jose, CA 95127 2962 Story Rd, San Jose, CA 95127
Assessor's Parcel No.	488-03-003
Size	1.223ac
Date of Last Sale	11 Feb 2014

Note: Brilliant Minds occupies a single parcel, along with two churches. It appears to have its own buildings, but shares the single parking lot. The size of the parcel is 2.446ac, and arbitrarily, half has been allocated to Rocketship Brilliant Minds.

Table 24
Brilliant Minds: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

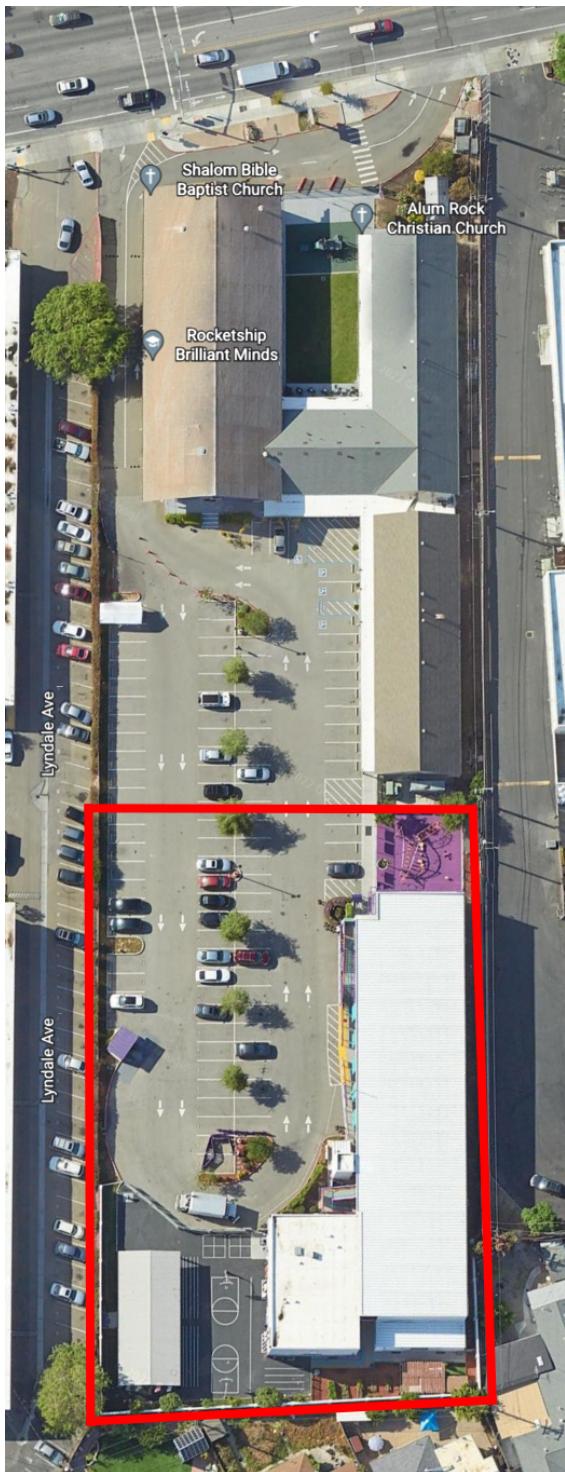
Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$8,630,187	\$4,218,635	\$12,848,822
2021	\$8,460,968	\$4,135,917	\$12,596,885
2020	\$8,374,212	\$4,093,509	\$12,467,721

Figure 22 *Brilliant Minds Plat Map*



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 23 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/brilliant-minds-plat-map>.

Figure 23
Brilliant Minds Satellite Photo



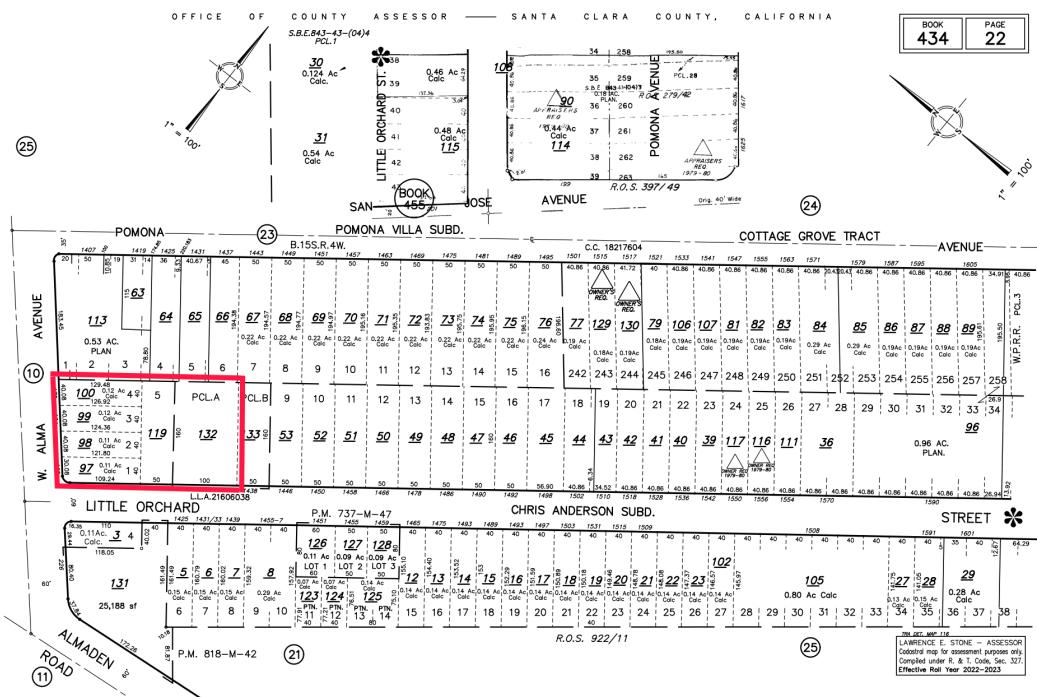
Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 23 Dec 2022 from <https://tinyurl.com/brilliant-minds-v2>.

C.7 Alma Academy

Table 25
Alma Academy: Property Information

Property Address 198 West Alma Ave, San José, CA 95110
Assessor's Parcel No. 434-22-097,098,099,100,119,132
Size 0.551ac
Date of Last Sale 12 Apr 2012

Figure 24
Alma Academy Plat Map



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 03 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/alm-a-academy-plat-map-v2>.

Table 26

Alma Academy: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$1,615,598	\$0	\$1,615,598
2021	\$1,583,932	\$0	\$1,583,932
2020	\$1,567,686	\$0	\$1,567,686

Note: Rocketship Alma Academy comprises six adjacent parcels, so the assessed value indicated in this table is the sum of all six parcels.

Figure 25

Alma Academy Satellite Photo



Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 03 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/alma-academy>.

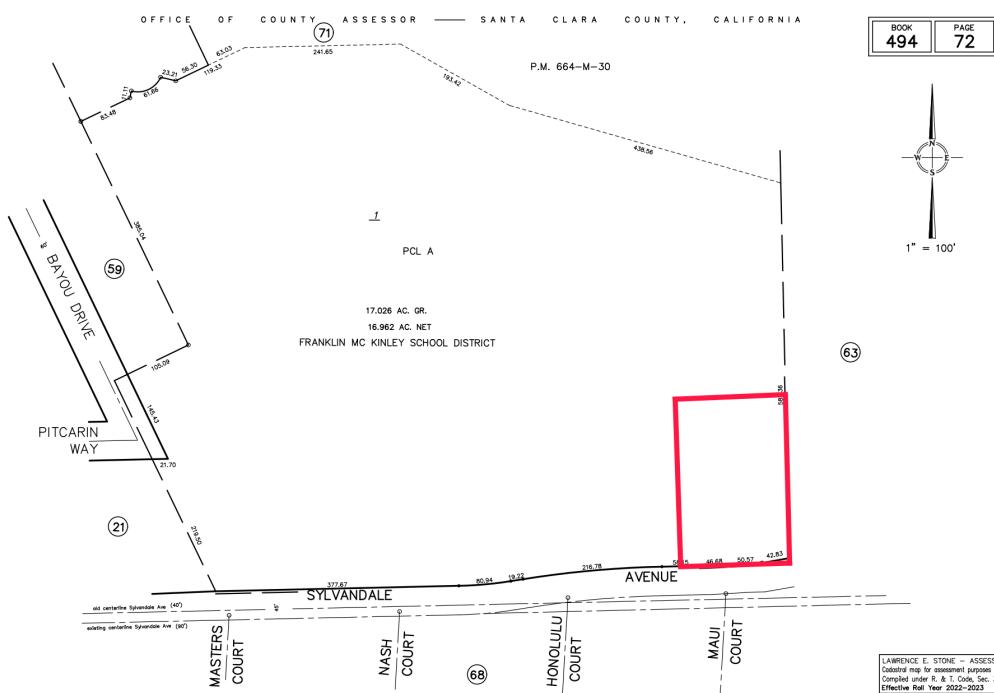
C.8 Spark Academy

Table 27
Spark Academy: Property Information

Property Address	683 Sylvandale Ave San José, CA 95111
Assessor's Parcel No.	[494-72-001]
Size	approx. 1ac
Date of Last Sale	[01 Jun 2012]

Note: Spark Academy has a land lease from the Franklin McKinley School District, so the figures above enclosed in brackets are those of the Franklin McKinley School District.

Figure 26
Spark Academy Plat Map



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 07 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/spark-academy-plat-map>.

Note: The outline is approximate.

Table 28
Spark Academy: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$0	\$0	
2021	\$0	\$0	
2020	\$0	\$0	

Note: As noted above, Spark Academy leases its land from the Franklin McKinley School District. Since public school districts are exempt from property taxes, all the taxable amounts in this table are listed as \$0.

Figure 27
Spark Academy Satellite Photo



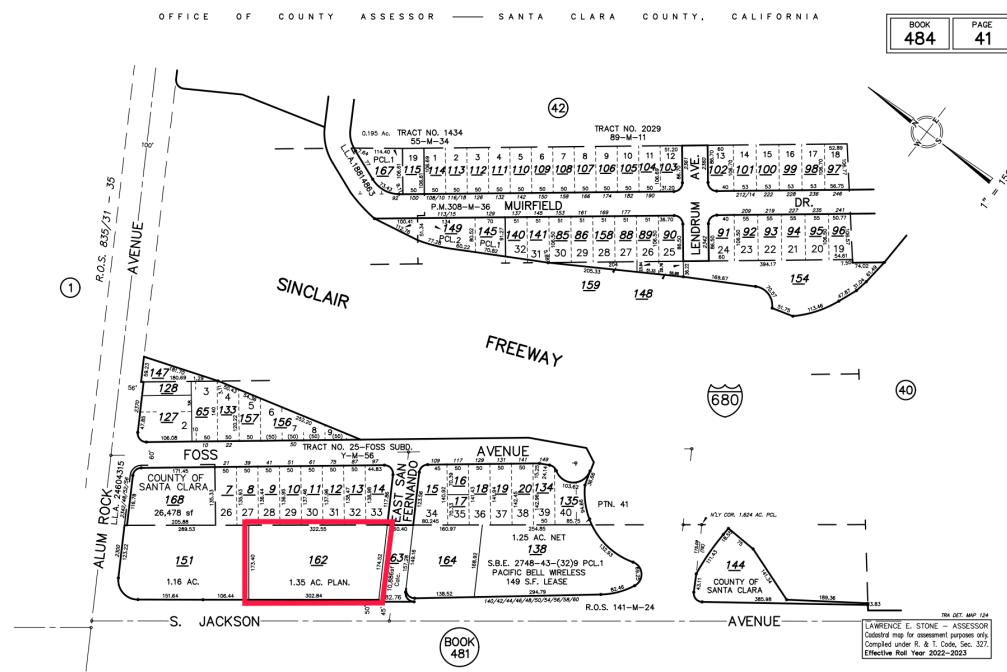
Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 07 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/spark-academy>.

C.9 Fuerza

Table 29
Fuerza: Property Information

Property Address	70 S. Jackson Ave, San José, CA 95116
Assessor's Parcel No.	484-41-162
Size	1.35ac
Date of Last Sale	02 Feb 2018

Figure 28
Fuerza Plat Map



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 07 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/fuerza-plat-map>.

Table 30

Fuerza: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$2,656,862	\$937,117	\$3,593,979
2021	\$2,604,767	\$918,743	\$3,523,510
2020	\$2,578,059	\$909,323	\$3,487,382

Figure 29

Fuerza Satellite Photo



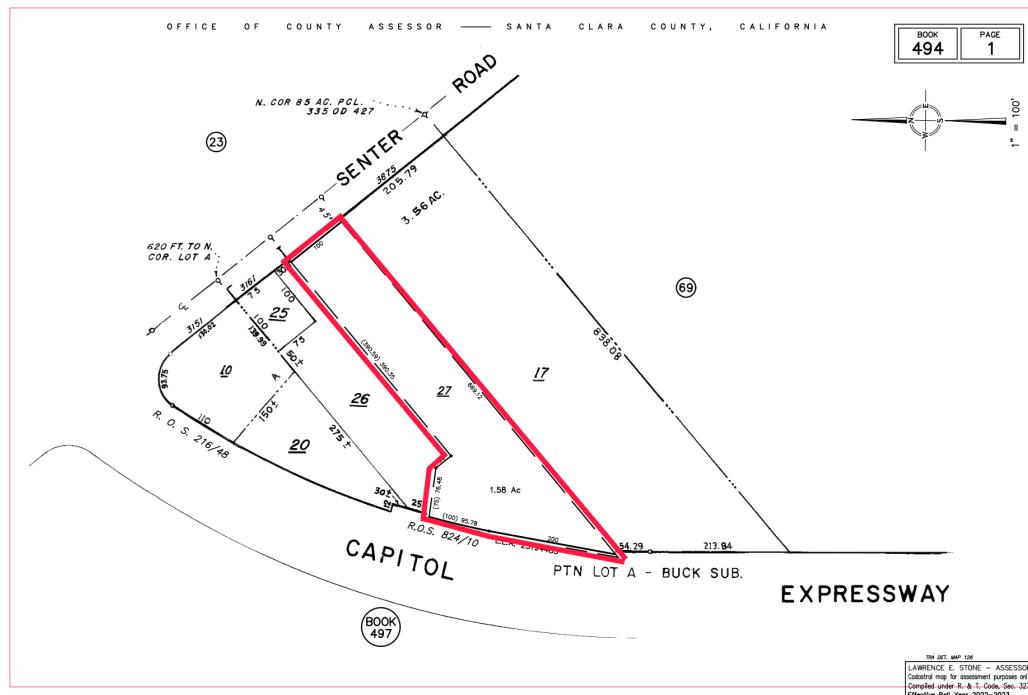
Google. (n.d). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 07 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/fuerza-v2>.

C.10 Rising Stars

Table 31
Rising Stars: Property Information

Property Address 3173 Senter Road, San José, CA 95111
Assessor's Parcel No. 494-01-027
Size 1.58ac
Date of Last Sale 01 Dec 2016

Figure 30
Rising Stars Plat Map



Santa Clara County Assessor's Office (n.d.). [Plat Map]. Retrieved 07 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/rising-stars-plat-map>.

Table 32
Rising Stars: Taxable Amount of Assessed Property

Year	Land	Improvements	Total Assessed Value
2022	\$2,997,872	\$12,139,470	\$15,137,342
2021	\$2,939,091	\$11,901,442	\$12,139,470
2020	\$2,908,955	\$11,779,408	\$14,688,363

Figure 31
Rising Stars Satellite Photo



Google. (n.d.). [Google Earth image]. Retrieved 07 Jan 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/rising-stars-v2>.

Appendix

Consolidated Financial Position (2010-2022)

Table 33
Consolidated Financial Position, YE 2010-2022

	Year ending, June 30	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Assets								
Current Assets								
Cash and cash equivalents		\$7,001,097	\$9,369,115	\$9,172,882	\$14,317,955	\$33,058,905	\$16,072,631	\$24,573,632
Restricted cash		\$40,019	\$909,959	\$1,927,649	\$5,014,729	\$5,149,879	\$5,136,357	\$7,624,930
Investments								\$249,350
Accounts receivable		\$1,732,866	\$4,154,307	\$7,927,381	\$9,880,618	\$9,513,318	\$5,838,881	\$7,889,515
Deferred rent asset								
Grants receivable			\$1,083,000	\$333,598	\$593,008	\$873,694	\$588,050	\$503,160
Note receivable								
Prepaid expenses and deposits		\$218,858	\$145,658	\$407,045	\$1,583,894	\$1,736,015	\$1,265,685	\$2,497,514
Total current assets		\$8,992,840	\$15,662,039	\$19,768,555	\$31,390,204	\$50,331,811	\$29,150,954	\$43,088,751
Long-Term Assets								
Grants receivable				\$582,367	\$703,443	\$420,022	\$163,714	\$235,474
Intracompany receivable								
Security deposits								
Accounts receivable								
Prepaid expenses and deposits					\$64,034			
Note receivable						\$560,000	\$560,000	\$560,000
Deferred rent asset								
Total property, plant and equipment, net		\$17,347,756	\$32,470,668	\$42,596,821	\$45,821,468	\$58,986,771	\$63,644,651	\$89,243,223
Total long-term assets		\$17,347,756	\$32,470,668	\$43,179,188	\$47,148,945	\$59,966,793	\$64,368,365	\$90,038,697
Total assets		\$26,340,596	\$48,132,707	\$62,947,743	\$78,539,149	\$110,298,604	\$93,519,319	\$133,127,448

Consolidated Financial Position, YE 2010-2022, cont'd

	Year ending, June 30	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Assets							
Current Assets							
Cash and cash equivalents	\$43,265,177	\$38,794,312	\$34,519,662	\$36,215,753	\$47,620,276	\$48,532,010	
Restricted cash	\$10,634,074	\$11,363,000	\$12,497,822	\$12,547,596	\$14,098,510	\$9,720,654	
Investments							
Accounts receivable	\$8,203,486	\$9,533,421	\$13,242,884	\$18,555,403	\$26,926,079	\$25,916,680	
Deferred rent asset			\$175,000			-	
Grants receivable	\$476,241	\$1,404,283		\$900,000	\$17,000	\$15,000	
Note receivable	\$560,000						
Prepaid expenses and deposits	\$1,368,099	\$3,347,455	\$3,612,640	\$4,024,684	\$6,021,009	\$6,547,464	
Total current assets	\$64,507,077	\$64,442,471	\$64,048,008	\$72,243,436	\$94,682,874	\$90,731,808	
Long-Term Assets							
Grants receivable	\$96,325	\$75,000					
Intracompany receivable							
Security deposits		\$35,795	\$26,830	\$28,330	\$49,709	\$53,297	
Accounts receivable					\$19,723	\$8,475	
Prepaid expenses and deposits							
Note receivable							
Deferred rent asset							
Total property, plant and equipment, net	\$99,989,879	\$103,593,491	\$140,800,699	\$137,529,685	\$161,798,585	\$156,960,429	
Total long-term assets	\$100,086,204	\$103,704,286	\$140,827,529	\$137,558,015	\$161,868,017	\$157,022,201	
Total assets	\$164,593,281	\$168,146,757	\$204,875,537	\$209,801,451	\$256,550,891	\$247,754,009	

Consolidated Financial Position, YE 2010-2022, cont'd

	Year ending, June 30	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Liabilities and Net Assets								
Current Liabilities								
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	\$1,837,261	\$3,149,027	\$3,149,027	\$3,343,879	\$6,778,855	\$4,971,627	\$7,979,337	
Accrued interest	\$91,909	\$89,014	\$224,902	\$318,293	\$448,391	\$417,127	\$516,835	
Lines of credit				\$1,000,000				
Deferred rent liability								
Deferred revenues		\$62,500		\$1,635,767	\$622,884	\$370,372	\$1,341,972	
Current portion of loans payable	\$262,124	\$256,660	\$2,075,432	\$7,453,675	\$17,996,666	\$6,842,252	\$7,617,636	
Total current liabilities	\$2,191,294	\$4,246,221	\$7,811,754	\$12,751,614	\$25,846,796	\$12,601,378	\$17,455,779	
Long-Term Liabilities								
Security deposits								
Accrued interest	\$126,494	\$190,407	\$203,554	\$116,862	\$77,459	\$108,256	\$149,196	
Deferred rent liability				\$164,972	\$631,405	\$1,185,092	\$1,350,949	
Intracompany payable								
Convertible loans	\$2,450,000	\$1,800,000	\$1,800,000	\$550,000	\$550,000			
Loans payable	\$19,353,844	\$32,683,939	\$41,199,336	\$49,074,491	\$69,836,416	\$69,061,846	\$97,240,060	
Total long-term liabilities	\$21,930,338	\$34,674,346	\$43,202,890	\$49,906,325	\$71,095,280	\$70,355,194	\$98,740,205	
Total liabilities	\$24,121,632	\$38,920,567	\$51,014,644	\$62,657,939	\$96,942,076	\$82,956,572	\$116,195,984	
Net Assets								
Unrestricted	\$2,218,964	\$7,629,140	\$10,363,266	\$13,486,489	\$12,089,432	\$10,074,280	\$16,442,127	
Temporarily restricted		\$1,583,000	\$1,569,833	\$2,394,721	\$1,267,096	\$488,467	\$489,337	
Total net assets	\$2,218,964	\$9,212,140	\$11,933,099	\$15,881,210	\$13,356,528	\$10,562,747	\$16,931,464	
Total liabilities and net assets	\$26,340,596	\$48,132,707	\$62,947,743	\$78,539,149	\$110,298,604	\$93,519,319	\$133,127,448	
Net Asset Increase over Prior Year		315.16%	29.54%	33.09%	-15.90%	-20.92%	60.29%	

Consolidated Financial Position, YE 2010-2022, cont'd

	Year ending, June 30	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Liabilities and Net Assets							
Current Liabilities							
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	\$6,783,072	\$9,728,362	\$10,652,213	\$8,237,562	\$12,379,687	\$14,580,021	
Accrued interest	\$761,817	\$592,457	\$745,229	\$730,670	\$807,476	\$615,761	
Lines of credit							
Deferred rent liability					\$35,276		
Deferred revenues	\$823,348	\$1,324,670	\$921,751	\$1,593,373	\$2,942,053	\$5,680,705	
Current portion of loans payable	\$9,722,526	\$2,716,668	\$3,690,122	\$4,006,297	\$8,298,873	\$4,546,870	
Total current liabilities	\$18,090,763	\$14,362,157	\$16,009,315	\$14,603,178	\$24,428,089	\$25,423,357	
Long-Term Liabilities							
Security deposits							
Accrued interest	\$113,478	\$148,825	\$166,076	\$196,643	\$233,082	\$172,481	
Deferred rent liability	\$1,922,841	\$5,917,604	\$4,706,852	\$5,689,509	\$5,541,230	\$6,711,830	
Intracompany payable							
Convertible loans							
Loans payable	\$126,930,036	\$126,675,229	\$159,908,722	\$164,694,827	\$188,117,172	\$182,003,696	
Total long-term liabilities	\$128,966,355	\$132,741,658	\$164,781,650	\$170,580,979	\$193,891,484	\$188,888,007	
Total liabilities	\$147,057,118	\$147,103,815	\$180,790,965	\$185,184,157	\$218,319,573	\$214,311,364	
Net Assets							
Unrestricted	\$16,490,691	\$20,883,606	\$23,897,122	\$23,717,294	\$38,214,318	\$33,008,787	
Temporarily restricted	\$1,045,472	\$987,130	\$187,450	\$900,000	\$17,000	\$433,858	
Total net assets	\$17,536,163	\$21,870,736	\$24,084,572	\$24,617,294	\$38,231,318	\$33,442,645	
Total liabilities and net assets	\$164,593,281	\$168,974,551	\$204,875,537	\$209,801,451	\$256,550,891	\$247,754,009	
Net Asset Increase over Prior Year	3.57%	24.72%	10.12%	2.21%	55.30%	-12.53%	

Appendix

Consolidated Activities (2010-2022)

This table describes the origin (categories) of the funds Rocketship uses to pay for the various categories of operating costs (expenses) that it incurs. It is remarkable that its net assets have grown every year from 2010 until 2022 except for a likely pandemic-induced drop in 2022. This is a performance that is better than most startups in Silicon Valley.

Table 34*Consolidated Activities, Years Ending 2010-2022*

	Year ending June 30	Consolidated Activities					
		2010 Total	2011 Total	2012 Total	2013 Total	2014 Total	
UNRESTRICTED NET ASSETS							
REVENUES							
LCFF State Aid & Property Tax Revenue	\$ 1,307,654	\$ 3,808,147	\$ 7,750,396	\$ 13,345,784	\$ 23,505,887	\$ 29,395,472	
Categorical grant revenue	\$ 802,227	\$ 1,286,595	\$ 2,234,521	\$ 3,324,789			
Property taxes	\$ 2,905,691	\$ 2,757,142	\$ 4,178,669	\$ 5,422,165	\$ 6,328,495	\$ 7,536,074	
Apportionment revenue	\$ 1,307,654	\$ 3,808,147	\$ 7,750,396	\$ 13,345,784	\$ 2,005,025	\$ 7,039,060	
Other State revenue	\$ 1,307,189	\$ 2,158,917	\$ 3,612,096	\$ 6,279,357	\$ 8,107,055	\$ 9,200,216	
Federal revenue	\$ 1,438,772	\$ 1,846,344	\$ 2,791,168	\$ 3,794,964	\$ 6,257,194	\$ 8,136,903	
Other local revenue	\$ 123,109	\$ 1,284,251	\$ 159,258	\$ 246,867	\$ 330,206	\$ 498,053	
Contributions	\$ 1,047,856	\$ 5,833,925	\$ 3,848,403	\$ 6,261,881	\$ 7,140,065	\$ 5,251,662	
Amounts released from restriction			\$ 1,583,000	\$ 1,422,347	\$ 2,780,203	\$ 851,995	
Total unrestricted revenues	\$ 10,240,152	\$ 22,783,468	\$ 33,907,907	\$ 53,443,938	\$ 56,454,130	\$ 67,909,435	
EXPENSES							
Program expenses							
Educational programs	\$ 4,719,700	\$ 7,620,063	\$ 13,130,262	\$ 22,280,859	\$ 36,985,459	\$ 46,219,562	
Site supports & program development			\$ 6,821,115	\$ 10,775,327	\$ 16,905,996	\$ 16,955,433	
Program development and expansion	\$ 655,990	\$ 735,481					
Site supports	\$ 1,419,008	\$ 2,719,223					
Supporting services							
Administration and general	\$ 932,421	\$ 2,490,378	\$ 3,472,008	\$ 3,918,745	\$ 3,959,732	\$ 4,933,874	
Fundraising							
Total supporting services	\$ 3,007,419	\$ 5,945,082	\$ 10,293,123	\$ 14,694,072	\$ 20,865,728	\$ 21,889,307	
Total expenses	\$ 7,727,119	\$ 13,565,145	\$ 23,423,385	\$ 36,974,931	\$ 57,851,187	\$ 68,108,869	
Change in unrestricted net assets	\$ 1,205,379	\$ 5,410,176	\$ 2,734,126	\$ 3,123,223	-\$1,397,057	-\$199,434	

Consolidated Activities, Years Ending 2010-2022, cont'd

Consolidated Activities						
Year ending June 30	2010 Total	2011 Total	2012 Total	2013 Total	2014 Total	2015 Total
TEMPORARILY RESTRICTED NET ASSETS						
Amounts released from restriction			-\$1,422,347		-\$2,780,203	-\$851,995
Contributions	\$1,583,000	\$2,247,235	\$2,247,235	\$1,652,578	\$73,366	
Change in temporarily restricted net assets	\$1,583,000	-\$13,167	\$824,888	-\$1,127,625	-\$778,629	
Change in net assets	\$1,205,379	\$6,993,176	\$2,720,959	\$3,948,111	-\$2,524,682	-\$978,063
Beginning net assets	\$1,013,585	\$2,218,964	\$9,212,140	\$11,933,099	\$15,881,210	\$11,540,810
Ending net assets	\$2,218,964	\$9,212,140	\$11,933,099	\$15,881,210	\$13,356,528	\$10,562,747

Consolidated Activities, Years Ending 2010-2022, cont'd

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Consolidated Activities							
	Year ending June 30	2016 Total	2017 Total	2018 Total	2019 Total	2020 Total	2021 Total
UNRESTRICTED NET ASSETS							
REVENUES							
LCFF State Aid & Property Tax Revenue	\$36,874,280	\$38,756,121	\$54,505,286	\$63,871,048	\$66,915,020	\$68,946,084	
Categorical grant revenue							
Property taxes	\$9,388,704	\$13,886,120					
Apportionment revenue	\$11,304,499	\$20,628,908	\$24,205,579	\$29,960,397	\$35,399,299	\$41,743,700	
Other State revenue	\$11,818,504	\$12,324,370	\$14,517,185	\$21,341,595	\$20,884,624	\$23,380,609	
Federal revenue	\$9,850,236	\$11,057,467	\$12,951,747	\$12,974,150	\$11,965,795	\$19,487,194	
Other local revenue	\$385,359	\$2,766,145	\$7,440,059	\$3,938,359	\$886,809	\$2,640,117	
Contributions	\$8,141,627	\$8,197,231	\$8,006,858	\$5,461,149	\$6,323,553	\$5,798,443	
Amounts released from restriction	\$299,290	\$264,170	\$670,638	\$799,680	\$187,450	\$900,000	
Total unrestricted revenues	\$88,062,499	\$107,880,532	\$122,297,352	\$138,346,378	\$142,562,550	\$162,896,147	
EXPENSES							
Program expenses							
Educational programs	\$55,869,661	\$70,573,394	\$77,408,214	\$92,810,139	\$98,929,764	\$101,402,187	
Site supports & program development	\$20,076,599	\$27,977,604			\$26,861,068	\$29,008,887	
Program development and expansion							
Site supports			\$13,798,155	\$19,510,598			
Supporting services							
Administration and general	\$5,748,392	\$9,280,970	\$27,685,198	\$21,743,194	\$16,606,399	\$17,547,189	
Fundraising				\$281,801	\$345,147	\$440,860	
Total supporting services	\$25,824,991	\$37,258,574	\$27,685,198	\$22,024,995	\$16,951,546	\$17,988,049	
Total expenses	\$81,694,652	\$107,831,968	\$118,891,567	\$134,345,732	\$142,742,378	\$148,399,123	
Change in unrestricted net assets	\$6,367,847	\$48,564	\$3,405,785	\$4,000,646	\$14,497,024	\$14,497,024	

Consolidated Activities, Years Ending 2010-2022, cont'd

Consolidated Activities						
Year ending June 30	2016 Total	2017 Total	2018 Total	2019 Total	2020 Total	2021 Total
TEMPORARILY RESTRICTED NET ASSETS						
Amounts released from restriction	-\$299,290	-\$264,170	-\$670,638	-\$799,680	-\$187,450	-\$900,000
Contributions	\$300,160	\$820,305			\$900,000	\$17,000
Change in temporarily restricted net assets	\$870	\$556,135	-\$58,342	-\$799,680	\$712,550	-\$883,000
Change in net assets	\$6,368,717	\$604,699	\$3,347,443	\$3,200,966	\$532,722	\$13,614,024
Beginning net assets	\$10,562,747	\$16,931,464	\$17,536,163	\$20,883,606	\$24,084,572	\$24,617,294
Ending net assets	\$16,931,464	\$17,536,163	\$20,883,606	\$24,084,572	\$24,617,294	\$38,231,318

Appendix

Consolidated Cash Flows (2006-2022)

Table 35*Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022*

YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2006-2008	2009	2010	2011
CASH FLOWS FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES				
Change in net assets	\$396,350	\$617,235	\$1,205,379	\$6,993,176
Adjustments to reconcile change in net assets to net cash provided (used) by operating activities				
Depreciation and amortization expense	\$15,898	\$285,270	\$430,901	\$607,170
Transfers and losses on disposal of assets				
Allowance for non-recoverable project costs				
Loss/(gain) on disposal of assets		-\$122		
Forgiveness of debt		-\$400,000	-\$650,000	-\$650,000
Donated investments				
(increase) decrease in operating assets				
Accounts receivable	-\$132,089	-\$557,343	-\$1,043,434	-\$3,141,035
Grants receivable				-\$1,083,000
Prepaid expenses and deposits	-\$53,930	-\$74,002	-\$90,926	\$73,200
Deferred rent asset				
Increase (decrease) in operating liabilities				
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	\$168,568	\$125,965	\$339,095	\$1,339,028
Deferred revenues				\$62,500
Deferred rent liability				
Net cash provided (used) by operating activities	\$394,797	-\$2,997	\$191,015	\$4,201,039

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2006-2008	2009	2010	2011
CASH FLOWS FROM INVESTING ACTIVITIES				
Proceeds from sale of property, plant, and equipment				
Proceeds from sale of stock				
Proceeds from note receivable				
Purchases of property, plant, and equipment	-\$4,243,089	-\$5,729,479	-\$6,685,221	-\$14,287,712
Purchases of investment		-\$1,000,001		
Net sales of investments			\$1,000,123	
Net cash used by investing activities	-\$4,243,089	-\$6,729,480	-\$5,685,098	-\$14,287,712
CASH FLOWS FROM FINANCING ACTIVITIES				
Intracompany loans				
Change in restricted cash			-\$40,019	-\$869,940
Borrowings on notes payable	\$3,849,612	\$14,254,483	\$8,286,077	\$13,561,059
Borrowings on line of credit	\$752,042	\$435,000		
Change in line of credit				
Payments on lines of credit	-\$752,042	-\$435,000		
Principal payments on notes payable		-\$2,907,537	-\$366,667	-\$236,428
Net cash provided (used) by financing activities	\$3,849,612	\$11,346,946	\$7,879,391	\$12,454,691
Net increase in cash, cash equivalents and restricted cash	\$1,320	\$4,614,469	\$2,385,308	\$2,368,018

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2006-2008	2009	2010	2011
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS , BEGINNING OF YEAR	\$0	\$1,320	\$4,615,789	\$7,001,097
Cash, and cash equivalents				
Restricted cash				
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS, END OF YEAR	\$1,320	\$4,615,789	\$7,001,097	\$9,369,115
NON-CASH INVESTING ACTIVITIES				
Property and equipment financed through accounts payable		\$1,422,036		
SUPPLEMENTAL DISCLOSURES OF CASH FLOW INFORMATION				
Forgiveness of debt				
Cash paid for interest (net of capitalized amount)	\$21,384	\$290,260	\$595,603	\$1,145,472
Capitalized Interest			\$24,426	\$152,186
NOTES				
Totals may not add up exactly because small entries may have been omitted.				
Some related entries have been combined.				

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2012	2013	2014	2015
CASH FLOWS FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES				
Change in net assets	\$2,720,959	\$3,948,111	-\$2,524,682	-\$978,063
Adjustments to reconcile change in net assets to net cash provided (used) by operating activities				
Depreciation and amortization expense	\$1,065,143	\$1,473,483	\$1,453,818	\$2,080,534
Transfers and losses on disposal of assets				
Allowance for non-recoverable project costs			\$670,656	\$6,365
Loss/(gain) on disposal of assets		\$321,492		
Forgiveness of debt	-\$539,232	-\$1,376,033	-\$566,782	-\$550,000
Donated investments	-\$6,687			-\$249,350
(increase) decrease in operating assets				
Accounts receivable	-\$4,903,258	-\$2,196,302	\$1,467,891	\$7,077,426
Grants receivable	\$167,035	-\$380,486	\$2,735	\$541,952
Prepaid expenses and deposits	-\$261,387	-\$1,240,883	-\$88,087	\$470,333
Deferred rent asset				
Increase (decrease) in operating liabilities				
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	\$1,943,090	\$1,096,710	-\$384,880	\$697,873
Deferred revenues	-\$62,500	\$1,635,767	-\$1,012,883	-\$252,513
Deferred rent liability		\$164,972	\$492,459	\$515,839
Net cash provided (used) by operating activities	\$123,163	\$3,446,831	-\$489,755	\$9,360,396

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Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2012	2013	2014	2015
CASH FLOWS FROM INVESTING ACTIVITIES				
Proceeds from sale of property, plant, and equipment		\$1,650,071	\$770,000	
Proceeds from sale of stock				
Proceeds from note receivable				
Purchases of property, plant, and equipment	-\$11,133,681	-\$9,115,145	-\$13,206,306	-\$11,025,976
Purchases of investment				
Net sales of investments				
Net cash used by investing activities	-\$11,133,681	-\$7,465,074	-\$12,436,306	-\$11,025,976
CASH FLOWS FROM FINANCING ACTIVITIES				
Intracompany loans				
Change in restricted cash	-\$1,017,690	-\$3,087,080	-\$135,150	\$13,522
Borrowings on notes payable	\$16,326,366	\$19,025,730	\$47,916,624	\$400,000
Borrowings on line of credit				
Change in line of credit	\$1,000,000	-\$1,000,000		
Payments on lines of credit				
Principal payments on notes payable	-\$5,494,391	-\$5,775,334	-\$16,114,463	-\$15,734,216
Net cash provided (used) by financing activities	\$10,814,285	\$9,163,316	\$31,667,011	-\$15,320,694
Net increase in cash, cash equivalents and restricted cash	-\$196,233	\$5,145,073	\$18,740,950	-\$16,986,274

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2012	2013	2014	2015
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS , BEGINNING OF YEAR	\$9,369,115	\$9,172,882	\$14,317,955	\$33,058,905
Cash, and cash equivalents				
Restricted cash				
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS, END OF YEAR	\$9,172,882	\$14,317,955	\$33,058,905	\$16,072,631
NON-CASH INVESTING ACTIVITIES				
Property and equipment financed through accounts payable				
SUPPLEMENTAL DISCLOSURES OF CASH FLOW INFORMATION				
Forgiveness of debt				
Cash paid for interest (net of capitalized amount)	\$2,300,580	\$3,066,545	\$3,715,640	\$4,975,669
Capitalized Interest	\$120,316	\$18,764	\$162,839	\$130,319
NOTES				
Totals may not add up exactly because small entries may have been omitted.				
Some related entries have been combined.				

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

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YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2016	2017	2018	2019
CASH FLOWS FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES				
Change in net assets	\$6,368,717	\$604,699	\$3,347,443	\$3,200,966
Adjustments to reconcile change in net assets to net cash provided (used) by operating activities				
Depreciation and amortization expense	\$2,265,143	\$2,957,153	\$3,303,505	\$3,730,769
Transfers and losses on disposal of assets				
Allowance for non-recoverable project costs	-\$105,540	\$1,721,312		
Loss/(gain) on disposal of assets				
Forgiveness of debt				
Donated investments				
(increase) decrease in operating assets				
Accounts receivable	\$175,572	-\$276,902	-\$1,329,935	-\$3,709,467
Grants receivable	\$13,130	\$166,068	-\$906,717	\$1,304,283
Prepaid expenses and deposits	-\$1,558,793	\$677,420	-\$1,236,192	-\$254,876
Deferred rent asset				
Increase (decrease) in operating liabilities				
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	\$1,456,653	\$1,183,357	\$3,546,032	\$1,067,570
Deferred revenues	\$1,298,564	-\$66,629	-\$268,181	-\$412,375
Deferred rent liability	\$165,857	\$608,637	\$4,144,643	-\$1,171,631
Net cash provided (used) by operating activities	\$10,079,303	\$7,575,115	\$10,600,598	\$3,755,239

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

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YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2016	2017	2018	2019
CASH FLOWS FROM INVESTING ACTIVITIES				
Proceeds from sale of property, plant, and equipment	\$3,611			
Proceeds from sale of stock	\$249,350			
Proceeds from note receivable		\$560,000		
Purchases of property, plant, and equipment	-\$26,165,647	-\$18,766,316	-\$6,891,872	-\$39,946,341
Purchases of investment				
Net sales of investments				
Net cash used by investing activities	-\$25,912,686	-\$18,766,316	-\$6,331,872	-\$39,946,341
CASH FLOWS FROM FINANCING ACTIVITIES				
Intracompany loans	-\$2,244,791	-\$2,244,791	-\$750,000	
Change in restricted cash	-\$2,488,573	-\$3,009,144	-\$699,262	
Borrowings on notes payable	\$41,539,443	\$44,837,264	\$17,060,412	\$36,081,955
Borrowings on line of credit				
Change in line of credit				
Payments on lines of credit		-\$9,700,583		
Principal payments on notes payable	-\$12,471,695		-\$24,321,077	-\$2,841,680
Net cash provided (used) by financing activities	\$24,334,384	\$29,882,746	-\$8,709,927	\$33,240,275
Net increase in cash, cash equivalents and restricted cash	\$8,501,001	\$18,691,545	-\$4,441,201	-\$2,950,827

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

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YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2016	2017	2018	2019
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS , BEGINNING OF YEAR	\$16,072,631	\$24,573,632	\$43,265,177	\$38,823,976
Cash, and cash equivalents				\$34,519,662
Restricted cash				\$12,497,822
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS, END OF YEAR	\$24,573,632	\$43,265,177	\$38,823,976	\$47,017,484
NON-CASH INVESTING ACTIVITIES				
Property and equipment financed through accounts payable				
SUPPLEMENTAL DISCLOSURES OF CASH FLOW INFORMATION				
Forgiveness of debt				
Cash paid for interest (net of capitalized amount)	\$5,376,401	\$6,734,613	\$7,761,957	\$7,761,957
Capitalized Interest	\$130,858	\$111,379	\$28,050	\$28,050
NOTES				
Totals may not add up exactly because small entries may have been omitted.				
Some related entries have been combined.				

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

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YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2020	2021	2022
CASH FLOWS FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES			
Change in net assets	\$532,722	\$13,614,024	-\$4,788,673
Adjustments to reconcile change in net assets to net cash provided (used) by operating activities			
Depreciation and amortization expense	\$4,569,248	\$4,798,935	\$7,051,934
Transfers and losses on disposal of assets	\$41,744	\$62,490	
Allowance for non-recoverable project costs			
Loss/(gain) on disposal of assets			-\$77,251
Forgiveness of debt		-\$1,687,635	
Donated investments			
(increase) decrease in operating assets			
Accounts receivable	-\$5,313,437	-\$8,390,399	\$1,020,647
Grants receivable	-\$725,000	\$883,000	\$2,000
Prepaid expenses and deposits	-\$413,544	-\$2,017,706	-\$530,043
Deferred rent asset			
Increase (decrease) in operating liabilities			
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	-\$2,395,184	\$4,274,373	\$1,952,538
Deferred revenues	\$671,623	\$1,348,680	\$2,738,652
Deferred rent liability	\$1,017,932	-\$183,558	\$1,166,080
Net cash provided (used) by operating activities	-\$2,013,896	\$12,702,204	\$8,535,884

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2020	2021	2022
CASH FLOWS FROM INVESTING ACTIVITIES			
Proceeds from sale of property, plant, and equipment		\$1,079,193	
Proceeds from sale of stock			
Proceeds from note receivable			
Purchases of property, plant, and equipment	-\$980,966	-\$28,891,372	-\$1,036,008
Purchases of investment			
Net sales of investments			
Net cash used by investing activities	-\$980,966	-\$28,891,372	\$43,185
CASH FLOWS FROM FINANCING ACTIVITIES			
Intracompany loans		-\$19,355	
Change in restricted cash			
Borrowings on notes payable	\$8,387,635	\$32,711,734	\$43,704,197
Borrowings on line of credit			
Change in line of credit			
Payments on lines of credit			
Principal payments on notes payable	-\$3,646,908	-\$3,547,774	-\$55,749,388
Net cash provided (used) by financing activities	\$4,740,727	\$29,144,605	-\$12,045,191
Net increase in cash, cash equivalents and restricted cash	\$1,745,865	\$12,955,437	-\$3,466,122

Consolidated Cash Flows, Years Ending 2006-2022, cont'd

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YEAR ENDING JUNE 30TH,	2020	2021	2022
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS , BEGINNING OF YEAR	\$47,017,484	\$48,763,349	\$61,720,807
Cash, and cash equivalents	\$36,215,753	\$47,620,276	\$48,532,010
Restricted cash	\$12,547,596	\$14,098,510	\$9,720,654
CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS, END OF YEAR	\$48,763,349	\$61,720,807	\$58,256,707
NON-CASH INVESTING ACTIVITIES			
Property and equipment financed through accounts payable			
SUPPLEMENTAL DISCLOSURES OF CASH FLOW INFORMATION			
Forgiveness of debt		\$1,687,635	
Cash paid for interest (net of capitalized amount)	\$9,501,979	\$9,636,799	\$11,041,165
Capitalized Interest			
NOTES			
Totals may not add up exactly because small entries may have been omitted.			
Some related entries have been combined.			

Appendix

Consolidated Functional Expenses (2019-2022)

Table 36*Consolidated Functional Expenses, (2019-2022)*

Year Ending, 30 June	2019	2020	2021	2022
Salaries	\$54,294,263	\$62,373,909	\$66,828,182	\$81,042,560
Employee Benefits	\$6,428,104	\$7,562,911	\$9,730,733	\$9,464,728
Pension	\$3,879,706	\$4,545,283	\$5,511,783	\$6,416,455
Payroll Taxes	\$3,030,272	\$3,488,943	\$3,521,365	\$4,223,462
Management Fees	-	-	-	-
District Fee	\$1,275,290	\$955,533	\$1,183,610	\$1,642,503
Accounting Expenses	\$166,059	\$423,683	\$264,784	\$848,221
Legal Expenses	\$457,817	\$637,787	\$894,912	\$809,606
Instructional Materials	\$3,593,898	\$3,316,399	\$2,948,451	\$4,795,970
Other Fees For Services	\$14,590,025	\$17,967,479	\$17,164,978	\$24,909,490
Advertising	\$251,310	\$118,555	\$81,334	\$210,761
Office Expenses	\$2,481,166	\$2,906,902	\$2,229,970	\$3,705,681
Information Technology	\$3,806,135	\$3,413,075	\$7,263,178	\$5,960,090
Printing and Postage	\$328,479	\$395,094	\$250,472	\$407,136
Occupancy	\$10,075,489	\$7,597,805	\$8,941,605	\$11,165,624
Travel	\$2,125,714	\$1,954,354	\$785,025	\$2,635,011
Conferences and Meetings	\$49,276	\$16,520	\$21,273	\$25,654
Insurance	\$410,924	\$528,233	\$614,141	\$970,539
Bad Debt	\$606,798	\$47,124	-	-
Depreciation and Amortization	\$3,730,769	\$4,569,248	\$4,919,017	\$6,801,509
Interest Expense	\$7,957,256	\$9,568,359	\$10,161,272	\$10,943,932
Capital Expenses	\$1,598,061	\$218,054	\$38,413	\$151,922
Grants to School	-	-	-	-
Other Expenses	\$13,208,921	\$10,137,128	\$5,044,625	\$12,181,105
	\$134,345,732	\$142,742,378	\$148,399,123	\$189,311,959
Eliminations	\$36,290,573	\$36,976,313		\$42,697,311

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