

Archived Information

SECTION 3

How Schools Manage Accountability Relationships

Faced with complex external accountability relationships, how do charter schools cope? Are they pulled in many directions by the need to maintain the confidence of many different parties, including families, teachers, people who provide help and donate funds, and their authorizing agencies? Or can school leaders learn to manage all the demands on them efficiently? This chapter examines charter schools' relationships with key constituencies. Our main findings are:

Charter schools learn to manage their disparate external accountability relationships by clearly defining their approach to instruction and expected student benefits, and by making sure students get what the school promised. By “tending to their knitting” as managers of effective teaching and learning, charter schools keep their programs simple and ensure that the work lives of their leaders and teachers are, however demanding, nonetheless manageable. By avoiding relationships with families, teachers, and donors who want something that the school is not designed to provide, schools avoid developing constituencies that they cannot satisfy.

Charter schools are responsive to their authorizers, though school-authorizer relationships are not as sharply focused on academic performance as the theory of charter schools would predict.

Maintaining Family Confidence

Charter schools and parents are interdependent and therefore reciprocally accountable. Schools that cannot attract students do not get funding. Parents, on the other hand, want and need to send their children to schools that provide a caring and motivating climate and effective instruction. Evidence from our interviews confirms the results of national surveys, which show that parents choose charter schools because of the methods of instruction they offer, the safe and studious climate they maintain, and the sense of commitment to the individual child.¹

In order to attract parents, charter schools must make, or at least imply, some promises. Most charter schools offer a smaller, more intimate setting, staffed by people who chose to work in the school. Parents also know that charter schools can be more responsive to individual needs

¹ See, for example, Berman, Paul, Beryl Nelson, John Ericson, Rebecca Perry, and Debra Silverman, *A Study of Charter Schools: Second Year Report, 1998*, Washington DC, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1998, p. 99.

than regular public schools, since teachers and staff on site are in charge and cannot dodge a reasonable request by saying “the central office won’t let us.”² Most charter schools also expressly promise to be more open, interesting, focused on academics, and caring than regular public schools.

Though most parents do not want to continue shopping for schools once they have placed their child in a charter school, all know that they can leave a charter school if it does not keep its promises or if it fails to provide good instruction. Parents do withdraw their children from charter schools, for many of the following reasons predicted by charter advocates.

Some charter schools, as discussed above, do not “jell” quickly. Founder-parents are patient with such schools, but parents who chose such schools expecting them to be fully formed educational institutions can be disappointed. Further, parents are capable of wishful thinking when choosing a charter school. Some believe that a charter school will do things it never promised. Some parents find that methods of instruction that sounded appealing in the abstract do not in fact meet their child’s needs. Some who have placed their children in brand new schools find that the school develops in directions they do not like. Some parents assume that a charter school will accommodate them or their children in any way the family desires, and find out that it cannot. Others choose charter schools after trying a series of public schools and finding them all somehow wrong for their children. Though a few “frequent shopper” parents find a charter school to be just right, many are as Finn and Manno report, prone to conclude that the charter school is also against them or their children and move on.³

Not all parents perceive that they have many choices. For some a charter school is a last resort. For others who have given up on conventional public schools, there is no practical alternative to staying with a charter school that is struggling or has a philosophy with which the parents are not entirely comfortable. In several of the schools we visited, parents were not apt to leave unless a situation became terrible or unsafe.

The numbers of parents who remove their children for these reasons are small. But all schools suffer some family attrition, and it creates leverage for new parents and parents who remain. Even the large numbers of schools that have waiting lists understand that they cannot survive if parents lose confidence in them.

For most parents, choosing a charter school is their most important form of involvement. Parent choice gives parents standing to make reasonable requests and get action. The school’s control of its resources enables flexible responses to the needs of individual children. One parent

² We did not survey parents, but interviewed many in the course of our school case studies. The statements about parents here reflect what we heard and observed in our case study schools. We cannot say for sure whether the relationships reported here apply to all charter schools. But we can say that they were remarkably consistent in the schools we studied.

³ Finn, Chester E., Gregg Vanourek, and Bruno V. Manno, *Charter Schools in Action: Will they Save Public Education?* Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000.

we interviewed had pulled her child from a Massachusetts public school because the administration would not put her in an advanced reading program. At the charter school, this fifth-grade student was put in the sixth grade for English and the fifth grade for math. This is the solution the parent was looking for and she is now content.

Parents who choose schools with firmly-established programs (e.g., schools run by large management companies such as National Heritage Academies, Edison, and SABIS) typically have confidence in the school's basic design even if they do not fully understand all the details of the curriculum and teaching methods. Many families choose schools run by Heritage and SABIS, for example, because they expect discipline, respect for teachers and other students, and back-to-basics courses. These families complain if the school does not live up to its image, but they are unlikely to get involved in day-to-day governance as long as the teaching and climate remain consistent.

Our case study schools are learning how important it is to help form parent expectations, to socialize them to the school, and to discourage parents who could never be satisfied with a school from enrolling their children in it. Schools that were once private and have converted to charter status have a head start on this, as many parents already have some idea of what to expect. Most, though not all, startups have a much harder time and usually take several years to articulate the school mission and vision well enough to attract the kinds of families that will fit well with the school, and give families good bases on which to join or avoid them.

One school in Michigan takes the parent education process very seriously. When prospective parents (or teachers) approach the director, he suggests they purchase books written about the curriculum and philosophy of the school so they have a better understanding of its principles. The school has also held seminars for both existing and potential parents about the programs and methods used by the school. A new district-sponsored school required prospective students and parents to complete a challenging questionnaire, which explored the family's real willingness to forego television in order to do significant amounts of homework, and commit to very high rates of attendance and effort. Such mechanisms ensure that parents clearly understand what the school offers. They are designed as much to help parents conclude that they would *not* be satisfied with the school as to increase enrollment.

Some have worried that this process might be used to exclude low-income or minority families.⁴ We saw no evidence that this was the case. To the contrary, charter schools' clear expectations are often a magnet for poor and minority parents who feel strengthened and supported, not rejected, by schools that create high expectations.⁵

⁴ See e.g., Cobb and Glass 1999, and Horn and Miron 1999.

⁵ The debate will continue over whether charter schools serve the "right" numbers of minority students. Our case study results are consistent with reports by others that many charter schools intend to serve diverse populations and take great pains to do so. See e.g., Berman et al., 1998. Finn et al., 2000.

What both schools and parents are learning about charter schools is that choice creates reciprocal accountability. Parents must meet the school's expectations as well as vice versa. This relationship is new and it is one of the charter school movement's greatest contributions to public education.

Though critics have warned that schools of choice would cater to parents' every whim, we saw no evidence of that in our case studies. Most charter schools try to attract parents by offering a definite instructional program. Most also promise individualization, but within the boundaries of the school's goals and approach to instruction. Thus, a student who needs extra help or some tutoring that provides new angles on the subjects taught can usually get it. But a parent who objects to the school's avowed approach to instruction, or who wants special concessions (exemption from attendance and discipline rules or family-supervised homework) is less likely to be accommodated.

Competent school leaders know that they must keep faith with other parents by putting the school's energy into the things it is determined to do well and staying the course. One highly regarded private African-American school in Michigan opted to become a charter school. The school's "internal gyroscope," its long waiting list, and a charismatic school founder all helped to keep the important elements of the school intact, even while it recruited a larger and more diverse student body and a teaching force that changed certain aspects of the school.

In sum, the charter schools we visited take account of parents' aspirations, but they are not dominated by parents' whims. Nor do they, as some critics have feared, compete for students on the basis of easy courses, lax requirements, or emphasis on entertaining noncurricular activities. To the contrary, the vast majority of charter schools we visited offer a safe, caring environment and many also promise high standards and heavy workloads. These promises are especially attractive to low-income and minority parents who feel that the public schools in their neighborhoods are chaotic and academically inferior.

Accountability to Teachers

A charter school needs to attract and keep a teaching staff that is not only able but also willing to provide the kind of instructional program promised in its charter. Thus, every school needs to provide the working conditions, climate, support, and pay that satisfy current teachers and impress potential teachers that it is a good place to work. Charter school employment of teachers leads to mutual accountability—schools must make and keep promises to teachers and teachers must perform effectively in the context of the school.

Some teachers have specific preferences about instructional style and would not choose to teach in a school that required methods that made them uncomfortable.⁶ Most teachers,

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however, make more general demands. They want to work in a caring, collegial environment where they carry few administrative burdens and where classroom practice is not always changed by mandates from on high.⁷

School leaders also feel accountable to their teachers. Most of the school heads in our case studies regard good teachers as assets that must be cherished and protected. Some schools have strict discipline policies for students and remove children from a class if they act out. For some teachers, this is an area that makes their job much easier and more rewarding. It also gives them a sense that the administration is there to back them up.

In our case studies we encountered no charter schools that have created exploitative “sweat shop” conditions for teachers. Most have tried to make teaching in the school as rewarding as possible. Because charter schools receive less public money than regular public schools, some offer lower average teacher salaries, though most pay about the same as neighboring public schools for beginning teachers.⁸ They try to overcome these disadvantages with pleasant working conditions, careful consultation about important decisions, and more overt appreciation for teacher accomplishments. As Koppich et al. report, most, though not all, charter school teachers say they would choose to teach in a charter school if they had it to do over again.⁹

Some teachers joined charters expecting to play major roles in school governance. There are teacher-run charter schools, and a larger number of schools in which a small group of teacher-founders share administrative responsibilities. But most teachers who hoped to decide all matters by committee eventually change their minds: some see that constant committee work takes too much time away from teaching and gets too little done, and others simply burn out and return to conventional public schools. Most charter schools settle down rapidly, creating a clear set of well-defined roles, including division of some administrative responsibilities among teachers.

Most teachers who choose to work in charter schools want to collaborate with other teachers, making sure students’ knowledge accumulates across different courses and between grade levels. They want school leaders to make collaboration possible by creating free periods for discussion and rewarding collaboration. But as charter schools mature, and teachers come to understand what is possible within them, teachers value internal clarity over open-ended deliberation on all matters.

Even in localities like Mesa, Arizona, where teachers are scarce and competition between charters and conventional public schools is intense, few charter schools have had trouble attracting capable teaching staffs.¹⁰ Most teachers who choose to join charter schools in their first

⁷ Koppich et al.

⁸ See Koppich, Julia E., Patricia Holmes, and Margaret L. Plecki, *New Rules, New Roles? The Professional Work Lives of Charter School Teachers*. Washington, DC, National Education Association, 1998, p. 26–34.

⁹ Koppich et al., op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁰ See, for example, Berman et al. p. 108: Less than 10 percent of all charter schools, including new schools, reported difficulty hiring staff.

few years of existence did so because they liked their school's educational philosophy and for other reasons consistent with the development of coherent, productive instructional environments.¹¹

Some new charter schools also employ retired public school teachers, who are eligible for pensions and no longer want to work in conventional public schools. If a national teacher shortage predicted for the early-2000s actually occurs, charter schools might have to recruit high proportions of their teachers from unconventional sources—retired teachers, other retirees, and educated adults who are skilled in other fields but lack teaching experience. Teachers from these sources have had other professional opportunities and might be demanding employees.

Conversion schools, which often start out with the same teaching staff they had when they were conventional public schools, do not need to attract new teachers, at least at the start. But school leaders know that valuable teachers can choose to leave, and that retirement and residential moves will inevitably create turnover. Thus, a conversion school's reputation among teachers is extremely important. Conversion charters are attractive to teachers who are tired of being told that good ideas violate central office rules. However, some conversion schools have very little independence. This is particularly true for schools whose principals can be abruptly reassigned by the parent school district. In that situation, it is difficult for a school to promise anything in particular, and its accountability to teachers is thus weakened.

As with parents, charter schools' relationships with teachers are not always idyllic. Some new charter schools that started out without clear ideas about instruction experienced conflicts within the teaching staff, and between school leaders and teachers.¹² Of the schools we studied, some new schools experienced teacher and administrator turnover in their early months, and some came close to failing. Without judging each case, it is possible to say that these conflicts led many schools to sharpen their commitments on instruction. Many that endured staff conflict and attrition now present themselves more clearly to prospective teachers.

The need to make the school attractive to teachers puts a premium on internal accountability. Many teachers we interviewed remarked on the differences in internal communication in charters versus conventional public schools. They said that teacher-teacher and teacher-administrator communication is more personal, more frequent, and more focused on instruction in charter schools than in conventional public schools.

Some teachers in new schools found the requirement to renew their contracts each year unnerving, but were convinced of its value. One teacher said that during her 4 years at a traditional public middle school, no teachers left, even though several were vocally unhappy with their jobs and vigorously resisted efforts to upgrade the school's teaching methods. As this teacher said, when it happens for the right reasons turnover can be healthy. At these charter schools, good performance is praised, bad performance is dealt with and people who do not want to work in a common enterprise are encouraged to find other schools where they will fit in better. Teachers we interviewed said this gives the school an atmosphere of fairness and energy.

¹¹ Finn, Vanourek, and Manno, *op. cit.*, ch. 2.

¹² See Berman et al, *op. cit.*, p. 106–109. Nearly 20 percent of charter schools reported problems with internal conflicts.

Many teachers we spoke with described their charter schools as having a “professional environment” of shared responsibility and demanding mutual accountability. At a conversion school in Georgia, teachers attributed this to their school’s charter status, saying that it forced them to work constantly on school improvement. Though teachers started by working in their own autonomous zones, they soon realized that the school was going to be held accountable at the end of the year for test scores, and this led them to begin to talk seriously with each other. Charter school status meant that the school had flexible funds, which allowed them to bring in a consultant who helped them focus their staff development on particular instructional improvement goals.

In general, the charter schools in our case studies rely heavily on good reputations to attract teachers. In many cases teachers who are having a difficult time are noticed quickly and offered extra support and mentoring. Teachers have personal relationships with the principal that help them feel listened to and valued. These charter schools have the flexibility to deal with teachers individually and creatively to help them grow.

How Relationships with Authorizers Affect Internal Accountability

No matter how carefully they manage connections with parents, teachers, and others, charter schools must always tend their relationships with authorizers. Authorizers approve charter applications, release public funds so that schools can use them, and must ultimately decide whether to renew the charter when the school’s term expires (5 years in most states, up to 15 years in Arizona and an unlimited number of years in the District of Columbia and Michigan). This section focuses on how schools manage their relationships with authorizers. Section 4 immediately following discusses how authorizers operate.

How does the key external accountability relationship between school and authorizer affect the internal life of a charter school? Charter schools are not controlled in detail by their authorizers, but there are times in which relations with authorizers are critical.

Authorizers are all-important before a school gains its charter. Groups drafting charter proposals must consider whether what they want to do meets the authorizer’s priorities. In states where there are multiple routes to charter approval, such groups can select the authorizer most likely to be friendly to their ideas. Then, throughout the process of proposal drafting, submission, defense, and amendment the group seeking a charter must pay rapt attention to the authorizer’s concerns. This intense focus on the authorizer continues until the charter is approved and sometimes longer. Schools that must find new space are often subject to careful scrutiny until after the school is open and teaching students.¹³

¹³ For information about charter approval and startup see Millot, Dean and Robin Lake, *So you Want to Start a Charter School? Strategic Advice for Applicants*, Recommendations from an Expert Workshop, Seattle, Center on Reinventing Public Education, 1996. See also Finn, Manno, Bierlein, and Vanourek, 1997, op. cit. Berman, Paul, Beryl Nelson, Rebecca Perry, Debra Silverman, Debra Soloman, and Nancy Kamproth. *The State of Charter Schools*, Third Year Report, Washington DC, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1999, p. 41–54.

Once a school is opened, a school’s relationship with its authorizer is not an everyday concern. School staff, the governing board, and founders focus their energies on day-to-day school operations. The inevitable startup crises—facilities problems, a teacher out sick, more or fewer students than expected, conflicts between the school head and the governing board, a new faculty member who did not take seriously what was said about the school’s teaching methods—consume everyone.

Even after school is up and running, the focus of most energy is internal. Heads of charter schools are at least as busy as the principals of regular public schools—perhaps more, since they must also manage a facility, keep positive relationships with a governing board, deal with parents who can threaten to remove their children from the school, and in many cases, lead a newly-assembled teaching staff.

Heads of new charter schools attend meetings that they call for the school’s purposes, but they try to minimize meetings with their authorizers. In contrast, heads of most conversion schools feel the same obligation as principals of conventional public schools to respond to district demands for their presence. This leads to a big difference between new and conversion schools in how much time the principal has available to spend on the school’s internal business.

Most school leaders remain aware of their promises to the authorizer, and of unresolved issues that might lead the authorizer to ask for data or conduct a monitoring visit. However, many school leaders know that the authorizer is very unlikely to initiate any contact. This is especially true in states like Arizona, where some authorizers are responsible for dozens of schools but have little or no staff capacity,¹⁴ and in states where school districts authorize schools but manifestly take no interest in them.

As the next section will show, some authorizers are highly active and remain a frequent—at least monthly—presence in the lives of their charter schools. The Massachusetts State Charter School Office and the Chicago Public Schools Charter School Office are examples of active authorizers that have very frequent contact, both formal and informal, with individual schools. Other authorizers are less active, but any of them can become engaged when problems in the school come to their attention—parent complaints, feuds, firings, lack of fiscal controls leading to budget crises, conflicts with contractors, etc.

As figure 3.1 shows, schools in our sample states rate their authorizers as an important, but not the primary, external entity to which they are accountable. Except in Michigan and Arizona, school leaders are more keenly aware of the need to maintain relationships with their own governing boards, parents, or the state education agency than with their authorizer.

¹⁴ The Arizona State Board of Education employs two staff members to oversee their 55 charter schools. Charter schools are only a small part of the responsibilities of this department that also establishes educational policy for all schools in Arizona. The State Board of Education has tried to tighten its application process, but once a charter is awarded, they do little more than monitor the schools for compliance. Boxes of paper 3 and 4 feet high line the walls of the state office, and the director acknowledged that she had only physically visited about half (29 of 55) of the schools. Usually the “problem” schools got the visits (i.e., the schools that parents complained about). She generally conducted these visits on her own and they were informal in nature. Surprisingly, she said that she could only “recommend” that a school take certain corrective actions, but that her office really had “no teeth” to force compliance.

In general, the more smoothly a school operates the less it has to do with its authorizer on a day-to-day basis. Most authorizers fall on the reactive end of the spectrum, since few have the resources to pay close attention to what schools are doing. Authorizers pay selective attention, driven by conflicts and complaints from within the school or from its neighbors. Scandals, and charges of illegal activity or misuse of funds, will always draw authorizers' attention.

Internal conflicts that draw the attention of authorizers or newspapers weaken the school. School heads soon learn this. So do teachers and parents when they see that the school's ability to take action and solve its own problems is important to them. The majority of charter schools quickly learn to avoid conflicts by describing the school up-front in ways that discourage people with incompatible expectations from taking jobs or placing students there.

Dealing with Authorizers on School Effectiveness

All the charter schools in our sample assess their own academic performance and provide required data to their authorizers. The charter schools we studied were quick to create instructional improvement strategies when they, their authorizers, or parents, identified school-wide deficiencies in student performance.

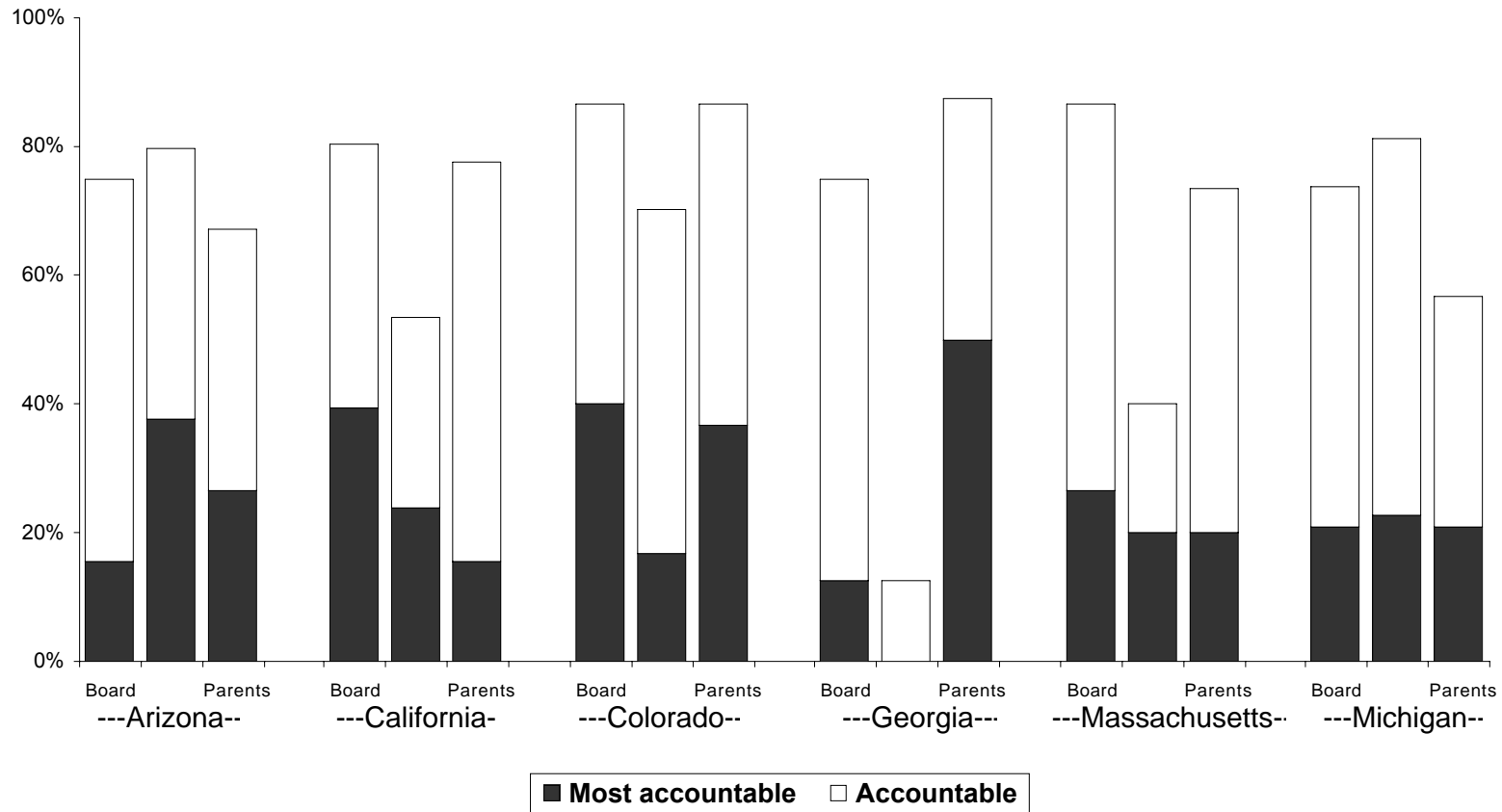
Nationwide, only four charter schools have been closed by their authorizers for poor academic performance.¹⁵ However, a much larger number—based on our case studies at least one in 20 charter schools—have received comments from authorizers based on poor student test results. These interventions almost always lead to intense work within the school (including some brief periods of frantic overwork) leading to greatly increased time on instruction in the areas where the school is weak. In this way charters are not different from conventional public schools that come under threat of sanctions for low performance.¹⁶

Charter schools generally do not look to their authorizers for technical assistance. Moreover, some important authorizers—including the Massachusetts and Chicago Charter School Offices—have made conscious decisions to stay out of the “assistance business.” They fear that advising a school would conflict with their job of assessing the school's progress. These agencies, however, refer schools to nonprofit resources centers and other sources of assistance.

¹⁵ See Charter Schools, A Progress Report: Part II, Closures. *The Opportunity for Accountability*. Center for Education Reform, 1999.

¹⁶ For an account of how low-performing public schools in a standards-based reform state respond to ominously low scores on state standards-based tests, see Lake, Robin J., and Paul T. Hill, *Making Standards Work*, Washington DC, The Thomas J. Fordham Foundation, 1999.

Figure 3.1—In most states, schools see themselves primarily accountable to their governing boards and parents



As discussed in the next section, both the Massachusetts and Chicago charter school offices have created independent review teams that conduct periodic reviews of school operations. Though charter school leaders find “inspection” visits uncomfortable and anxiety provoking, most say that the results are an extremely helpful, if sometimes grim, account of a school’s strengths and weaknesses. Inspection results can help school staffs get beyond minor personal differences of opinion and focus on the most critical school wide issues.

At one school, administrators described an inspection team’s findings as “right on.” In 1 day the visitors were able to see that school leader-governing board conflicts and facilities problems were plaguing the school. The report served as a wake-up call and a lever. Realizing that their charter might be in jeopardy, the school’s governing board immediately backed off in their overzealous involvement of the day-to-day operations and more aggressively began looking for a new facility. An administrator who had been at the school since it opened said, “We knew the board’s micromanaging was destructive, but we didn’t have the leverage to make them stop. We appreciated the report because it helped us get something done at the school that we might not have been able to do on our own.”

Conclusion

Chartering puts schools into a unique combination of accountability relationships, as described above. But does the need to maintain the confidence of multiple constituencies distract teachers and administrators from the schools’ main business of providing effective instruction to students? Based on the evidence in this section, the answer to that question is a qualified no. For most charter schools, the best way to maintain the confidence of all these constituencies is to tend to the academics, serving students well and keeping promises about the type and quality of instruction delivered. In the vast majority of situations we studied, charter schools do not have to “buy off” their different constituencies by making concessions that compromise instruction. They can meet their obligations to authorizers, parents, internal board members, teachers, and donors in the same way, by making the school a good place to learn and to teach.

Charter schools do get into trouble. As we have seen, a school threatened with loss of parents, or a teacher walkout, strife on its governing board, or withdrawal of financial support from a donor, must go into a crisis mode. Schools that do not resolve these crises perish (or never open, as has happened several times in Massachusetts and Chicago).

The mechanism by which schools manage their different relationships with external constituencies is internal accountability—a clear division of responsibilities focused on accomplishing the school’s goals for students. Internal accountability is related to a broader concept we have introduced in other research, *integrative capital*, which is the set of all values, commitments, and responsibilities that holds a school together and ensures that it can and will

provide students the experiences they need in order to learn.¹⁷ Integrative capital includes traditions, values, leadership, and shared experience about what works for students. Internal accountability is an aspect of integrative capital. It is the arrangements a school makes to ensure that it can meet its commitments to legitimate external constituencies without abandoning its goals for students.

Tensions among parents, teachers, governing boards, and donors can strain any school. But in charter schools that survive the first 3 years of turbulence and role-clarification, the need to maintain the confidence of all these parties strengthens the focus on motivating and educating students. Private schools are similarly strengthened by their need to create relationships of trust and confidence with parents, teachers, governing boards, and donors.¹⁸

Internal accountability must be created and tended by the people who work, volunteer, and learn there. No external authority can create internal accountability simply by commanding it. In fact, as Fred Newmann has argued, external authorities can destroy internal accountability by forcing school teachers and leaders to spend all their time on matters other than providing quality instruction.¹⁹

Charter schools become internally accountable for two reasons; because they must, and because they can. They *must* be internally accountable because coordinated, consistent effort is necessary if the school is to keep all its promises and survive. They *can* be internally accountable for many reasons: Because they control their own processes and assets. Because they can decide whom to hire, and assign staff flexibly. Because they can invest in teacher training, new equipment, and other assets to improve instruction. Because they can assess their own performance and initiate their own correctives. Because they can inform parents in advance about what children will and will not experience.

The consequences of charter schools' accountability relationships with government agencies—their authorizers and agencies with broader jurisdiction such as like civil rights agencies and building inspectors—are less clearly conducive to internal accountability. As the next two sections will show, such agencies are having great difficulty defining their own powers and responsibilities toward charter schools.

¹⁷ Hill, Paul T., and James W. Guthrie, A New Paradigm for Understanding (and Improving) Twenty First Century Schooling, ed. Murphy, Joseph and Karen Seashore Louis, *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration, Second Edition*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1999.

¹⁸ See Bryk and Lee, *op. cit.*, Hill Fostrer, and Gendler *op. cit.*, Coleman, James S., and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*, New York, Basic Books, 1987.

¹⁹ Newmann et al, 1997, *op. cit.*