

Archived Information

SECTION 6

Conclusions and Recommendations for People Engaged with Charter Schools

Charter school laws put schools in a situation of mixed accountability to private parties as well as to government, in pursuit of a public purpose. The public purpose is student learning. In theory, charter schools' accountabilities serve that public purpose—parents, teachers, and other private parties, as well as authorizers, care about student learning and reward or punish schools accordingly. Also in theory, schools are more likely to attain that public purpose if they are accountable to all those parties than if they are accountable to only one of them. No party, not even government, knows exactly what students need to know, nor can any party, not even government, be completely trusted to act purely in students' interest.

Using mixed accountability mechanisms to serve public ends is not exactly a new idea. Public utilities, for example, are accountable both to government and to their investors. In recent years, they have also become accountable to customers, who are free to switch from one provider to another. Publicly funded social services are now delivered both by government agencies and by private organizations that are accountable to government via contracts but remain accountable to their boards and members of their parent organizations. Even conventional public school systems make promises in order to get private donations and rely on voluntary unpaid effort by parents and teachers. These are all examples of enterprises that combine government oversight and private accountability in pursuit of broader public ends.¹

Not everyone accepts the idea that public ends can be achieved by mixing governmental and private accountability. For many, accountability in public education means accountability to government and nothing else. Though most analysts of public education readily concede that government does not always articulate the public interest in education well—allowing a succession of different self-interested groups to write laws and regulations to create advantages for themselves—many still argue that government can do the job right. Some assume that government's now-chaotic actions can all be realigned to emphasize student learning over all other interests. Advocates of “alignment-” based reforms intend to hold individual schools accountable for student learning. Unlike charter school laws, however, alignment-based proposals do not expose schools to the pressures of free choice made by families and teachers or create autonomous governing boards for individual schools.

Schools that do only what they are told cannot be held responsible for the results. If schools are to be accountable they must have more control over their budgets, schedules,

¹ These ideas are more fully developed in Brandl, John, *Money and Good Intentions are Not Enough*, Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution Press, 1998.

methods, and staff selection than is possible in a conventional public school system. Moreover, school level freedom of action in turn implies some degree of free choice for teachers and for families. A school to which students and teachers are subject to involuntary assignment has little chance to establish a well-defined approach to instruction; it must focus instead on coping with the demands and limitations of the people who happen to be there. Whether they are public or private, schools that work for their students start with communities based on informed consent, not involuntary assignment.

By design, charter schools must reconcile pressures from many sources. They depend on many different parties—authorizing agencies, families, teachers, donors, volunteer governing boards, and other government agencies—each of whom has reason to expect evidence of performance. Each external party hopes the school will produce high levels of student performance, but some have their own peculiar concerns. Authorizers are also concerned about financial propriety, teachers about job security and working conditions, families about safety and caring, and other government agencies about maintaining regimes of regulation that they think benefit their particular clients.

Despite many false starts and some outright failures, charter schools are learning to face the problems of multidirectional accountability. They are helped by the fact that the most significant parties to whom they are accountable, parents and teachers, care more about maintaining a school climate conducive to learning than about any other dimension of school performance. Though some authorizers, other government agencies, and assistance groups create pressures that do not reinforce schools' focus on teaching and learning, on the whole, the schools we studied are creating internal accountability mechanisms that allow them to deliver enough of what everyone cares about to maintain their charters and survive financially. Though some charter schools cannot handle all the pressures on them and go out of existence, charter laws allow other schools to form and, potentially, learn from others' failures.

Nevertheless, there are still unresolved issues about charter school accountability:

- Some charter schools have managed to produce acceptable student outcomes but are still a long way from creating strong internal accountability arrangements and stable working relationships between the governing boards and management.
- Only a few of the hundreds of legally designated charter authorizing agencies have faced their own responsibilities in holding charter schools accountable. Some authorizers fall back on process and compliance monitoring and avoid acting on measures of student performance, rather than opening themselves up to the criticism that they will not close or replace any of the conventional public schools for which they are also responsible.
- Charter schools can be exposed to forms of pressure from other government agencies that other public schools simply do not encounter.

No one could expect all these problems to be solved within 5 years of the beginning of such a radical shift in methods of public service provision. Moreover, charter schools, their supporters, and some authorizers (including the states of Massachusetts and Colorado, special-purpose authorizing agencies in the District of Columbia and Michigan, and school districts in Chicago and Colorado) are making real headway.

In general, the preceding sections have shown that charter schools' multidirectional accountability can work, in the all-important sense of promoting effective instruction for children. For this to happen, however, charter schools must be more than neutral registers of the external pressures upon them. They must be real organizations, capable of organizing the effort of adults and children in pursuit of a mission and using data and expertise to solve problems. In short, if a school is to be externally accountable it must also be internally accountable.

Charter schools develop internal accountability because they need to do so. Charter schools can develop internal accountability because they control the resources and decisions that count. Internal accountability is *necessary* for charter schools because:

- A school receives public funds only if it meets the conditions of its charter—to deliver a coherent instructional program, show a government authorizer that students are learning, and maintain equitable admissions practices.
- A school must compete for students, whose families send them only if the school provides credible instruction and maintains a motivating, safe, and caring climate.
- A school must compete for teachers, who can choose schools they believe are stable enough to pay them and that provides a satisfying professional climate.

Internal accountability is *possible* because:

- Schools control funds and can therefore decide how to allocate resources between instruction and other objectives. They can also purchase the exact kinds of materials and advice they need to improve instruction.
- Schools have hiring authority over staff, which allows them to select the combination of skills it needs to manage its instructional program and gives schools the leverage they need to ensure that all faculty members work to provide the kind of instruction promised.
- Schools control their schedules and staff work assignments, and they can adapt programs to the needs of students and respond to information about their own performance.

However, based on the research reported in section 2, it is evident that these six conditions are not in themselves *sufficient* to create internal accountability. Some charter schools encounter all these conditions and still fail to become internally accountable. Becoming

internally accountable requires something more: compelling ideas about what makes a good school; leadership to help staff, parents, and the governing board converge on a common image of the school; and continued hard work to update general agreement about the school's purposes and methods and apply it to current circumstances.

People outside the school can create the conditions that make a school need to be internally accountable and enable a school to take responsibility for its results. Outsiders can even help the school community converge on shared ideas about good instruction. The fact that a charter school must establish enough guiding principles up front to write a compelling proposal starts it on the way toward establishing internal accountability, but it is clear that many charter schools nonetheless struggle, and a few ultimately fail, to develop it. Based on our research, we do not have a complete theory of how schools develop internal accountability. We can, however, identify the ways that key actors, both within and outside the school, enable and help schools develop internal accountability. The remainder of this section suggests how charter school leaders, governing boards, parents, teachers, authorizers, state governments, and philanthropists and other private-sector friends of charter schools can contribute to the development of internal accountability.

How Key Actors Can Improve Charter School Accountability

Most actors care more about whether a school gives children a positive learning environment and provides effective instruction than about whether it is punctilious about following rules. However, rules are part of life. The key to the success of charter schools—and to public education in general—is to find a way to reconcile the compliance pressure on schools with their need to focus on issues of teaching and learning. To make this possible, all parties must accept some responsibilities.

Charter school governing boards need to: understand that boards of directors must follow Osborne and Gaebler's² dictum to “steer, not row,” formulating the school's mission and making decisions that set long-term directions, such as hiring the school head and establishing the criteria against which her performance will be judged. Directors who are also school founders must accept the fact that, like parents, they must learn to “let go.” Stable and productive board-management relationships depend on the board's acceptance of the limitations of its “steering” role, supporting management whenever possible and replacing, rather than hobbling, managers who cannot be trusted.

New boards must expect a serious shakedown period that requires continual clarification of mission, governance relationships, and staffing. Neither boards nor staffs can always operate on the basis of consensus, and some conflicts might be serious enough to lead some board members or school managers to depart. However, the board must continually ask whether its

² Osborne and Gaebler, 1991, op. cit.

actions are strengthening or weakening the instructional program and whether its actions clarify or blur the divisions of responsibility on which internal accountability is built.

Charter school leaders need to: seize the initiative on external accountability. Though some charter school leaders think the less they can have to do with their authorizers the better, avoidance leads to trouble. School leaders need to initiate contact, define the terms under which they hope authorizers will hold them accountable, and create a flow of relevant information. Schools that avoid assessment or resist tests that the government is clearly authorized to require only increase the likelihood that government will do what comes naturally—try to control the situation by imposing new rules, demanding compliance, and imposing penalties.

Schools in states that require standards-based testing can critique the tests but they must not resist administering them. School leaders must avoid first encouraging staff opposition to the tests, and later telling staff they have no choice but to go along.

School leaders must also take the initiative in creating well-informed expectations among parents, teachers, and governing board members. Leaders must clearly communicate to parents and teachers what the school intends to accomplish and what it will not attempt. Vaguely characterizing the school as a happy place that values diversity and helps everyone learn does not discourage parents and teachers from maintaining irreconcilable fantasies about what the school will be. The school must be characterized clearly enough so that people can know what it will *not* do, and so that people whose expectations cannot be met will look elsewhere.

Attaining this degree of clarity takes time. No one can know in advance all the expectations that people might carry with them into the school. But at every juncture, school leaders serve everyone best by creating clarity, not ambiguity.

Internal accountability depends on clarity, which is in turn a function of leadership. Educators accustomed to conventional public schools, in which staff and parents are assigned to a school and must find ways to live with their differences, have learned to paper over conflicts with glittering generalities. Charter school leaders must operate very differently, constructing specific expectations, selecting and socializing staff, and creating internal divisions of responsibility that allow the school to meet them. This requires setting action priorities on the basis of hard performance data, not staff politics.

Parents need to: become wise consumers. Parents who know what to expect from a school, and can both effectively demand what was promised and avoid making demands that a school clearly was not constructed to meet, make an indispensable contribution to internal accountability. Charter schools need to be held to their promises, and parents who do so strengthen their school. But parents who import their own secret hopes, especially for instructional programs, facilities, and extracurricular activities that a charter school obviously lacks the capacity to deliver, only diffuse the efforts of board and staff.

Parents need to understand that not every charter school is for every child. It is their responsibility to perform due diligence before enrolling a child in a school. Parents need to ask questions: What will students experience every day? What will the school's climate and academic standards be? What kind of help will children get when they are struggling? and What is expected of families?

Teachers need to: understand that joining a charter school is an opportunity to change the type of educational relationship teachers have with students and other teachers. Charter schools are problemsolving organizations and the survival of the school depends on each teacher's success. Teachers and leaders must consider themselves as co-owners and comanagers, not as bureaucrats with limited responsibility.

Like parents, teachers need to perform due diligence about whether a charter school's expectations match theirs. They also need to hold board members and school leaders to their promises about instructional quality, school climate, and professional development opportunities. Teachers strengthen schools if they demand quality. But teachers must expect to be challenged and to work under performance pressure.

Authorizers need to: take their responsibilities toward charters seriously. School districts, in particular, need to overcome habits of letting schools slide until something dire happens. This requires creating routines for monitoring and assessing schools, and rules of thumb to use early in a school's development to distinguish schools that are having normal startup problems from those that are seriously at risk of failing to deliver. Authorizers should consider creating or contracting for school inspection organizations, as have the Massachusetts and Chicago charter schools offices.

Authorizers must fulfill their public duties to ensure that charter schools are held accountable for performance, and to protect students from failing schools. This requires clear definitions of performance measures of schools' value added. It does not require exhaustive measurement of every aspect of a school's operation, but it does require sharp, valid, and tamper-proof measures of student learning outcomes, especially in core subjects. Parents and teachers can be trusted to assess and react to important but hard-to-measure school attributes like climate and morale. But authorizers must collect and act on hard measures of whether students are learning.

Authorizers must also adapt to the realities of dealing with schools that are independent organizations responsible for demonstrating student performance. Schools cannot be expected to develop as educational institutions if they are constantly surprised by rules and constraints newly discovered by disorganized authorizers. Charter schools can live with rules, but rules must be stable and the accompanying administrative burdens predictable. Unstable rules and sporadic enforcement can drive schools in one of two directions: toward either slavish compliance to the rule of the day or arrogant disregard of compliance obligations.

State governments need to: hold authorizers accountable for their responsibilities.³ All states that allow local school districts to charter schools must understand that districts are not accustomed to holding schools accountable for performance. Many need help understanding their responsibilities and exposure to districts that have learned how to fulfill these responsibilities. State-funded professional development for administrators responsible for charter school oversight and for school board members is essential, but no state has accepted this responsibility.

States need to provide enough guidance and training so that a conscientious authorizer can determine whether it is fulfilling its responsibilities toward potential and current charter operators. States also need to make sure local districts and other authorizers face negative consequences if they do not follow the intent of state law in processing charter school applications and overseeing charter school performance.

State governments might also help other agencies like fire code enforcers and building inspectors by issuing guidelines for dealing with charter schools. These guidelines should make it clear that charter schools are not to be held to more rigorous standards than existing public or private schools.

The federal government needs to: clarify key regulations as they apply to charter schools. State laws differ on whether charter schools are to be considered school districts or simply contractors working for public agencies (e.g., Wisconsin, California, Arizona, and Connecticut). This has meant that individual charter schools have been required to offer special education programs that school districts, not individual schools, normally provide. In conventional public education, no one school must provide services appropriate to every disabled child: it is enough for the school district to provide appropriate services at some place in the district that is accessible to the student. Federal enforcement of the rights of handicapped children should permit charter schools that are not school districts under state law to make similar arrangements, either by depending on school districts to provide special education, or by forming consortia in which different charter schools provide different special education services.

Friends of the charter school movement need to: help government agencies and private actors support and effectively evaluate charter schools. Foundations, charter school associations, and resource centers should direct investments toward helping charter schools develop strong governing boards and other internal accountability mechanisms such as self-assessment models, effective grievance policies, and staff evaluations. State and national

³ An Education Commission of the States report has suggested that states create sanctions for school districts that do not provide districts with the freedom of action and performance-based oversight contemplated by state law. These sanctions can include loss of control over the schools in question and even replacement of the existing school board. See The Education Commission of the States, *Bending without Breaking: Improving Education through Flexibility & Choice*, Denver, 1996. Sarah Brooks has also suggested that such sanctions might be applied to districts that do not fulfill their responsibilities under standards-based reform. See Brooks, Sarah, *How States Can Hold Schools Accountable: The Strong-Schools Model of Standards-Based Reform*, Seattle, Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2000.

associations should help disseminate best practices on internal accountability to other charter schools and to other public schools.

Those who hope to see the charter school movement expand and thrive must also work to expose charter schools to technical tools that help them get the kind of data they need to be held accountable.⁴ Likewise, friends must help charter school authorizers and evaluators develop new capacity to measure school progress, rather than rely on compliance evaluations.

Perhaps most importantly, charter friends need to develop effective ways to help parents evaluate the progress of their children and their children's schools. Efforts in these areas are emerging and should be fostered. In Rochester, New York, a local foundation has provided planning grants to schools on the condition that they adopt a common assessment model that can be used to create a charter school report card. The Charter School Development Center at California State University now offers accountability training and materials for authorizers as well as schools. The Walton Foundation is funding a multistate project to develop and disseminate new accountability methods for charter schools.

While statewide associations and resource centers can do much to support strong accountability and strong schools, these organizations now have their limitations. Their main mission is help individual schools get started and thrive. A new statewide independent nongovernment entity must also serve a more specific role. Such an organization would be charged simply with defending the integrity of the state's charter school law. It would act as a watchdog on state government's faithful implementation of the charter law, fight unnecessary new regulatory demands, help central office and authorizing agency staff to shift from a control mode to a support mode, and encourage multiple sources of information about charter schools. These might include media, associations, and parent groups.

Conclusions

Even this early in the development of charter schools, the stakes are high. The majority of charter schools are less than 3 years old and most are still developing their approaches to instruction and institutional identity. If they face an unpredictable regulatory environment they may never reach their full potential. Charter schools, and the broader national movement behind them, can serve children well only if authorizers and supporters create conditions friendly to internal accountability.

The stakes are high for all of public education, not just for charter schools and their supporters. Charter school laws did not create the need to hold individual schools accountable for performance. That need has been recognized for decades by educators and policymakers who knew that compliance-based accountability weakened schools and diverted time and energy away from instruction. Seeking to focus public oversight on school performance, 49 states have

⁴ See, for example, Finn et al., 1999, op. cit., Appendix A: "Generally Accepted Accountability Principles for Education."

committed themselves to standards-based reform, which requires a form of school performance accountability that has many of the elements of charter schooling. Like charter schooling, standards-based reform intends to make schools accountable for performance, not compliance; gives teachers and principals the freedom of action necessary to improve instruction; and promotes new investment in ideas, organizations, and people.

Charter schooling is the laboratory in which governments and other actors, both public and private, can learn how to play new roles in public school accountability. Charter schools, once a marginal enterprise, could offer new insights to renewal in public education.