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A Study of

Charter School

Accountability

NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY STUDY

Center on Reinventing Public Education
Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
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Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
University of Washington

Paul Hill
Robin Lake
Mary Beth Celio
Christine Campbell
Paul Herdman
Katrina Bulkley

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement

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U.S. Department of Education

Rod Paige

Secretary

Office of Educational Research and Improvement

Sue Betka

Deputy Assistant Secretary

June 2001

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For more information on the contents of this report, contact Ram Singh, project officer, on 202-219-2025, or e-mail ram.singh@ed.gov.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Charter schools are a new kind of public school. They must be open to all students and meet state standards, but they have more freedom, and bear more burdens, than conventional public schools. Their most important freedom is to use public funds to buy the things that matter—especially teachers’ time and instructional materials—in the ways school leaders think will be most effective for the students served. Charter schools’ most important burden is the need to demonstrate that the instruction provided actually benefits students. Unlike conventional public schools, charter schools can lose their public funding and be forced to close if they cannot demonstrate that their students are learning.

Charter schools have other freedoms, and the burdens that must come with their freedoms. Charter school leaders can hire their own teachers, make their own tradeoffs between spending on administration and teaching, locate anywhere in the community, and let parents know in advance what a child must do in order to succeed in the school. These freedoms bring burdens: the need to attract teachers who can freely choose to work elsewhere; the need to get administrative work done as efficiently as possible in order to focus expenditures on teaching; the need to spend money to rent space; and the need to attract and hold families that can freely choose to send their children elsewhere.

Unlike conventional public schools, which have dollars, teachers, funds, space, and students assigned by the local school district and are seldom closed for reasons of academic performance, charter schools must make many decisions and continue to exist only if they perform. Charter schools have high stakes relationships with many parties: with the school board or other government agency, teachers without whom the school cannot operate, and families whose choices determine whether the school gets funding. Because charter schools seldom get as much per pupil as the local public school system, and must pay rent for space that conventional public schools get free, charter schools often depend on donors—people who donate goods and services.

The fact that charter schools are dependent on many parties has raised issues about accountability:

- Conventional public schools are considered accountable because they must follow all the rules set by local and state school boards, and abide by all the provisions of contracts that these boards enter with unions and other organizations. Charter schools are exempted from many of these rules, and instead are required to demonstrate student learning. Can performance replace compliance as a mechanism of accountability to government?
- Even if charter schools satisfy the expectations of government, they can be forced to close if teachers or parents (and in some cases private donors) reject them. Does this dependence on parents and teachers force (or enable) them to ignore their responsibilities to the public?

- Charter schools must satisfy many constituencies, all at once and with limited resources. Does this compel school leaders and staff to spend all their time and energy pandering to different groups, or are they able to focus their energies on their one most important goal, providing effective teaching and learning?

The charter school movement is still a new phenomenon, and though the issues listed above can be defined they have not been resolved. This report is the result of the first extensive, nationwide study of charter school accountability. We hoped to illuminate the issues posed above by observing charter schools in operation. We designed our research to answer questions like these: Do charter schools take serious account of the public interest as represented by the school boards and other government agencies that authorize and oversee them? How are authorizing agencies adapting to the unfamiliar requirement to judge schools according to performance, rather than compliance? Are school boards overseeing charter schools closely, or treating them as distractions from their responsibilities toward conventional public schools? Are charter school leaders preoccupied with maintaining the support of one constituency to the neglect of the others? Is it possible for a charter school to balance the demands of its many adult audiences without neglecting the quality of instruction for students?

We could not hope to answer these questions definitively for all time: the charter movement is so new that at any time more than half the schools are either just starting up or in their first year of operation. But we could observe how the earliest schools are accountable in their relationships with authorizers, parents, teachers, and other key constituents. Our research could also give people struggling with charter school accountability—school board members, groups proposing to run charter schools, teachers, parents, charter friends associations, and foundations—the benefit of others' experience.

Accordingly, we spent 2 years (from September 1997 to September 1999) studying charter schools and their authorizers. Individual schools were our main focus: we asked how their relationships with authorizers affected their day-to-day operations; and how they developed relationships of trust and confidence with parents, teachers, and other community members. We also studied how authorizers—school districts and in some states, universities or special state agencies—were learning to oversee charter schools. We focused on six states with differing legal provisions on charter schools—Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Michigan. Taken together, these states also contain the vast majority of charter schools.

We found, not surprisingly, that charter schools and authorizers are just learning how to handle their new responsibilities and relationships. Major findings in this report include these:

- Though charter schools experience periods of confusion as they are starting up, most quickly learn that the best way to maintain the confidence of authorizers, families, teachers, and donors is to focus on providing quality instruction.

- Charter school leaders recognize that they must tend their relationships with authorizers carefully. However, on a day-to-day basis their main concerns are with internal accountability—how to maintain productive relationships among teachers, students, parents, and financial supporters.
- Creating governing boards, which are often the official oversight mechanism for charter schools, and establishing a productive division of responsibility between board and staff, has proven extremely challenging for many charter schools. When this relationship works well, however, it is an effective model for strong internal accountability.
- Charter authorizers are struggling to learn how to relate to schools on the basis of performance rather than compliance. New organizations created to oversee charter schools—special offices in universities, school districts, and state governments—learn their jobs relatively quickly. Conventional school district offices have trouble breaking long-established habits of detailed compliance-oriented oversight.
- Charter schools’ dependency on donors, lenders, and sources of outside assistance brings advantages and risks, but in general, such voluntary external partnerships seem to strengthen the school’s academic performance and reinforce its focus on quality instruction.
- Government agencies other than charter school authorizers are unaccustomed to working directly with individual public schools. As a result, these agencies sometimes deal with charter schools “by the book,” more severely than they treat conventional public schools.

Most charter school leaders know that they must meet performance goals set by the government agencies that authorize them to receive public funds, and maintain a relationship of trust and confidence with those agencies. However, many government agencies have not clarified their expectations and oversight processes toward charter schools. Government agencies that do not clarify performance expectations send an implicit message that charter schools will ultimately be assessed on the basis of political popularity and compliance. Thus, in many localities the implicit bargain in a charter school’s relationship with government—performance accountability in return for freedom from detailed rules about procedure and compliance—still remains an unrealized aspiration.

Most charter school leaders know that they must maintain relationships of trust and confidence with government authorizers, parents, teachers, and donors. Building these external accountability relationships, and reconciling the needs of different parties, is a major challenge that virtually all charter schools struggle to meet. Charter schools that survive more than 1 or 2 years show signs of developing this capacity. They do so

not by pandering to different groups but by making and keeping promises about what students will experience in school and what they will learn. Thus charter schools establish *internal accountability*—a belief that the school’s performance depends on all adults working in concert, leading to shared expectations about how the school will operate, what it will provide children, and who is responsible for what.

Internal accountability can enable charter schools to meet ambitious performance expectations. But if government’s expectations continue to be unpredictable and based on processes not outcomes, charter schools will be forced to focus on tasks other than the effective instruction of their students.

Taken together, these findings paint a picture of a new public enterprise in which all parties are learning to play their roles. Charter schools are creating opportunities for teachers, parents, and community groups to offer new schools. These groups are learning, sometimes with great difficulty, how to handle the unique challenge of being accountable to public officials as well as to parents, students, and the community. Chartering also challenges government to learn how to oversee public schools on the basis of performance, rather than compliance with rules. School leaders, parents, teachers, and government officials are all rethinking their relationships with public schools. As this report shows, the process can be messy. But the results can be worth the cost, if it leads to new and effective options for the education of America’s children.

The report concludes with recommendations about how all the parties involved in public education—including state legislators, school district leaders, philanthropists, school leaders, teachers, parents, and charter school supporters—can do their parts to ensure that charter schools have the freedom to educate children effectively yet remain accountable to the public.