

CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY: PATTERNS OF PRACTICE  
AMONG MULTIPLE SPONSORING AGENCIES

By

Terry Wiita

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Dissertation proposal submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State

University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

APPROVED:

Jennifer Sughrue, Chair

Jean B. Crockett

Christina M. Dawson

Steve R. Parson

Travis W. Twiford

April 14, 2000

Blacksburg, Virginia

Key Words: Charter Schools, Accountability, Sponsoring Agencies, and Minnesota

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Terry Wiita  
(ABSTRACT)

Since 1991, charter schools have become a popular school choice option. Charter schools are independent public schools free from most state regulations in exchange for a written contract specifying that certain results will be obtained. Charter school accountability depends on both the specific charter school law and the agreement that has been struck between the sponsoring agency and the individual charter school. This study explores the patterns of practice in the accountability processes used by multiple sponsoring agencies in Minnesota. Minnesota's charter school law allows local school districts, post-secondary institutions, and the state education agency to sponsor charter schools. One central overarching question was addressed in this study: How do the micro accountability systems of multiple sponsoring agencies within Minnesota compare? In addition, several subquestions provided the framework for the research:

1. How is the charter school accountability process defined in the state legislation?
2. How is the charter school law interpreted by the state education agency?
3. How do sponsors determine the accountability processes they require of their charter schools?
4. How satisfied are the charter school directors and the sponsoring agencies with their accountability process?

This qualitative study utilized research methods suitable for a multiple case study. The two primary data collection methods were document analysis and interviews. Individual case reports for each type of sponsoring agency were written that discussed specific elements of the accountability systems in use by each type of sponsoring agency within the state. A final report outlining the patterns of practice in the accountability processes used by all sponsors is included.

Any measurement of the macro accountability dimensions in the charter school movement may be confounded by the different micro accountability indicators used

by the different sponsoring agencies. This study provides information about the specific accountability processes being adopted by the sponsoring agencies. The results of this study will help sponsoring agencies of charter schools focus on the types of accountability to which they may hold their charter schools accountable.

## DEDICATION

Earning a Ph.D., is the fulfillment of a life-long dream and is due in part to five people who have been an important part of my life. To my husband, John, who provided continual love and support. I couldn't have done it without him. To my two sons Nathan and Ryan, who have always cheered their mom on during all her academic endeavors. They seemed to sense what I needed most at the moment and provided it, even if it meant going on to the soccer games without me. And finally, to my parents who raised me to understand the value of an education and instilled in me the belief that I could achieve anything as long as I was willing to expend the effort.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My committee contributed to this dissertation by spending untold hours providing me with ideas, information, and resources. Many thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Jennifer Sughrue, and the other members of my committees: Dr. Jean Crockett, Dr. Tina Dawson, Dr. Steve Parson, and Dr. Travis Twiford. They helped to shape the study and provided me with the necessary commentary throughout the project. This dissertation is in a large part due to their efforts.

Secondly, there are several individuals who provided support during my years as a doctoral student. Thanks to my siblings, Cathy, Tony, Anne, Mike, Tricia and Bryan who have always provided encouragement and support. A special thanks to my sister, Tricia who called and visited on a regular basis. The visits provided me with much needed breaks away from the project. Additionally, her enthusiasm and pride served as a motivating force. Thanks to my colleague and friend, Lisa who continually reminds me that I have what it takes. Thanks to my office mate, Becky, who provided a willing ear and helpful suggestions throughout our two years together. And thanks to Paulette, who provided understanding, concern, and technical help during my entire four years at Virginia Tech. I couldn't have done it without all of you. Thanks!

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
The Charter School Option in Brief.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Research Questions.....	5
Justification of the Study.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	7
Limitation of the Study.....	9
Delimitations of the Study.....	10
Organization of the Study.....	10
CHAPTER TWO.....	11
School Choice.....	11
Charter Schools.....	14
Micro Accountability.....	27
Summary.....	40
CHAPTER THREE.....	42
Purpose of the Study.....	42
Research Questions.....	42
Research Design.....	43
Researcher as Instrument.....	45
Site and Sample Selection.....	46
Data Collection Methods.....	49
Data Management and Analysis.....	50
Time Line.....	51

Summary of Outcomes .....	52
PREFACE TO CHAPTER FOUR.....	53
CHAPTER FOUR.....	62
Analysis of Minnesota’s Charter School Law .....	63
State Education Agencies’ Interpretation of the Law .....	70
Accountability Systems Specified in the Charter Contracts .....	80
Patterns of Practice in Charter Contracts .....	109
Sponsors’ Determination of Charter Contract Accountability Processes .....	113
Patterns of Practice in Determining Charter School Accountability Processes.....	116
Satisfaction with the Accountability Systems.....	116
Patterns of Practice in the Satisfaction with Accountability Processes .....	122
CHAPTER FIVE .....	124
Conclusions.....	125
Suggestions For Future Research.....	139
Final Reflections .....	141
REFERENCES .....	143
APPENDICES .....	152
Appendix A.....	152
Appendix B.....	153
Appendix C .....	154-155
Appendix D.....	156
Appendix E .....	157-159
Appendix F.....	160-161
Appendix G.....	162
Appendix H.....	163
Appendix I .....	164-169
Appendix J .....	170-175
Appendix K.....	176-181
Appendix L .....	182-191
Appendix M .....	192
Appendix N.....	193-197

Appendix O.....	198
CURRICULUM VITA .....	199



## TABLES

Table 1: States with Charter School Legislation.....	16
Table 2: Expansive or Restrictive Legislation .....	20
Table 3: Minnesota Sponsoring Agencies .....	80
Table 4: Demographics for State Board of Education Charter School.....	83
Table 5: Summary of Accountability Elements Found in State Board Charter Contracts .....	87
Table 6: Demographics for Post-Secondary Institutions Charter Schools.....	89
Table 7: Summary of Accountability Elements Found in Post-Secondary Institution’s Charter Contracts .....	93
Table 8: Demographics for School District Charter Schools.....	95-96
Table 9: Summary of Accountability Elements Found in School District Charter Contracts .....	110

## FIGURES

Figure 1: The individuals and organizations that shape the Accountability Process.....8

## CHAPTER ONE

Throughout the history of public education many theories have been proposed regarding the improvement of the educational process. The emphasis in most of these theories has vacillated between two equally significant requirements for schooling: “rigor and flexibility” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 2). The launching of the Soviet Sputnik and the resulting fear that Americans had an inferior educational system sparked reform movements designed to increase the rigor of the academic program (Chubb & Moe, 1990). During the 1960s, using state and federal funds, public schools implemented a variety of structural changes in an effort to be more flexible. Open classrooms, alternative schools, and alternative schedules were among the innovations used to increase the flexibility of the school system (Lieber, 1997). During the 1980s, educational reform focusing on both increasing flexibility and rigor became a priority and assumed a national focus.

Educational reform is a collective term used to describe any of the many processes that are instituted to make the American educational process more adaptable and improve student performance, the former representing flexibility and the latter, rigor. Currently, among the more popular strategies utilized in many educational reforms are: site based management, moving “the responsibility for decisions about scheduling, curriculum, hiring and even budgeting to the school level” (Weiss, 1995, p.571); school/parent/community partnerships, involving the entire community in the educational process; and accountability, measuring student and school performance.

### The Charter School Option in Brief

In the last 20 years, school choice, described as giving parents the opportunity to decide what school their children will attend, has emerged as a popular educational reform strategy. Ideally, school choice allows individual schools to design new and more effective learning environments. Parents opt to send their children to the school that best meets their own educational values and the specific needs of their children. School choice can take a variety of forms: vouchers, magnet schools, schools within a school, open enrollment, post-secondary enrollment, and charter schools.

Since 1991, charter schools have become a popular school choice option. Charter schools are independent public schools free from most state regulations in exchange for a

written contract specifying that certain results will be obtained. According to a national report, approximately 250,00 students attend 1,150 charter schools (United States Department of Education, 2000).

### Legislation

While known as a singular movement, charter schools are uniquely defined by the specific legislation that exists in each of the 37 states and the District of Columbia that have passed charter school legislation (Hirsch, 1998; National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, 1998). Generally charter school legislation includes seven issues: appeals process; sponsorship; finance and fundraising; autonomy; teachers and staff; students; and the broad category of oversight, renewal, and revocation.

### Sponsoring Agencies

The category of sponsorship impacts several of the other six issues outlined in charter school legislation. Sponsors are agencies within the state given the authority to approve charters and are responsible for monitoring the performance of the charter school. Sponsors can monitor any of several accountability areas: budget and funding issues, academic performance of the students, performance of the school, and compliance with state and federal regulations.

In the majority of states with charter school legislation the law allows for only one type of sponsor, the local school board. However, 14 of the 37 existing charter school laws allow for multiple sponsors. Among the possible sponsors, according to these laws, are the state Department of Education, the state Charter School Board, the local education agency, and post-secondary institutions (Center for Educational Reform [CER], 1999).

Generally, the reporting requirements of the individual schools are outlined in the state's charter school legislation. A charter school sponsoring agency, working with the charter school, outlines more specific reporting requirements and deadlines in the actual charter. In essence, charter school accountability depends not only on the specifics of the charter school law but also the agreement that has been struck between the sponsoring agency and the individual charter school.

### Charter School Developers

An individual or groups of individuals who design a charter school program and negotiate the charter contract are generally known as charter school founders. In

Minnesota, the site of this study, the charter school founders are known as charter school developers, which more aptly describes their primary function of designing the educational program of the charter school. Developers generally fall into three groups: educators, parents, and organizations. The most commonly cited reason educators give for starting a charter school is to realize a new vision of schooling. Parents start charter schools because they are dissatisfied with their public schools and desire a different educational experience for their children. In a similar fashion, non-profit organizations, for-profit firms, and multi-service community groups start charter schools to put their ideas into practice (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1997).

### Governing Boards

Charter school governing boards are responsible for overseeing the school's operations. Charter school laws vary in mandating the composition of the board. In some states, the law mandates the exact composition of the governing board, naming the percentages of principals, teachers, students, parents, and community members that must serve. In other states, general guidelines for board composition are given. For instance a charter school law may mandate that a majority of the governing board must be teachers in the school or parents of students attending the school. However, the majority of state charter school laws require only that the process for electing board members and the responsibilities of the board be included in the charter contract (CER, 1998).

### Accountability

Traditionally, public school accountability has centered on inputs, procedures, and rules compliance. Curriculum redesigns, adoption of national standards, new scheduling plans, and revised state and federal reporting documents have all been used in an effort to increase accountability of the schools. Accountability based on measuring the inputs assumes that extra resources, such as providing additional monetary funds, lowering pupil/teacher ratios, and increasing the number of support staff, will raise student and school performance levels. Recently, the focus on accountability in public schools has shifted from inputs to outputs. Standardized tests, mandatory exit exams, and state-mandated assessments are being used to judge the quality of the educational process in a particular school or school district.

Charter school accountability focuses on outputs, mainly increasing student performance. Two dimensions of accountability, macro and micro, exist in the charter school arena (Manno, et al., 1997). The macro category includes efforts by state and private agencies to create systems to measure the charter school concept, on a state or national level, as an educational reform strategy. Micro efforts are those efforts by the individual charter school to provide evidence of their own performance as specified by their charter (Manno et al., 1997). The combined micro efforts of many schools are used to evaluate the macro dimension or the viability of the charter school concept.

### Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the charter school movement is measured by the ability of charter schools to increase student and school performance levels. However, defining acceptable performance levels and designing indicators of these levels is very political. Often, monitoring accountability in charter schools has been no more than ensuring compliance with state and federal regulations (Manno, 1999). It seems that charter school accountability has not been adequately defined nor consistently applied. Therefore claims of success by the charter school movement are highly suspect.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, says charter schools are involved in “old fashion horse trading,” swapping rules and regulations for results. In theory, schools that can not demonstrate fulfillment of the accountability terms in their charter are subject to closure. However, most sponsors do not have well developed plans for monitoring charter schools or dealing with a school that is in trouble (Finn, 1996).

### Statement of the Problem

Micro accountability for charter schools, in reality, depends on the amount of oversight responsibility assumed by a particular sponsoring agency. The specifics of each charter school law vary depending on the particular state; however, most charter school laws are particularly vague when it comes to accountability. Most charter school laws include a very general discussion of audit requirements, standardized test requirements, and grounds for revocation of the charter. The development of a mission, the development of academic and non-academic performance standards, and the design of methods to monitor progress towards these standards are elements of a negotiating process between each individual charter school and its sponsor.

In states that allow for multiple charter school sponsors there seems to be little coordination among the sponsors to ensure that all charter schools within the same state are using similar accountability processes. Multiple sponsors within the state do not work together, and the type of reporting that is required by the different sponsoring agencies within the state are quite different (J. Nathan, personal communication, July, 1999; C. Brennan, personal communication, July, 1999). Any measurement of the viability of the charter school movement within a state may be confounded by this differential use of accountability indicators. The charter school movement's focus on results may become meaningless unless the micro dimension of accountability is more clearly defined and the processes used to monitor this dimension are outlined clearly for all multiple sponsors within the state.

This study will explore the patterns of practice in micro accountability systems within a single state, Minnesota, whose law allows multiple sponsors. It will also compare these micro accountability processes with those recognized in the literature as best practices.

#### Research Questions

This study will address one central question: How do the micro accountability systems of the multiple sponsoring agencies within Minnesota compare? Additionally, several subquestions will be addressed:

1. How is the charter school accountability process defined in the state legislation?
2. How is the charter school law interpreted by the state education agency?
3. How do sponsors determine the accountability processes they require of their charter schools?
4. How satisfied are the charter school directors and the sponsoring agencies with their accountability system?

#### Justification of the Study

In order for the effectiveness of the charter school movement to be evaluated on the macro level, charter schools must provide evidence at the micro level of increasing academic achievement in a school that is managed properly and is fiscally sound. There has been a void in detailed information regarding the issue of charter school

accountability. Recently efforts have been mounted to collect specific data to provide a more accurate picture of accountability in the individual charter schools (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 1997; Cheung, Murphy, & Nathan, 1998; Premack, 1998; Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1998;). Additionally, there seems to be movement toward developing systematic processes for measuring a charter school's performance (Chicago Public Schools Charter Office, 1999; Colorado League of Charter Schools, 1998; Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997). Sponsoring agencies need to take their oversight responsibilities seriously. Any study that can provide information about the accountability systems that sponsoring agencies are adopting is vital.

### Theoretical Framework

The accountability system that a particular charter school is required to follow may be shaped by several different agencies within the state, namely the state legislature, the state department of education, the state school board, the sponsoring agency, and the charter school founder, governing board, and director. A study of the specific process involves examining the input provided by each of these constituents. Research begins with an analysis of the specific accountability requirements outlined in the state charter school law. Most state charter school laws require compliance with federal regulations. Therefore, a necessary part of analyzing the state's charter school law is knowledge of the federal laws which must be obeyed. Further study requires an examination of the state's educational agencies guidelines for both charter school sponsors and developers. In some states only the department of education provides clarification of the meaning of the law. In other states, both the state department of education and the state school board contribute to the law's interpretation.

Additionally, the accountability process is shaped by the application form, application guidelines, and monitoring processes adopted by the sponsoring agencies. The charter school founder, with input from the school's governing board, interprets these guidelines and writes the school's charter contract, including the results for which the school will be held accountable. If appointed, the director of the school may also provide input into the formation of the conditions specified in the charter. This charter document is reviewed by the sponsoring agency, and any changes are negotiated between the founder and the sponsoring agency. The actual monitoring process is in



theory based on the specific elements of the charter. In the absence of the charter containing well-defined performance standards, the accountability process is determined by the specific reporting requirements the sponsoring agency may devise on a periodic basis. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of this process.

Evaluation of the accountability process followed by a particular sponsoring agency can be studied using several different criteria. Several state, sponsoring agencies, and charter schools have been recognized for having strong guidelines for their charter accountability plans. According to Manno (1999), the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, the Academy of the Pacific Rim, Chicago Public Schools Charter School Office, Colorado League of Charter Schools, and the State of Massachusetts have exemplary guidelines for drafting accountability plans. After reviewing the components of all these guidelines, I designed the Charter Analysis Form, including categories that were common to most of these exemplary accountability guidelines. This study used the criteria listed on the Charter Analysis Form. (See Appendix H). These categories are: (a) Mission and Goals; (b) Academic Goals, Performance Indicators, and Assessments; (c) Non-academic Goals, Performance Indicators and Assessments; (d) Fiscal Affairs; (e) Rule Compliance; (f) Strategies for Renewal, Non-Renewal, Termination and Continuous Improvement; and (g) Procedures for Reporting Progress and Customer Satisfaction.

#### Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study the following terms will be used:

**Charter Contract:** In Minnesota, the written authorization for a charter school signed by the sponsor and the Board of Directors of the charter school. This document specifies the outcomes for which the school will be held responsible.

**Charter school:** “An independent public school of choice, given a charter or contract for a specified period of time (typically five years) to educate children according to the school’s own design, with a minimum of bureaucratic oversight....It is held accountable to the terms of its charter and continues to exist only if it fulfills those terms” (Manno, 1999, p.1).

**Director:** The person who is responsible for the day to day operations of the charter school. May use the alternative title of school principal.

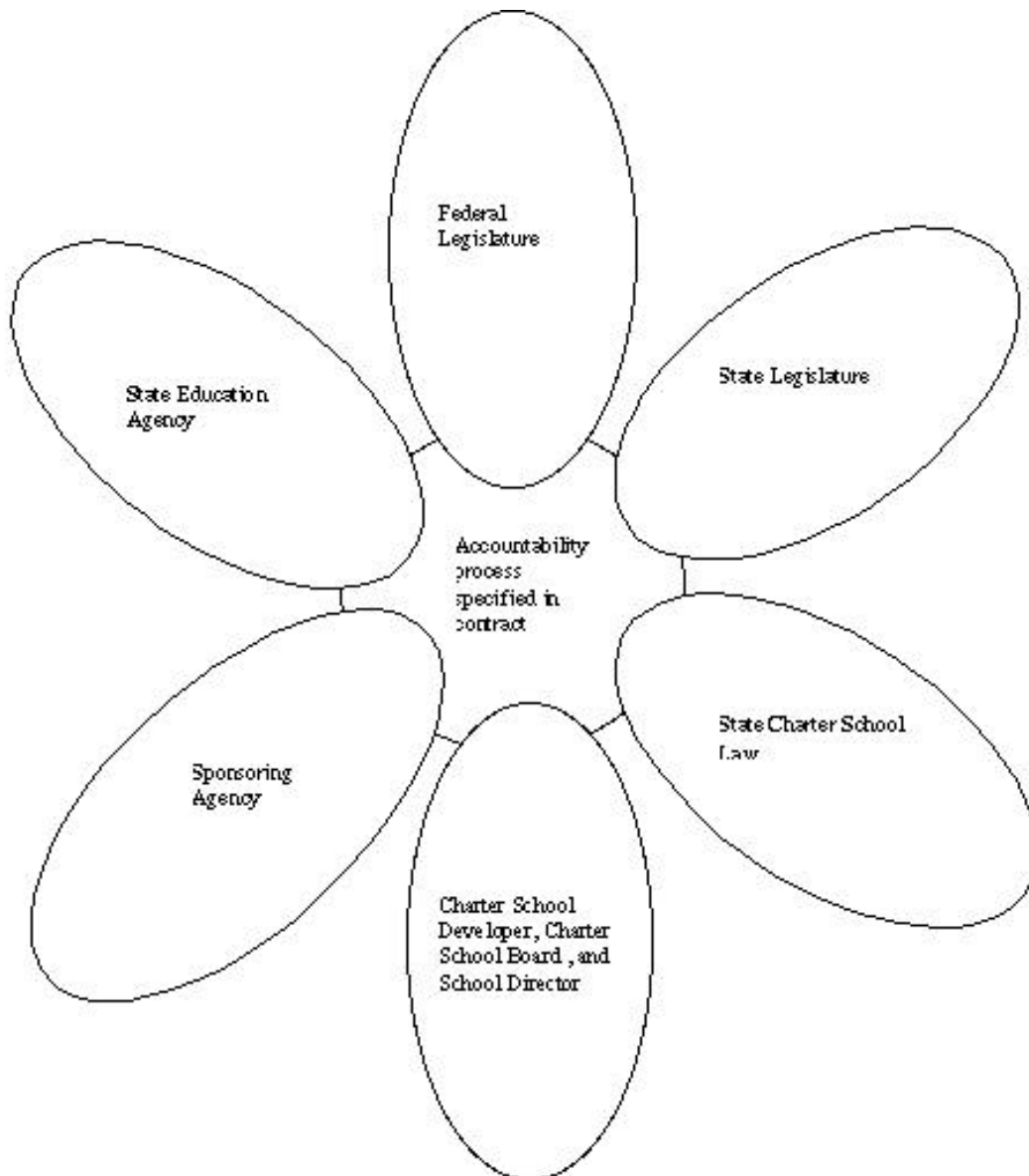


Figure 1. The individuals and organizations that shape the accountability process specified in a particular charter school contract.

**Expansive Legislation:** Legislation that fosters numerous charter schools, providing each school with a great deal of financial and legal autonomy. An alternative designation is strong legislation (Mulholland & Bierlein, 1995; Schneider, 1998).

**Developer:** In Minnesota, an individual or group of individuals who design a charter school program and negotiate the charter contract with the sponsoring agency. In other states may also be called founders.

**Micro accountability:** The process schools go through to provide information about their performance.

**Minority populations:** People belonging to the American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, and Black race/ethnic groups (Children, Families and Learning Department [CFL], 2000a).

**Oversight:** All of the monitoring duties a sponsoring agency performs to ensure that the charter school is adhering to its charter.

**Restrictive Legislation:** Legislation that requires charter schools to remain part of the local school district and seek waivers from rules on a case-by-case basis. An alternative designation is weak legislation (Mulholland & Bierlein, 1995; Schneider, 1998).

**Special Education Services:** “Specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. This means the content methodology or delivery of instruction is adapted so that each child with a disability can meet the educational standards that apply to all children” (CFL, 2000a).

**Sponsors:** Any of several agencies that approve the charter contract and monitor the performance of individual charter schools. Also known as sponsoring agencies, charter granting entities, chartering agencies, or charter authorizers, they ultimately decide whether the school’s performance merits the school’s continued existence.

#### Limitation of the Study

The study is limited to states with multiple sponsoring agencies. Fourteen states have charter school laws that allow multiple sponsors. The sample from the 14 states is further limited by the number of states that have more than five years experience with chartering and monitoring schools and those that have a sufficient number of charter schools in operation. After a review of the sponsoring agencies and charter schools in operation in all fourteen states, Minnesota was chosen as the site for the study.

### Delimitations of the Study

The sample includes charter schools in Minnesota. This state was chosen based on its extensive experience with charter schools and also on the number of charter schools that were in operation at the time of the study. Minnesota also has a range of charter school sponsors which facilitates the primary objective of this study: to examine the variations in accountability that exist between the different sponsors in the state.

The site selection was limited to charter schools in Minnesota that were in operation during the 1998-1999 school year. This was a purposeful decision to limit the research to charter schools that had at least one year's experience operating as charter schools. The research was conducted based on the assumption that these schools had been in operation long enough to have their accountability processes firmly in place.

### Organization of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One includes an overview of the charter school movement, a statement of the problem, justification for the study, theoretical framework, research questions, definition of terms, limitation of the study, delimitations of the study, and the organization of the study. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature related to the issue of accountability in charter schools. Chapter Three describes the research methodology that will be used in conducting the proposed study. The results of the study will be described in Chapter Four. Chapter Five contains a summary of the research, conclusions, discussions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.