CHAPTER TWO

Within the United States, there has been a long-standing tradition of children attending neighborhood public schools that are both close to home and age appropriate. Finances for these neighborhood schools primarily stem from two major areas, local property taxes and funds received from the state government. In recent years parents, educators, and politicians have increasingly verbalized serious doubts about the ability of the local public schools to adequately meet the educational needs of the nation’s children. According to Ralph Lieber, Superintendent of South Orange-Maplewood School District in Maplewood, New Jersey, “public education is on the verge of breaking” (1997, p.16). Lieber predicts that public funding for schools will continue to decline resulting in the schools inevitable “slide into mediocrity” (Lieber, 1997, p.16). At the point of losing faith in the competence of the public schools the public will shift its educational dollars to other institutions capable of providing an education. Many believe that only a total reorganization of public schools will save them from their complete demise.

During the 1980s, in response to this lack of confidence in public schools, many of the proposed educational reform strategies could collectively fall under the heading of school choice. School choice can take many forms but generally refers to reform efforts that change the “structure and performance of public education-- while keeping the public schools public” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p.206). Some argue that ideologically, choice promotes individualism and is compatible with the Jeffersonian idea of a decentralized government. Others counter with the argument that to Thomas Jefferson education of the common people was an important method of promoting shared values and increasing the understanding of human differences (Fuller, 1996). Despite the arguments, in many areas of the United States school choice programs are one of the many methods utilized in an effort to make public schools more effective learning environments.

School Choice

One of the most discussed issues in public education for the last 20 years has been school choice. School choice is best defined as a process giving parents the power to decide what school option best meets the needs of their children. Advocates of school choice say it is a way to increase the flexibility of the school system (Anderson, 1996).
Choice as a broad term encompasses many different ideas. School choice may have multiple meanings (Anderson, 1996; Ziebarth, 1998). Among them are:

- **Choice (open enrollment)** -- Allows choice of public schools either interdistrict (across and within district boundaries) and intradistrict (within district boundaries). Districts can either choose to participate in the program (voluntary) or the state can require participation (mandatory).

- **Tax deductions** -- A reduction in taxable income made prior to the calculation of tax liability.

- **Private vouchers** -- Payment is made by a private organization to be used for a child’s educational expenses.

- **Public vouchers** -- Government pays the parent a sum to be used for a child’s educational expenses.

- **Post-secondary enrollment** -- Allows secondary students to enroll in post-secondary courses and to use the course credit at one or both of the institutions.

- **Magnet schools** -- Public schools designed and operated by the school district, each having a particular curricular emphasis. Extra funds are provided by the school district and entrance tests are permitted (Jones, 1998).

- **Schools within a School** -- Public schools designed by parents, community members, teachers, and principals, utilizing innovative teaching methods, having a particular focus, and largely self-governing. No extra funds are provided and no admissions tests are allowed (Nathan, 1999a).

- **Charter Schools** -- Independent public schools free from most state regulations in exchange for a written contract specifying that certain results will be obtained.

Ziebarth (1998) found only four states (Maine, Montana, Vermont, and West Virginia) that did not provide for some measure of school choice as defined above.

A 1995 study by the National Center for Education Statistics (Anderson, 1996) revealed approximately 20% of all children attended schools selected by their families; 11% attend public schools and nine percent attend private schools. Families who exercised the school choice option were more likely to be Black, to be living in urban
areas, to have incomes over $50,000, and to have higher levels of education. Who Chooses, Who Loses? Culture, Institutions and the Unequal Effects of School Choice, funded by the Lily Endowment and co-directed by Richard Elmore, Gary Orfield, and Bruce Fuller of Harvard University, substantiates and further clarifies the NCES findings. School choice is more popular with working class and inner city parents (Anderson, 1996).

According to Schwartz (1996), charter schools are often found in urban areas where poor resources and overcrowding in public schools are common. However, these urban charters usually do not serve the most vulnerable minority and disadvantaged students in the community. Instead they tend to serve the “easier to teach” students—generally the white, middle class children living in the area (Schwartz, 1996). Choice may often result in inequities because those children without parents actively engaged in their children’s education remain in schools that are not adequately meeting their needs. Culture also plays a role in choice decisions. Many Black and Hispanic parents seek schools that place an emphasis on their cultural heritage, language, and beliefs (Anderson, 1996).

According to O’Neil (1996), choice increases the likelihood of parents to be more involved and committed to their children’s education. Parents must study their options and must choose a school that best meets their own educational values and the specific needs of their children. In doing so, they commit to the school’s educational values and its mission. A parent’s commitment and interest increase the likelihood of the child’s academic success. On the flip side, disinterested parents rarely exercise the school choice option and their children often experience academic difficulty. However, the interest in school choice continues to grow.

School choice in the late 1960s and early 1970s referred to the practice of parents opting to send their children to newly designed schools created by innovative educators (Nathan, 1999). One of the early experiences involved New York City public school educator, Deborah Meier. In her well-known book, The Power of Their Ideas (1995), she describes the creation and daily workings of Central Park East, a school within a school that she and her staff created. Later in the 1970s, in an effort to achieve racial integration Congress authorized the creation of magnet schools (Nathan, 1999). Magnet schools are
public schools designed and operated by the school district, each having a particular curricular emphasis. The idea was that the schools would be so good, they would act like magnets and would attract children voluntarily from a wide range of backgrounds and school districts (Jones, 1998). Unlike the earlier innovative schools, magnet schools have admissions requirements or tests and receive more funds per pupil than the local neighborhood schools (Nathan, 1999). A source of frustration for these innovative public schools was their inability to control operating budgets and selection of personnel (Nathan, 1999).

Charter Schools

One of the most popular arguments of school reformers is that those closest to the students (the schools, not the school district) should be held more responsible for student achievement. With the individual schools having more autonomy, they can design educational programs that best match the students’ needs (Mulholland & Bierlein, 1995). The charter school movement allows for the creation of innovative, autonomous, and accountable academic institutions. The movement also encourages existing schools and school districts to reexamine their methods and help promote educational change (Cheung, Murphy & Nathan, 1998; Mulholland & Bierlein, 1995).

History of Charter Schools

In 1988, Ray Budde published Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts in which he recommended giving teachers the opportunity to create new programs. He likened this process to a “charter”, originally a term used to describe documentation of an agreement between explorers and their royal sponsors. He believed the teachers could develop a charter with the local school district to create a new, innovative program. In much the same way the early explorers reported back to the sponsor, these teachers would provide a report back to the local school board on the results of the newly implemented programs (Budde, 1988).

Al Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at this time, was greatly influenced by Budde’s book. So much so that on March 31, 1988, in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Shanker proposed extending this idea to whole schools. He recommended teachers be given a chance to create “charter schools”, schools that would commit to improving student achievement and would work with
teachers on developing the skills necessary for this focus (Molnar, 1996). At Shanker’s urging the AFT, at its 1988 convention, endorsed the charter school idea (Nathan, 1999).

After extensive work by charter school proponents, Senator Reichgott introduced the nation’s first charter law bill to the Minnesota State Legislature in 1991. The bill passed by a narrow margin. This early Minnesota legislation allowed for a maximum of eight charter schools. Each charter school had to receive permission from both the local school board and the state school board, and a majority of the charter school board members had to be teachers in the school. This legislation was later modified to allow for more charter schools, for a request for approval to be appealed to the state board of education, and for the possibility of schools being sponsored by public universities (Nathan, 1999).

Evolution of Charter School Legislation

In 1992, California, influenced by Minnesota’s legislature, adopted charter school legislation. A growing interest in charter schools continued; in 1993 six states, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Mexico, and Wisconsin, adopted charter school legislation. A June 1998, report prepared by the National Conference of State Legislatures found that 29 states and the District of Columbia had some sort of charter school legislation (Hirsch, 1998). By the end of 1998, five more states, Missouri, Utah, New York, Idaho, and Virginia, had enacted charter school laws (National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, 1998). In June 1999, two more states, Oklahoma and Oregon, passed charter school legislation bringing the total to 37 different charter school laws in the United States. Table 1 categorizes the states with charter school legislation under the year the legislation was passed.

Federal Government Support of Charter Schools

In 1994, the U.S. Department of Education passed two legislative acts supporting education and indirectly providing funds to help cover start-up costs of charter schools. Goals 2000 (Educate America Act) provided seed capital for schools and communities to implement school reform plans (U.S. Department of Education, 2000a). The Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) re-authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The IASA provided resources to states, districts, and schools to support efforts to help students reach high state standards. The IASA also
Table 1.

States with Charter School Legislation by Year of First Enactment

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>D.C.</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>New York</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>Texas</td>
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provided flexibility to the three entities in the implementation of federal programs with a focus on new strategies to hold districts and schools accountable for student achievement. Finally, IASA promoted partnerships among families, communities, and schools (U. S. Department of Education, 1995). In 1998, Congress reauthorized the program through the Charter School Expansion Act of 1998. This act not only continued the policy of providing start-up funds but also provided two-year grants to support partnerships between charter schools with a minimum of three years of experience and clearly demonstrated success with conventional public schools (Medler, 1999).

Current Status of Charter Schools

As shown in Table 1, the largest number of states passed charter school legislation in 1995 and 1996, the first two years federal funds were available to support charter schools. In the four years following the passage of the two federal legislation acts, the number of states having charter school legislation more than doubled. The number of charter schools has dramatically increased. In 1992, there were two charter schools and in 1995, 154 charter schools opened their doors bringing the total number of charter schools in existence to 255. In 1998, there were 52.3 million school-age children in the United States and approximately 108,000 public schools. It was estimated that approximately 250,000 students (0.5%) attend 1,150 charter schools (1%) (U.S. State Department of Education, 2000b). Appendix A provides state specific information concerning the number of charter schools currently operating.

Charter School Legislation

The original vision of a charter school held by people like Budde, Shanker, and Reichgott was a legally and financially autonomous public school operating like a private business and accountable for student educational results (Mulholland, 1996). Legal and financial autonomy included no tuition, no religious affiliation, and no selective admission procedures. Additionally, schools were free from state laws and district regulations. Today charter schools come in many different varieties. The differences are due to the provisions outlined in the charter school law of the state in which the school is established. According to Nathan (1998), generally charter school legislation has several defining characteristics: it (1) allows creation of new schools or conversion of existing
public schools; (2) prohibits admission tests; (3) permits only nonsectarian schools; (4) holds schools responsible for student achievement; (5) waves most state rules and regulations; (6) permits several public bodies to authorize creation of a charter school; (7) allows families to choose to attend; and (8) directs the average per pupil funding and other appropriate funding to follow the student to the charter school. Each charter school is unique, having been established to try and meet the needs of the local community, and operates using strategies often characterized as creative and innovative (Perry, 1998).

All public schools (including charter schools) have certain characteristics in common. Namely, they cannot charge tuition, must be nonsectarian, are subject to federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination, and must meet health and safety laws. While charter schools laws vary significantly from state to state, generally charter schools are granted additional powers by state statutes. These powers include:

- negotiating and contracting for facilities and services
- acquiring real property
- receiving and disbursing funds
- incurring temporary debt
- operating as a business or corporation
- adopting a name and a corporate seal (Education Commission of the States & National Conference of State Legislators, 1998).

Some state laws have enabled the operation of a significant number of charter schools while in other states the legislation has provided little incentive for establishing charter schools. Differences in the laws include the application process, the number of charter schools permitted, the need for demonstrated community support, the organizations that can act as eligible sponsors, and the amount of legal and financial autonomy. Initially state charter school laws were classified as either “strong”, fostering numerous schools having great financial and legal autonomy, or “weak”, schools that remain part of the local school district and seek waivers from rules on a case-by-case basis (Mulholland & Bierlein, 1995; Schneider, 1998). With the increasing popularity of charter schools new terms that more accurately reflect the content of the state laws have been adopted to describe a specific state’s charter school legislation. Currently, the
popular belief is that state laws for charter schools exist along a continuum from those that are classified as “expansive”, used to describe those that facilitate the development of autonomous charter schools, to “restrictive”, used to describe those that provide little incentive for charter school development (Buechler, 1996). Table 2 outlines the twelve criteria that can be used to determine whether a charter school is expansive or restrictive. Several states, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Georgia to name a few, have recently amended their original charter school legislation to make the existing laws more expansive (Mulholland, 1996). Appendix B provides the Center for Educational Reform rankings of the individual state charter schools laws according to Mullholland, Bierlein, and Buechler’s standards.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) developed a different set of criteria with which to judge charter school legislation. According to AFT, “good” charter school laws include elements to ensure quality schools while protecting the public interest (AFT, 1996). As such, “good” legislation guarantees public accountability for student achievement, ensures that all students have access to charter schools, requires local district approval of charter schools operating in their jurisdictions, and mandates specific guidelines for reporting both school and student performance (AFT, 1996). On the other hand, “bad” legislation sets up an alternative school system which is paid for by many but benefits only a few. AFT reviewed the charter school legislation that existed in the 25 states at the time of the study and found that only Rhode Island’s charter school law could be classified as good. Eleven more states-- Louisiana, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas--come close ensuring quality education for all (AFT, 1996).

In December 1997, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) conducted a survey of the status of state laws and programs. The survey looked at original and amended legislation in the 30 states that had passed charter school legislation at that time. The survey examined seven major areas of charter school legislation: appeals process, sponsorship, finance and fundraising, autonomy, teachers and staff, students, and the broad category of oversight, renewal, and revocation (ECS, 1997). The document released as a result of this survey, “Charter School Roadmap,” was prepared using the
Table 2.

**Expansive or Restrictive Legislation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Expansive</th>
<th>Restrictive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools</td>
<td>Permit many</td>
<td>Limit the number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Sponsors</td>
<td>Multiple sponsors which may include local school boards, state boards,</td>
<td>One authorizing power, generally the local school board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and universities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Operators</td>
<td>Permit variety of groups including teachers, parents and other citizens,</td>
<td>Limit eligible operators to particular groups or individuals such</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-profit organizations, and businesses</td>
<td>as licensed teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Schools</td>
<td>Permit existing schools to convert as well as new schools to start from</td>
<td>Permit only conversions or permit on new schools from scratch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>scratch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeals Process</td>
<td>Permit denied charter operators to appeal to a different authorizing body</td>
<td>No appeals process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Support</td>
<td>No specified level of support from teachers, parents and community members</td>
<td>Specified level of demonstrated support from teachers, parents and community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanket Waiver From Laws and Regulations</td>
<td>Provide blanket waivers from most state and local district laws</td>
<td>Provide no waivers or require the negotiation of waivers on a case-by-case basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemption From Collective Bargaining</td>
<td>Provide complete control over personnel decisions</td>
<td>Charter School teachers are subject to the district collective bargaining agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Autonomy</td>
<td>Provide legal autonomy to sue and be sued, acquire property, etc.</td>
<td>Remain under district jurisdiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding Process</td>
<td>100% of per-pupil funding automatically follows the students enrolled in</td>
<td>Amount of funding supplied to the charter schools must be negotiated (generally is less than 100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Autonomy</td>
<td>charter schools</td>
<td>Schools are not allowed complete control over their budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start-up Funds</td>
<td>Permit schools to exercise complete control over their budget</td>
<td>No start-up funds provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Compiled from “Charter Schools: Legislation and Results after Four Years,” by M. Buechler, 1996.
resources of both the Education Commission of the States and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). It provides policymakers with an overview of these seven areas which policymakers will need to examine as they consider initial legislation or reevaluate existing legislation. The report is divided into seven major sections, one for each of the key charter school legislative issues named above. Each section includes a brief outline of the issue and a few examples of how specific states have dealt with this issue in their charter school legislation. The purpose of the report is to make policymakers aware of the options, that are available as they write or revise charter school legislation (ECS & NCSL, 1998).

**Sponsoring Agencies**

Sponsoring agencies, also known as charter granting entities, chartering agencies, or charter authorizers, approve and monitor the performance of individual charter schools. Currently, charter school legislation provides for one of three different sponsorship arrangements. A 1998 study completed by the U.S. Department of Education found 14 state charter school laws allow for single sponsors, typically the local school district or in some cases the state education agency. In nine states, a dual sponsorship arrangement exists; a state education agency approves the charter contract once the local school board has granted it or vice-versa. For example in Alaska the local school district grants the charter and the State Board of Education must also approve. In Arkansas, the State Board of Education grants the charter after the local school board or an organization representing a majority of the teachers in the district has approved it. In fourteen states, there exists a multiple sponsorship arrangement. Among the agencies eligible for sponsorship are: local school boards, intermediate school boards, state education agencies, public or private post-secondary educational institutions, specially created “charter school boards”, and other public bodies (U.S. Charter Schools, 1999a). For instance a charter school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, can be granted a charter by the city government in addition to the local school boards. (Jennings, Premack, Adelmann, & Solomon, 1998). In some states, the charter school developers can appeal to another authority, often the State Board of Education, if the initial sponsoring agency denies the application.
Charter School Developers

Most of the individuals involved in the design of charter schools are strong-minded people with virtually no experience in this arena (Finn, Manno, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1997). Generally, developers of charter schools fall into three groups: educators, parents and organizations. Research based on data from a telephone survey of more than 200 charter schools in operation in 1994-1995, revealed that in a majority of schools one or two key individuals served as a motivating force in drafting the charter proposal and in gaining community support (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). In about one-half of these cases, the sole individual was a school principal or administrator. In most of the other cases, a group of parents or teachers started the school. In a small minority of the schools, business leaders, a nonprofit foundation, or a group of educational reformers were the impetus behind drafting the charter school proposal (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Manno et al. (1997) remarked that many educators frustrated by the “bureaucracy, norms, or culture of conventional schools” start charter schools to realize their long held visions of doing things differently (p.2). According to this same two-year study involving visits to 60 charter schools and interviews or surveys of thousands of individuals, parents found charter schools because they are not satisfied with their public schools and want something different for their children. In most cases these parents cannot afford to pay private school tuition (Manno et al., 1997). Among the organizations that found charter schools are non-profit organizations, for-profit firms, and multi-service community groups like the Urban League. The motivation for these organizations falls under the collective heading of putting their ideas for schooling into practice (Manno et al., 1997).

The Center for School Change at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs in conjunction with the Education Commission of the States conducted a national study in 1995, “Charter Schools: What are They Up To?” The four-page survey was returned by 110 charter schools (66% response rate) in seven states (California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Wisconsin) and was designed to gather and share information about these schools. This study revealed that the most frequently cited reason for chartering a school was to provide better teaching and learning
to its community (ECS, 1995).

A U.S. Department of Education (2000b) four-year study of new and existing charter schools across the United States found the most important reason cited by all developers (newly created charter schools, and pre-existing public schools and pre-existing private schools converting to charter status) was to realize an alternative vision. In most instances an alternative vision referred to specific curricular or instructional approaches. The second most important reason cited by all the charter school developers, in this study, was to serve a special population. In 1998-99, 28% of the charter schools were founded to serve a special population compared to 19% of all charter schools founded prior to 1998 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000b). Beyond realizing an alternative vision or serving a special population, pre-existing public schools converted to charter status to gain autonomy from state or district regulations. Among the other reasons cited by pre-existing private schools who chose to convert to charter school status were financial reasons and a need to attract more students (U.S. Department of Education, 2000b). Included on their lists of reasons why they started a charter school, a small minority of all types of the developers included increasing parental involvement.

Charter School Governing Boards

In most charter schools the responsibility of the day-to-day management of the school is the job of the school administrator. For all charter schools a governing board is elected and is responsible for the oversight of the school’s operations. In some state charter school laws, the make-up of the board is specified. For instance, in charter schools in Hawaii, the board must be composed of at least one principal, one teacher, one support staff member, one parent, one student, and one community member (CER, 1998). In other states, board composition is more loosely specified. For instance in Georgia the majority of the board members must be parents of students enrolled in the school (CER, 1998). However, most of the charter school laws simply dictate that the charter contract must include a description of the school’s method of governance. The contract should also specify the relationship between the governing body and the administration of the school, as well as the procedures for electing the board members (Saks, 1998). In almost all charter schools the board takes on an active role in the oversight of the school, often
on a day-to-day basis (King, 1998). A board too focused on shared decision making and consensus building may end up spending hours in meetings and lose sight of its primary purpose, that is, to encourage the development and growth of its students (Nathan, 1998).

The U.S. Department of Education (2000b) found approximately 11% of the charter schools responding to the survey cited internal processes or conflicts and school administration and management as major implementation challenges. It is significant to note that a higher percentage of newly created schools reported a greater difficulty in overcoming these barriers than both pre-existing private and pre-existing public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2000b). It seems that newly created charter schools face problems similar to those faced when starting a new business. On the other hand, the research suggests that pre-existing schools were able to use their former administrative structure and working relationships as a basis for developing new policies.

The Hudson Institute is an independent non-profit organization based in Indiana. It recently completed a two-year study, *Charter Schools in Action*. The study involved visits to 60 charter schools, interviews of more than 1,300 individuals, and surveys of thousands of parents, teachers, and students (Vanourek et al., 1997). This study found governance problems in charter schools to be more prevalent and more serious than the federal study indicated. Among the governance problems cited by the participants are “personality clashes, inexperienced management, messed up governance and other internal political difficulties” like bad board-staff relationships (Finn, Manno, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1997, p. 5). The difference in findings between the two studies may be related to the methodological differences in the two studies. The federal study employed self-report by school directors whereas the Hudson Institute used interviews, observations, and their own analysis to gather and interpret data. Finn, Manno, Bierlein, & Vanourek, (1997) believe that the self report methodology may underestimate the occurrence of problems because often the participant doesn’t wish to acknowledge the existence of such problems for fear of negative recriminations.

**Charter School Performance Reporting**

The majority (96%) of charter schools in operation during the 1998-1999 school year were planning on making a report to the school’s governing board (U.S. Department
of Education, 2000b). Ninety-two percent of these schools were planning on making a report to their sponsor and 89% percent were planning on making a report to the parents of the enrolled students. Unfortunately, the study did not include a discussion of the format and contents of these reports. Approximately 77% of all state statutes require the charter school to report their progress annually to the sponsor and the state education agency (CER, 1998). However, the law in most cases does not specify the format and content of the annual report. In other states, the charter school sponsors may write the reporting requirements into the charter contract. The majority of the schools (94%) reported monitoring in the area of finances. Eighty-eight percent reported monitoring in the area of compliance with state and federal regulations, 87% in the area of student achievement, and 81% reported monitoring of student attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 2000b). This study did not analyze the nature of this monitoring.

Wells (1998), studying 17 charter schools in 10 school districts across the state of California, found that there is a great deal of variety in the levels of accountability that sponsoring agencies require of their charter schools. Often the requirements depended on how the sponsoring agencies viewed their roles. Some school board members felt that they needed to keep tight control over the charter schools; other school board members felt they had no control over what the charter school did. Quite often, the school board members said they lacked sufficient information to make an accurate assessment of how the charter schools were performing.

Wells (1998) also found local school boards are ambivalent about holding charter schools accountable. Most charter proposals contain vaguely written goal statements and outcomes that can not be easily measured. The charter proposals that did contain specific goal and outcomes statements did not specify a timeframe for the attainment of the goal. Thus it is difficult for schools boards to measure a charter school’s progress (Wells, 1998).

Most charter schools in California are being held fiscally accountable but rarely accountable for student academic gains (Wells, 1998). School board members are more comfortable monitoring a charter school’s fiscal affairs because that is their normal accountability role in public schools. Additionally, since most charter schools had such
ill-defined academic performance indicators and assessments, financial stability seemed to be an easier accountability issue (Wells, 1998).

Garn’s 1998 study of charter schools in Arizona also found policies and regulations relied more heavily on the reporting of financial aspects of the charter school and much less of a focus on student achievement. The state agencies did collect some performance information but there was no central person responsible for organizing the data. Consequently, the performance data collection was more to satisfy an established process than for actually examining the charter school’s performance. On the other hand, the Auditor General’s Office required all charter schools to have an annual financial audit conducted by a Certified Public Accountant. This information, in a fairly standardized format, was more easily monitored by the Auditor General’s Office (Garn, 1998).

Wolfe’s (1998) survey of the accountability practices being used by four post-secondary sponsors in Michigan found that the oversight functions performed by the sponsor varies depending on the particular requirements of each specific authorizing body. Most of the oversight responsibilities assumed by these authorizing bodies focus on financial and operational accountability. Among the possible oversight duties that can be mentioned in the individual contracts are: (1) compliance with state and federal rules; (2) maintaining acceptable standards in fiscal management; (3) establishing the method of selection for charter school board members; and (4) compliance with terms set out in the charter school contract, especially in the area of student performance. His study focused on two areas, providing a legal interpretation for Michigan’s law and providing an overview of the accountability processes used by sponsoring agencies in Michigan. Since 64% of the public school academies (term used in Michigan for its charter schools) are sponsored by one of these four post-secondary institutions, his study provided insight into how the majority of Michigan’s public school academies are being monitored.

Several agencies across the nation have completed charter school evaluation research reports. The Education Commission of the States in conjunction with the Center for School Change at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs (1995) completed a national study. Charter schools in seven states (California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Wisconsin) were surveyed in an effort to gather
and share information about these schools. The study found that the charter schools participating in the survey use a variety of methods to assess student achievement. Cheung, Murphy, and Nathan (1998) in a study involving charter schools in nine states, also found that the schools used a variety of methods to measure student achievement. The U.S. Department of Education (2000b) study found that 96% of the charter schools used standardized assessments of student achievement. The majority of these schools also used nonstandardized assessments of student performance such as student demonstrations of their work, student portfolios, and performance assessments. The schools also used parent satisfaction surveys, student interviews or surveys, and behavioral indicators to assess the school’s attainment of non-academic goals. Unfortunately, none of the studies examined the mechanisms for reporting this information back to the sponsor.

Micro Accountability

Publicized dissatisfaction with public education has brought evaluation of schools into the limelight. Demands for educational reform have centered on promoting academic excellence for all children (Chubb & Moe, 1990). In an effort to achieve this, the focus of educational reform has been on developing accountable educational institutions (Smith, 1988; Diamond, 1994). According to Cibulka and Derlin (1995) this quest for accountability has several origins:

- Government policy that is influenced by both economic and political interests;
- Popular dissatisfaction leading to demands for accountable institutions;
- Professionals who have continually demanded achievement testing; and
- Conflicts of fundamental political values like equity, economic impact, and local control.

Supporters of accountable educational institutions say the issue involves the school clearly defining its expected educational outcomes and then providing a means for assessment of these outcomes. Specifically, outcomes must be stated in measurable terms. Assessment must be conducted using a variety of assessment tools ensuring an accurate assessment of the students’ performance as well as the school’s performance. Finally, a regular means of reporting a school’s accountability in relation to specific benchmarks will provide the public with information about the quality of their schools.
(Diamond, 1994). Politicians and citizens alike are seeking information regarding the quality of schools.

**Accountability and Its Importance to Charter Schools**

One of the most pressing and difficult issues facing charter schools today is accountability. The public wants to know how the schools and their students are doing in an effort to judge the charter school movement as a whole, the macro dimension of accountability (Gardner, 1997). In actuality this is impossible since the charter school law in each state uniquely defines accountability. Additionally, much of the information needed to assess the micro dimensions of a charter school’s accountability is not available. There are three reasons for this lack of information according to Manno (1999). First, because the charter school movement is so new, data collection is just beginning. Secondly, charter school accountability plans are often not well developed systems, making them difficult to use in measuring performance. Finally, sponsors are not diligent about ensuring that the plans are well defined. The end result of this lack of information is that the charter schools are too often judged only on their ability to be compliant with the state and federal laws (Manno, 1999).

The evaluation focus in charter schools is on results or educational outcomes which is quite different from the former approach practiced in conventional public schools of accessing inputs, services, resources, and intentions (Finn, Bierlein, & Manno, 1997). However, today, the standards-based movement in many states is causing the focus in public schools to shift to outputs as well. Many believe that student performance outcomes should drive the educational program of the school (Gardner, 1997). The difficulty with this effort has been the struggle to appropriately link standards, tests, and consequences (Manno et al., 1997).

In many charter school states, the law requires charter school students to take the same state mandated standardized tests as students attending conventional public schools. While the charter schools must comply with this requirement, charter school advocates are quick to point out the problem with this practice: a nationally accepted test to assess student performance does not exist. Additionally, they say that there is no consensus among educators about the most effective use and appropriate role of standardizing
testing in public education (Cibulka & Derlin, 1995). Charter school supporters believe conventional reporting systems can not portray an accurate picture of the innovative practices and assessment techniques used by the schools. Bowman (2000) reported that a Michigan study found that the charter schools were using the same innovative practices that been in use by the conventional public schools for years, rather than developing innovative practices of their own.

Charter school advocates believe that educational quality does not enjoy a one-to-one relationship with standardized tests. According to Schwartz (cited in Schnur et al., 1999) the challenge is to “hold our students to high and consistently high standards without standardization… standards which recognize the uniqueness and the individuality of all the students in the school” (p. 3). Charter school advocates believe standardized tests should be only one of the methods used to assess charter schools. Other assessment methods utilized by charter schools across the United States include portfolios, performance assessment, self-reports, teacher observations, and individual evaluations. Using a variety of assessment methods enables the school and the public to gain a more accurate picture of the students’ achievements. However, some of these preferred assessments utilized by the charter schools do not have the proven reliability and validity of the standardized tests. The public often treats reports of increased student achievement based on non-standardized assessments with skepticism (Finn, Bierlein, & Manno, 1997).

Challenges to Policy Makers

Holding charter schools accountable is a monumental task for policy makers. Elmore, Abelmann, and Fuhrman (1996) remark that decisions about accountability are by their very nature political. Inherent in the concept of accountability is the question of what constitutes an acceptable performance level for the school and its students, as well as the indicators, and consequences of sub par performance. A variety of political interests define these key conceptual issues very differently. Additionally, the process used to establish these fundamental precepts is subject to pressures placed by a variety of constituent groups, resource constraints, and a lack of public understanding (Elmore et al., 1996).

Finn, Manno, and Bierlein (1997) recommend that this work be broken down into
five basic steps. First, policy makers must create a focus on results and not on the inputs or the intentions of the school. Secondly, indicators must be identified that will enable the public to gain a clear picture of the school’s performance. Third, policy makers must maintain a fine balance between the state’s desire to hold the schools accountable to specific levels and the individual school’s mission and philosophy. Fourth, a variety of data collection instruments must be used to record information about the school’s policies and operating procedures as well as student test scores and parental satisfaction rates. Finally, policy makers must ensure that the reports that result from the data collecting are free from biases and political agendas.

In order for the accountability focus to be successful, policy makers must ensure that the contract between the seller (charter schools) and the buyer (the public) calls for standards, performance assessment, and consequences for poor performance (Glass, 1972). The performance standards must be clearly written and details outlined. The testing aspect must include a variety of methods, including teacher assessments as well as standardized tests. Additionally, independent audits of all aspects of the school including attendance rates, graduation rates, the number and type of discipline problems, as well as student academic performance scores must be conducted by people other than those employed by the school. The results of these audits must be reported in a manner which is both understandable and allows for comparison across schools, school districts, and states. Finally, policymakers must establish and be ready to enforce a plan of intervention when schools fail to achieve promised results. In the end, policymakers must be willing to shut down a school that does not demonstrate adequate performance (Finn, Bierlein, & Manno, 1997).

Policy into Practice - Charter School Accountability Plans

Finn, Bierlein, and Manno (1997) found most states have three criteria for accountability: progress on meeting the school’s goals for its students; maintaining the general standards of fiscal management; and operating with honesty and integrity. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in its 1999 Training Academy Workbook defines four similar types of accountability standards for charter schools: academic, fiscal, rule compliance, and public/parental satisfaction. Manno (1999) reports charter
school laws generally specify four criteria for holding charter schools accountable:

- Students must have satisfactory academic progress on state- or district-wide tests and other similar measures.
- The school must demonstrate success in meeting the non-academic goals including those specified in the charter.
- The school must demonstrate that it is a viable organization, especially in the area of public funds use and in the arenas of management and governance.
- The school must comply with all federal and state laws that have not been waived as part of the chartering process.

All three systems have some common elements. All include meeting the standards set for student academic progress and for correct fiscal management. Accountability areas which may or may not be required include operating with integrity and honesty, complying with state and federal rules and regulations, satisfying the parents and public, and demonstrating success in meeting non-academic goals.

Regardless of the type of accountability specified in the state statute, as a step in the chartering process, potential operators of charter schools must define the school’s mission and goals as well as the performance levels to which the school will be held accountable. In some states, a document commonly known as an “accountability plan” is designed to “provide information needed to measure and track the school’s progress toward its goals, make program adjustments when needed, and report to parents, the community, and the chartering authority on performance and progress” (D.C. Public Charter School Board, 1998, p. 1). It is often used to compare the performance of the charter school with other conventional public schools. While the plan should provide continuous information about the school’s performance in the future, it should focus particularly on documenting progress during the reporting period required by the state’s charter school legislation. Most often this is annually, although in some states an in-depth review is only conducted during the renewal process, which may be a 3- to 15-year period after initial chartering.

Schools having different missions and utilizing different strategies will have different accountability plans. There are however several agreed upon essential elements that
should be included in order for the plan to be considered conceptually sound and useful to the school’s constituents. These include:

- A statement of challenging, measurable attainable goals.
- A statement of student academic content and performance standards.
- A set of performance indicators that specify what will be measured and counted.
- Annual and long-term performance targets or benchmarks.
- Measurement tools capable of supplying the information needed to judge performance.
- Strategies for supporting program improvement and continuous system renewal.
- Procedures for reporting progress and gauging customer satisfaction.


The accountability plan should be written to provide adequate information regarding establishing a school’s effectiveness but not so specific that the school has no flexibility in regard to the assessment and reporting methods (Gardner, 1997). Having an accountability plan that is agreed upon by both the chartering sponsor and the charter school reduces the possibility of a dispute between the two during the renewal process. The plan also gives the charter school operator and staff a clear idea of the expectations and standards upon which it its effectiveness will be judged (Manno, 1999). The accountability plan can also serve as a tool for the school when outlining continuous improvement strategies (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997).

Promising State Accountability Plans

In some states, particularly in those where the charter school law allows for only one charter granting institution, the oversight of charter schools is specified in a well-developed plan. Several localities have developed accountability guidelines that outline the specific procedures to be used by the charter school in reporting to their sponsor and the State Department of Education. Among the most promising plans are those developed by the Chicago School Reform Board and the plan developed by Rosenblum Brigham Associates for use by the Massachusetts Department of Education (Manno, 1999).
Additionally, the Colorado League of Charter Schools presented their accountability plan at the National Charter School Conference in March 1999.

Chicago.

The Chicago School Reform Board has developed a formal “Accountability Agreement” to be signed by each individual charter school. The agreement requires the Board to produce an annual report for each charter school. The performance report includes three categories: pupil performance, fiscal management and compliance. Each of these three categories has multiple indicators and the school’s performance is rated as high, middle, or low. The Board uses bi-annual site visits and school prepared reports in producing the annual reports for each school (Chicago Public Schools Charter School Office, 1999).

Within the pupil performance section, the results of specific standardized tests and alternative assessment methods are assessed. To achieve a “high” rating, a school must have 50% of the students’ standardized scores in both math and reading at or above the national norms. A “middle” ranking is given to schools who have 15-50% of the students standardized scores at or above the national norms. When less than 15% of the students score at or above the national norms a ranking of “low” is given. Additional factors reviewed in the pupil performance section are, “transfer rate out”, “attendance rate”, and unique standards and assessments (Chicago Public Schools Charter School Office, 1999).

The fiscal management section seeks to ensure the successful operation of the school as well as the proper use of public funds. The indicators used in this area are balanced budget, financial audit findings, and financial obligations. A ranking of “high” is given to a school that has a balanced budget for both the prior year and current year, had no findings during the audit, and has pension payments, payroll taxes, insurance coverage, and loan payments and terms in good standing. A “low” ranking is given to a school that doesn’t have a balanced budget for the current year, has repeated findings or a major finding during the audit, and has non-payment of any of the financial obligations without a realistic plan to make payment or is not complying with the terms of any of its loans (Chicago Public Schools Charter School Office, 1999).

The compliance section of the Accountability Agreement seeks to ensure that the
school has complied with the terms of the state statues involving criminal background investigations, open meetings, teacher qualifications, fire drills, tornado protection programs, and abused and neglected child reporting. It also seeks to ensure compliance of the issues written within the school’s specific charter. A “high” ranking is given to a school that has full compliance in all areas. A “middle” is assigned to schools that have a minor violation of the law or agreement. A major violation of either a law or terms of the agreement results in the assigning of a “low” ranking (Chicago Public Schools Charter School Office, 1999).

Massachusetts.

Rosenblum Brigham Associates has prepared an accountability model for the Massachusetts charter schools that has been nationally recognized (Finn, Bierlein & Manno, 1997; Schnaiberg, 1998). According to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, each charter school, in designing its accountability process, must do four things:

- Develop and pursue its own clear, concrete, and measurable performance objectives.
- Measure and document progress toward these objectives.
- Use credible student assessment tools for annually tracking student performance.
- Report its objectives, progress towards them, and student assessment results, along with other information in its annual report. (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997).

Charter schools in Massachusetts are required to submit an Accountability Plan at the end of the first year of operation and provide annual reports after that which outline the progress of the school (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997). The Plan is to be organized around measurable performance objectives, which include both student and school performance objectives. For each objective the school must supply expectations, strategies for attainment, progress indicators, measurement tools, and a description of current status (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997).

The Handbook explains that the Accountability Plan is a dynamic document, continually under revision, as the schools work in a continuing cycle of planning, action,
and reflection. In defining performance objectives the schools are directed to write at least one academic student performance objective, one school performance objective, and other nonacademic performance objectives. The total number of objectives will vary from school to school. For each objective, the school must write at least one expectation, “[a] more specific expression of performance objectives written in measurable terms,” which can be attained in five years (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997, Appendix D). The methods to be utilized in helping the school meet the objectives are outlined in the strategies for attainment section. Progress indicators are annual measurable accomplishments that can be achieved in working towards meeting the expectation.

The Accountability Plan also outlines the measurement tools that will be used to evaluate progress towards meeting the performance objectives. During the first year baseline data serves as the basis of reporting current status. After the first year, current status reporting relies heavily on the progress indicators the school has designed. In addition to these mandatory annual reports, the Education Department of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts conducts annual site visits to monitor each school’s progress. During these visits the evaluation team focuses on three essential questions: Is the academic program a success? Is the school a viable organization? Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter? (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997).

At the end of five years, the duration of a charter according to Massachusetts’s law, the Department of Education will use the Accountability Plan, the annual reports, financial audits, and the results of the site visits to make a decision to renew a charter. Only schools that can demonstrate adequate progress will have their contracts renewed (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1997).

Colorado.

The Colorado League of Charter Schools developed its “Accountability and Evaluation Proposal” in August of 1998 and presented it at the National Charter Schools Conference in March 1999. The plan has two stages, one prior to the school’s opening and a second stage focusing on the first five years of a charter school, the duration of a charter according to the Colorado statue. The initial stage helps a beginning school focus on designing measurable goals. The second stage spans five years and provides a plan for
refining the goals and their methods of assessment, as the performance data becomes available. The mission of the League in developing this document was to “help the districts and schools agree to some means of maintaining and improving the quality of education in each charter school” (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 1998, p.2). The League developed five critical questions that are to be addressed by the charter school each year. It is their belief that when a school asks the right questions, the focus will remain on the mission and allow constant reevaluation and continuous improvement. The five critical questions are:

- Is the school faithful to the terms of its contract?
- Is the school faithful to its stated mission, goals, and objectives?
- Is the academic program a success?
- Is the school a viable organization?
- Does the school recognize clearly where growth is most essential, and is the total program committed to discovering areas of self-improvement? (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 1998, p.5).

The proposal provides a list of supporting questions for each of the five critical questions. In the first year of operation the plan calls for the school to conduct financial, governance, and compliance reviews and preparation of a school improvement plan to be implemented in the second year. During the second year performance data is gathered and a self-study is conducted. An external site visit is the primary facet of the plan in the third year. The review team composed of administrators, teachers, board members, and parents from other schools review the report from the self-study done the previous year and prepare a report that takes the form of a formative evaluation, offering both commendations and recommendations. The fourth year, according to the plan, is spent acting on the report from the visiting team and preparing for the renewal process. Year Five of the accountability proposal includes a formal site visit by the school district, taking the form of a summative evaluation, upon which the renewal or non-renewal of the charter is based. Several crucial issues remained unresolved in this plan. Among them are, Who would oversee the assessment steps described in the five-year plan? What qualifications and training would needed for team members and leaders? Who would
fund the various elements of the five-year plan, especially the site visits? The League’s focus for now turns to the resolution of these unknowns and the implementation of this plan with charter schools across the state (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 1998).

The major components of these highly regarded state accountability plans (Chicago, Massachusetts, and Colorado) have been used to construct the Oversight Responsibilities matrix found in Appendix G. This matrix was used in the analysis of the charter contracts in the data analysis phase of my research.

The Status of Accountability in Other States

Some states have not adopted formal accountability plans. The charter schools in these states are simply required to comply with the accountability issues as specified in the statue. Accountability issues that are commonly mentioned in the statues include: monitoring of student academic progress, annual financial audits, rule compliance, and complying with specific terms outlined in the charter. The monitoring methods, often the responsibility of the local sponsor, differ greatly (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Another factor entering into this accountability requirements conundrum is the possibility of multiple sponsors in a state which has no formalized procedures for reporting requirements. The responsibility for both approval and overseeing the school resides with the individual sponsor and is based on the specific procedures each sponsor adopts. Often individual sponsors aren’t diligent in the approval process of demanding that specific charters include clearly defined, measurable goals (Manno, 1999). Without a clear set of measurable expectations, it is difficult for the sponsor to judge the school’s progress. Often, in these cases, the monitoring of the charter school amounts to nothing more than ensuring rule compliance (Manno, 1999). The reality is that charter schools in one state, authorized by different sponsors, have very dissimilar reporting requirements. The District of Columbia is a case in point.

The D.C. law allows for two chartering agencies, the elected D.C. School Board and the D.C. Public Charter School Board (U.S. Charter Schools, 1999b). In 1996, with little discussion, the D.C. Board of Education approved the Marcus Garvey Charter School (Strauss, May 4,1998). Three years later, the Board revoked the school’s charter following the firing of the school’s principal and reported mismanagement of school
funds and violation of sound governance procedures (Strauss, May 19, 1998). This highly publicized closing sparked concerns about the accountability of charter schools. The D.C. Board of Education faced questions regarding how well its charter school applicants are screened and then monitored (Strauss & Slevin, May 28, 1998). Charges that the Board had few policies or guidelines in place regarding charter accountability were common (Strauss & Slevin, May 28, 1998; Manno et al., 1997).

At the same time the D.C. Public Charter School Board was receiving accolades for setting up a process for granting charters which include delineation of operating standards and a detailed monitoring system (Strauss & Slevin, May 28, 1998). They have designed a 28-page application, an eight-page document explaining application review and decision process, and an 18 page-scoring rubric (July 1998). Their application process appears to be one of the best (Manno et al., 1997). Both the D.C. School Board and the D.C. Public Charter School Board can approve charter schools in the District of Columbia. However, according to the Manager of School Support Initiatives for the D.C. Public Charter School Board, Cynthia Brennan, the multiple sponsors do not work together (personal communication, July 8, 1999).

According to Joe Nathan, director of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, the District of Columbia is not alone. “Different organizations within the state do appear to be using somewhat similar and somewhat different methods of holding schools accountable” (J. Nathan, personal communication, July 13, 1999). It seems, within the same state, charter schools may design different accountability systems and use a variety of accountability indicators depending on who has authorized the charter. A review of the literature found only one study that dealt with the oversight responsibilities of multiple chartering agencies within a state. Wolfe (1998) outlined the general oversight functions performed by four Michigan universities, Central Michigan University, Eastern Michigan University, Ferris State University, and Grand Valley State University. Generally, the study found that the oversight responsibilities a sponsoring agency took on were determined by the charter document.

Failures – What They Tell Us

A Center for Educational Reform (CER) report (1999) found few charter schools
have had problems (DeSchryver, 1999). As of November 1998 approximately 30 charter schools had closed. This represents less than 2.6% of all charter schools operating across the nation. Supporters of charter schools believe that these failures provide evidence that the high stakes accountability system in place in charter schools is working. Schools that cannot demonstrate progress are shut down. However, a close examination of the statistics show that most of the schools have voluntarily closed down or had financial problems that compelled the schools to close down (Manno, 1999). Only four of the thirty schools actually had their charters revoked solely because of an inadequate academic program. The sponsor of one additional school cited among other things an inadequate academic program when it failed to renew the school’s charter (DeSchryver, 1999).

Even though only a few charter schools have been closed down, most sponsors do not have well-developed plans for dealing with a school that is in trouble. Finn (1996) maintains that closing the school should be a last step. Rather sponsors must take the time in the charter approval process to ensure that responsible and knowledgeable people with sound financial, management, and educational plans will operate the charter school. Manno (1999) believes that when a school shows signs of having trouble the sponsoring organization must intervene. This intervention could take a variety of avenues. One avenue employed by the sponsoring organization might be to warn the school of potential closing and give a specified time for the school to address its major failings. Another alternative might involve the sponsoring organization changing the school’s leadership. Additionally, the sponsoring agency could ask a successful charter school in the area to take over the troubled school. The final step is the shutdown of a school and the transfer of students to other nearby schools. This final step, potentially leaving students without a school to attend in the middle of the year, should only be taken after all other interventions have failed or if evidence points to serious failure. Despite the harshness of closure, sponsors must adopt a tough evaluation approach for the charter school movement to gain credence (Manno, 1999).

**Micro Accountability – The Bottom Line**

Charter school micro accountability is the primary method of evaluating the
viability of the charter school movement. Strong accountability plans, rigorous and regular oversight by the sponsors, and public annual reports will provide good information regarding the success of individual schools and the charter movement itself. “If we do not promise more than we can deliver, if we embrace genuine accountability and not some sham, we may stand a chance of making a few modest improvements in schooling” (Glass, 1972, p. 639).

Summary

The charter school movement is progressing across the United States. While known as a singular movement, charter schools are uniquely defined by the specific legislation that exists in each of the 37 localities that have passed charter school legislation as of June 1999. Generally, charter schools are defined as public schools that are held accountable for improving student performance in exchange for freedom from bureaucratic regulations of conventional schools (Manno et al, 1997). Variations in the state laws include number of charter schools that can operate, eligible operators and sponsors, funding process, personnel regulations, degree of autonomy, and procedures for oversight, renewal and revocation (ECS & NCSL, 1998).

Among the most challenging and difficult issues facing this movement as a whole is the issue of accountability. Accountability issues can be divided into two groups: “macro” efforts, those efforts that concentrate on assessing the general charter school approach; and “micro” efforts of the individual charter schools and their sponsors to assess the individual charter schools (Manno et al., 1997). However, assessing accountability in either realm is difficult. On a macro level, the challenge is to compare the level of overall performance of all of the charter schools with the level of performance in all conventional public schools across the state. This task becomes next to impossible with the realization that there is no one generally accepted method of assessing the performance of students and schools.

On a “micro” level, schools and sponsors struggle with the complex task of designing clearly defined and measurable goals and making assessments regarding the attainment of these goals. An additional factor that impacts the assessment on a “micro” level is that existence of multiple charter sponsors within the same state. While all
schools within the state must meet the requirements of the state charter school law, the individual sponsors are responsible for the oversight of a particular school’s performance (Kolderie, 1998). A key issue has surfaced regarding this oversight in states that allow for multiple sponsors. While generally, a “stronger” charter law allows for multiple chartering agencies, there seems to be little or no coordination of reporting requirements and oversight duties among the sponsors. In practice, within the same state, charter schools may have different accountability requirements depending on who has authorized the charter. This conundrum is the focus of my research.