CHAPTER FIVE

Charter-granting entities, also known as charter-granting agents, charter sponsors, or charter authorizers, are key to charter school reform because they approve and monitor the charter schools. First, these entities have authority to approve applications for charter schools. Second, once the school is running, they monitor its progress relative to its stated goals and evaluate whether its performance merits renewal of the charter contract. (U.S. Charter Schools, 1999a, p.1)

Charter school accountability is a challenging issue. “The development of meaningful outcomes, clearly linked to reliable assessment instruments and performance criteria, requires up-front planning, expert assistance, and resources” (Diamond, 1994, p.2). Unfortunately, many charter schools lack all three. As a result, charter school accountability plans are often vaguely written documents leaving lots of room for interpretation (Manno, 1999). In the absence of strong accountability plans, charter school sponsoring agencies undoubtedly question what they are to measure. A Minnesota school superintendent expresses this exact dilemma when talking about the charter school his district sponsors, “They [the charter school] say the kids are thriving but you know what--damned if I can tell, there is nothing to assess” (personal communication, March 7, 2000).

The challenge of charter school accountability becomes more problematic in states whose charter law allows multiple sponsors. In these states, different sponsoring agencies may take on different roles in regards to accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The potential exists for two charter schools with similar performance to be judged very differently. The essence of the charter school movement is to hold schools accountable for results; schools that can not show results are closed down. Theoretically, in states with multiple sponsors, two schools with similar performance records could face two entirely different futures.

Wolfe (1998) analyzed the charter contracts of 12 sponsoring agencies in Michigan and found that sponsoring agencies do create unique ways of monitoring the performance of their charter schools. This is also true in Minnesota despite the fact that the state education agency has tried to provide some structure for the charter contract design by providing a model contract as a template. Ultimately, the charter developer
negotiates the contents of the charter contract with its sponsor. The Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (1998) offers this piece of advice to charter developers on drafting the contract document, specifically the section, “Performance Indicators and Evaluation”:

In setting up performance indicators, charter operators need to agree to enough specifics to satisfy the sponsor and the Department of CFL, without over-promising or committing to more than is feasible for the school to do. The old phrase is good advice: better to under promise and over deliver than to over promise and under deliver. (p.38)

Conclusions

The literature review for this research used the theoretical framework (shown in Figure 1) as an organizational scheme. This discussion of conclusions will use this same framework.

Legislation

Hirsch (1998) found that the charter schools are uniquely defined by the specific legislation that exists in the state. However Nathan (1998) found that charter school legislation does have several common elements: (1) It allows the creation of new schools, or the conversion of preexisting public schools; (2) prohibits admission tests; (3) permits only non sectarian schools; (4) holds schools responsible for student achievement; (5) waves most state statutes; (6) permits several bodies to authorize the creation of a charter school; (7) allows families the choice to attend; and (8) directs the average per pupil funding and other appropriate funding to follow the student to the charter school.

The Education Commission of the States and the National Conference of Legislators (1998) identified six powers that are generally conferred to charter schools. These powers include: negotiating and contracting; acquiring property; receiving and disbursing funds; incurring temporary debt; operating as a business; and adopting a name and corporate seal.

An analysis of Minnesota’s charter school law revealed that the legislation contained Nathan’s (1998) eight defining elements as well as conferred the six powers identified by ECS and the National Conference of State Legislators (1998). For example, Minnesota’s charter school law allows for the creation of new schools and the conversion
of preexisting schools. Additionally according to the statute, charter schools may not limit admission to students on the basis of intellectual ability or athletic ability, charter schools must be nonsectarian, and several different types of sponsoring agencies are allowed. The statute also allows charter schools to negotiate and acquire property, to receive and disburse funds, and to incur temporary debt.

**Sponsoring Agencies**

The U.S. Department of Education (1998) found 14 states allowed multiple sponsors for charter schools. Among the possible sponsors 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. In Minnesota, eligible charter school sponsors include four of the six categories of sponsors. The statute allows school districts, post-secondary institutions and CFL to sponsor charter schools. During the 1998-1999 year, 15 school districts, three post-secondary institutions and the CFL all served as sponsors. Although the Minnesota law also allows intermediate and cooperative school educational districts to serve as sponsors, none do so. Minnesota’s law does not permit other public bodies or specially created “charter school boards” to serve as sponsors of charter schools.

**Founders**

Manno (1997) discovered charter schools are often founded by educators frustrated by the conventional schools. While this study did not directly address how the charter schools were founded, the interview data provides a glimpse of the motivations of some of the founders, or developers as they are called in Minnesota. According to data collected during the interview phase both Goodview and Beta charter schools were started by teachers who did not agree with the conventional educational philosophy of the surrounding school district.

The U.S. Department of Education (2000) study revealed the most important reason to start a charter school, cited by all founders, was to realize an alternative vision. According to the school superintendents of Ground, Esquire, and Iris school districts, the founders of Goodview, Earth, and Imagine charter schools started their charter schools and designed the school programs to realize an alternative vision of delivering education.
Charter School Governing Boards

The Center for Educational Reform (1998) found that the make-up of the charter school board is usually specified in the charter school legislation. According to Minnesota’s charter school legislation staff members who are employed at the charter school and parents of students enrolled in the charter school may participate in the election. According to this statute, licensed teachers employed at the school must compose a majority of the board of directors unless the Commissioner waives this requirement.

Despite research (Finn, Manno, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2000) that governance problems in charter schools tend to be common, none were reported by the schools in this study. The small number of charter school directors (6) that participated in this study could explain this contrary finding. Interviews with more charter school directors in Minnesota are needed to confirm or contradict this research.

Charter School Performance Reporting

All but one of the charter schools in this study made reports to the school’s sponsor. However, in most cases the format and contents of the report were not specified, confirming one of the conclusions of the research done by the U.S. Department of Education (2000). Wells (1998) found charter schools in California are being held fiscally accountable, but rarely accountable for student academic gains.

Four charter schools in Minnesota have closed at this point in time. An exploration of the reasons for closure found two charter schools closed voluntarily. The other two charter schools were forced into closure because of mismanagement and inadequate performance reporting (CER, 1999 and personal communication, 2000). In the business world, mismanagement often translates into financial problems particularly in the area of fiscal reporting irregularities. Performance reporting in charter schools usually includes the findings of an independent audit. These charter school closings could support Wells’ research. Another perspective provides confirming evidence of Wells’ (1998) study. The director of Earth Charter School said “the original Minnesota charter school legislation states the school needs to be fiscally solvent and then we have to make sure the students are performing” (personal communication, March 23, 2000).
Several studies have found that charter schools use a variety of methods to assess student achievement, including standardized tests (Cheung et al., 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). All charter schools in Minnesota are required to administer the two kinds of state mandated tests, Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments to the third and fifth grades, and the Basic Standards Tests to the eighth grade. In addition, a review of the charter contracts for the sponsoring agencies participating in this research found several schools used additional assessment tools like student portfolios, project-based learning, teacher evaluations, and individual educational plans.

**Micro Accountability**

The charter contracts of most of the participants in this study were not sufficiently detailed nor did they provide specific performance indicators that could be used in assessing a school’s performance, supporting Manno (1999) that charter school accountability plans are not very well developed and are difficult to use in measuring performance. Additionally, the number of study participants that indicated they were dissatisfied with the accountability systems specified in their contracts supports another conclusion drawn by Manno (1999); sponsors often do not concentrate on developing a charter contract containing well defined accountability plans.

According to Glass (1972), a strong accountable relationship requires standards, performance assessment, and consequences for poor performance. Minnesota’s charter school law states that charter schools must design their educational programs to meet (at a minimum) the outcomes adopted by the Commissioner for all public school students. If the Commissioner has not established these minimum outcomes then the school must meet the outcomes specified in the contract. Minnesota’s law does not contain Glass’s (1972) three elements of a strong accountable relationship unless one is to assume that the phrase “minimum outcomes” encompasses both the setting and assessment of standards.

**The Effect of Charter Schools**

Mulholland and Bierlein (1995) stated that a broad goal of the charter schools movement is to cause traditional public schools to question many of their practices, which in turn will promote change in the entire public educational system. Vanourek et al. (1997) state that charter schools “through competition and choice” will affect the local
school district schools” (p. 8). Some scant early evidence exists that charter schools are in fact doing this.

In Boston, after a flurry of charter school activity, the Boston school district and the teacher’s union moved to create “pilot schools” in which schools could be granted waivers of district policies. A Massachusetts charter school offered full-day kindergarten, the local school district responded by offering full-day kindergarten as well (Vanourek et al., 1997).

An Arizona school superintendent said his school district reacted in several ways to charter schools being established in their district. Among the responses were creating a magnet school, modifying the elementary calendar, and increasing the involvement of parents, businesses and the community in their schools (Cheung, Murphy, & Nathan, 1998). When the Arizona superintendent was asked if his district would have implemented these changes if charter schools had not been established, he said, “Probably not and certainly not as fast as we did” (Cheung, Murphy & Nathan, 1998, p. 7).

While this study did not examine the practices in traditional public schools, two superintendents’ comments are revealing. The Esquire superintendent said, “I believe I can make our charter schools stronger and more competent by building more accountability and structure in them. Our local school districts can become better schools because of the competition that charter schools bring to them” (personal communication, March 7, 2000). The Iris school superintendent said,

You know as a superintendent we try to talk with our staff and community about, even though we are a public institution, acting like a private institution. Trying to make sure that we are not thinking about ourselves as a monopoly and becoming more client sensitive. And so I think that those charter efforts help public district schools focus more on that.” (Personal communication, March 21, 2000)

These two Minnesota superintendents believe that the competition provided by the charter schools will make their conventional public schools stronger supporting the research findings of both Vanourek et al. (1997) and Mulholland and Bierlein (1995).

Comparisons to the Benchmarking Matrix

A part of this research involved comparing the accountability practices specified
in the individual charter contracts with a Benchmarking Matrix (see Appendix C). This matrix was constructed using the accountability plans of three exemplary processes (Chicago Public Schools Charter Office, Rosenblum Brigham Associates plan for Massachusetts’ charter schools, and The Colorado League of Charter Schools). The charter contracts of the sponsoring agencies in this study did not contain a majority of the accountability elements found on the matrix. Specifically, the areas of Educational Outcomes, Student Assessment Tools, and School Assessment Tools were especially weak. The charter contracts in this study did not contain a majority of the elements listed in these three areas. In contrast, the Rule Compliance area was strong, with the majority of contracts containing the elements listed in this area.

**Three Interesting Relationships**

A careful analysis of the data from this research identified several variables that affect the specification of the accountability elements in the charter contracts and the accountability processes that sponsors require of their charter schools. This analysis also identified several variables that do not affect the specification of the accountability processes in the charter contracts.

An analysis was done comparing the existence of several demographic factors to the accountability processes specified in the charter contracts. Among the demographic variables studied were:

1) size of the school district in which the charter school was geographically locate in, as measured by average daily membership;
2) size of the school district, as measured by the number of schools in the district;
3) experience as a charter school, as measured by the charter school’s opening date; and
4) level of the charter school as measured by grade levels served by the charter school.

No noticeable pattern between these demographic variables and the specification of the accountability processes in the charter contracts could be determined for the school districts and charter schools in this study. Contracts of charter schools with more experience did not contain a more detailed accountability process. Additionally, no
discernable patterns could be identified between the size of the local school district (as measured by the number of schools in the school district and by the total district student enrollment) and the accountability processes. Finally, there was no pattern between the accountability processes specified in the contract and the grade levels the charter school served.

Three other variables were identified that did seem to affect the amount of detail used to describe the accountability process in the charter contract. They are protection of self-interest, level of performance on state-mandated tests, and attitude towards charter schools as expressed by the sponsoring agency. A discussion of the variables and their parameters follows.

Protection of Self-Interest.

As a group, the charter contracts of post-secondary institutions and CFL do not have detailed accountability plans specified in their charter contracts. Their academic accountability process involves annual or biannual testing, the collection of baseline performance data related to the purposes of the charter school, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the school program in preparing students to transition to another school or to work. Non-academic accountability processes include monitoring of student attendance and the collection of survey data from parents and teachers. All post-secondary institution charter sponsors participating in this research also require their charter school to report progress in meeting its goals to the sponsor. These sponsors do not require any additional accountability processes beyond what is outlined in the charter.

Post-secondary institutions and CFL are somewhat removed from the day-to-day operations of conventional public schools. CFL has a more global perspective of examining the performance of all students enrolled in schools across the state. Post-secondary institutions focus on the academic preparation of their applicants, they do not focus specifically on the performance of individual schools. The post-secondary institutions and CFL do not have any specific facets of self-interest to protect when negotiating the contents of a charter.

The charter contracts of school districts participating in this study vary in the amount and type of accountability elements that are specified. The accountability processes detailed in the charter contract run the gamut from only requiring an annual
report to the specification of a explicit procedure for collecting and analyzing data using a
detailed list of performance indicators.

Two of the school district charter contracts (Lake and Beech school districts) analyzed in this research require only that an annual report be made to the sponsor. This stipulation is similar to the one found in the contracts of the post-secondary institutions. However, one-half of the school district charters require more detailed reporting processes. These additional reporting processes may include site visits, self-evaluations, and a list of specific information that must be included in the annual report. One school district sponsor, Esquire School District, required additional accountability elements that are not specified in the charter contract.

School districts have the same focus as the charter school. They serve the same clientele and receive funding from the same source. The existence of a charter school in a school district usually means the local conventional public school’s enrollment will decline, perhaps only slightly, but never the less it will decline.

I believe this potentially competitive relationship drives the school district to design more structured accountability processes for charter schools and to specify these processes in the charter contract. While the existence of a charter school in a school district may not always be viewed as a threat, school districts do want to ensure that the charter school is providing an education that is comparable to the education provided by the local conventional schools. In a sense they are only safeguarding their interests. As the Marshall school superintendent said, “If somebody comes back [to the conventional public school] we will welcome them with open arms, but we need to be able to assess their performance to determine if they actually do have the requirements for graduation” (personal communication, March 20, 2000). Post-secondary institutions and the State Board of Education do not experience this struggle for resources with the conventional public schools. As a result they have no direct need to ensure that the charter school is providing an education that is comparable to the local conventional public school.

Level of Performance on State Mandated Tests.

Since 1992, standards-based education has been a reality in Minnesota. A student can only be awarded a secondary school graduation diploma if the student has achieved minimum competencies in reading, math and writing. The three multiple-choice tests,
which assess these minimum competencies, are known as the Basic Standards Tests. Students must obtain at least a passing score of 75% on all three tests prior to graduation. The Basis Standards Tests in math and reading are first given in the eighth grade; the Basic Standards Test in writing is first given in the tenth grade. Students who do not meet the passing mark during the first administration are given additional opportunities to retake the test in later grades (College of Education and Human Development, 1998).

Averaged individual school scores and averaged district scores are posted on the web. While CFL does not use the data to officially rank schools or districts, they recognize that this is a possibility. According to CFL, schools and districts are encouraged to help their local communities understand the significance of the scores (CFL, 2000a).

People generally seem to recognize the difference between a high performing school or district and one that exhibits average performance. According to Levin (1974), the most common public interpretation of accountability is performance reporting, specifically statewide testing programs. The public uses the score reports to measure the relative academic strength of the schools and the school districts. Perhaps the Esquire superintendent says it best, “Good educational outcomes don’t happen by magic” (personal communication, March 7, 2000). Districts that earn the reputation of being academically strong want to protect that distinction. Maintaining high-test scores across the district becomes a focus.

As a first step in the analysis of this variable, the charter school contracts for the districts in this study were divided into two groups; one group was comprised of directors whose contracts contained only the components of the model charter contract. Contracts in the second group required more elements than those specified in the model document. The interview data was also analyzed in an attempt to provide additional insight into the accountability processes and reviews that each school district required of their charter school. Finally, an analysis of the Basic Standards Tests scores for the school districts was completed. The findings were conclusive. The school districts with the highest percentage of students passing the Basic Standards Tests on the first try, required the more thorough accountability process. It stands to reason that high performing school districts want to protect their reputation. Charter schools established within the geographic location of a school district must have strong educational programs and must
be able to show strong results on the Basic Standards Tests. School districts can help to maintain this focus on performance by building detailed accountability processes for their charter schools.

**Attitude Towards Charter Schools.**

The interview questions did not specifically ask how superintendents felt about the charter school movement. However, an examination of the survey data revealed clues about their attitudes. One specific interview question, How do you feel about charter schools being required to take the state mandated tests, specifically the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments and the Basic Standards tests, evoked powerful responses with regard to charter schools. The interview data were analyzed for the presence of words that imply negative or positive feelings.

As a group, the school districts with detailed accountability processes in their charter contracts had a positive attitude about charter schools. When asked about charter schools being mandated to take the state tests, the superintendent of Ground School District responded, “It’s good. Then we are all held to the same standards and I think that’s an advantage to charter schools to do so that they can say, hey we’re unique and special and yet look at the job we are doing” (personal communication, March 21, 2000). A further analysis of the complete transcription of the interview revealed words or phrases that can be attributed to a positive feeling. Some of the words were “collaboration,” “full partners,” and “mutual benefit.” When asked what additional accountability components he would add to the contract if he could he said,

The one thing I would hope that would evolve in the next five years is a tighter connection between the more conventional public schools and the charter school so that there is more sharing and interaction. (personal communication, March 21, 2000)

The superintendent of Marshall School District also exhibited a positive feeling towards charter schools. The Marshall School District charter contract outlines a fairly detailed accountability process. When he was asked about his feelings with regard to charter schools having to take the state mandated tests he said, “It is an absolute necessity . . . I just think that for the charter school to have any credibility at all it must demonstrate how its students are performing” (personal communication, March 20, 2000). In
describing his experiences with charter schools he used words that portray a positive attitude like, “comfortable” and “opportunity.” When asked about his contract design process he said, “We wanted to make sure that there were some fairly solid underpinnings and structure to what the school was starting to create” (personal communication, March 14, 2000). He further explained that the school district recognized the ambiguity of the Minnesota charter law in regards to accountability. According to him, “We tried to put some meat on the bone” and build an accountability system that would ensure a strong academic program (personal communication, March 14, 2000).

As a group, the school districts that had few accountability requirements in their charter contract had a negative attitude towards charter schools. When asked about the mandatory testing requirement for charter schools the Beech school superintendent said, “I think they should. I personally don’t see why they should be waived from it” (personal communication, March 22, 2000). He went on to explain that according to the research he had read, charter schools should actually perform better on the tests because of the existence of smaller classes and a more individual student focus in the charter schools. The charter contract of Beech School District requires only that the charter school report annually to their sponsor. While the existence of a document listing the minimum student outcomes is mentioned in the charter contract, the superintendent of Beech School District could not locate it.

The charter contract of Dare School District states that the school will submit an annual report of selected curriculum outcomes to their sponsoring district and to the State Board of Education. The contract further outlines an accountability process that requires six years to complete a review of the total school program. It is unclear how the six-year cycle interfaces with a three-year contract term.

When asked about his feelings concerning the requirement that charter schools must take the state mandated tests, the Dare school superintendent remarked, “[If] it is a requirement for us it should be for them [charter schools]. To waive it would be a travesty” (personal communication, March 21, 2000). The transcript of his complete interview revealed he used words and phrases in speaking about charter schools that evoked a negative image like, “adversarial,” “shot-gun marriage,” and “bastardization of public schools” (personal communication, March 21, 2000).
A pattern can be seen between the attitude of the school district superintendent towards charter schools and the level of detail outlined in the accountability process specified in the charter contract. Superintendents who had a positive attitude about charter schools had fairly specific accountability processes outlined in their charter contracts. The superintendents who expressed negative attitudes about charter schools had charter contracts in which the accountability processes were either vague or not realistic.

Superintendents who see charter schools in a positive light work to develop accountability systems that will provide strong evidence about the quality of the school. As a result, the components of their accountability systems are fairly specific. Superintendents who view charter schools negatively acted in one of two ways. The Beech school superintendent’s response to the contract negotiating process exhibits the first mode of action. He did not take the time to study the charter contract or to provide input.

The Dare school superintendent typifies the second course of action. Unlike the Beech superintendent, he did take the time to provide input into the contract. However, he approached the negotiating table with a lot of negative feelings. By his own admission the sponsoring of a charter school was not his idea. An outgoing board member who was angry about his defeat in the latest school board election initiated the possibility of sponsoring a charter school. When asked about the charter contract design process he said, “I had to basically negotiate against him as an adversarial party” (personal communication, March 21, 2000). Perhaps in the process of negotiating against the board member, he lost sight of what a strong accountability process might look like. As a result, Dash’s contract does specify an accountability process but it is not very workable.

Patterns of Practice

Currently many educational reforms center on building measures of accountability in schools. This focus on accountability requires a shift from examining inputs to measuring outputs. Charter schools, in theory, provide a setting that supports this results-based focus. As I have shown in my research, it is possible to study the patterns of practice in charter schools at three levels.
From a global perspective, it is possible to study the charter school movement as an idea versus the reality of the day-to-day operations of charter schools across the nation. According to former U.S. Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, charter schools are involved in “old fashion horse trading,” swapping rules and regulations for results. How close does this concept of a results-based movement match the practice of charter schools being faced with closure for not showing increases in student and school performance?

In this research, I have also studied charter schools using a somewhat more focused perspective. According to Spillane and Zeuli (1999) identifying the patterns of practice in the midst of educational reform can provide insight into the relationship between policy and practice. Specifically, how does a particular state’s charter school law match the contents of a single charter contract (the practice)?

Finally, my research has allowed me to examine charter schools from the smallest focal point. Research has shown that charter schools are very different, their identity often directly determined by the provisions of the state charter school law (Hirsch, 1998; National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, 1998). At the local level Wolfe (1998) found that the monitoring duties a particular sponsoring agency assumes depends on the contents of the charter contract. The analysis of charter schools can also be completed on a very basic level. How does the accountability system outlined in the charter contract match the monitoring duties the charter school performs?

Using the smallest lens first, most charter school directors and sponsoring agencies felt that the monitoring duties specified in the contract match the practices used in monitoring the charter schools. According to the Marshall school superintendent, “Basically everything that we are requiring is spelled out in the contract” (personal communication, March 14, 2000). The director of Earth Charter School commented that they were required to perform accountability processes that were not spelled out in the charter. An interview with the superintendent of Esquire School District (Earth’s sponsoring agency) confirmed that the school district did in fact require accountability processes other than those specified in the contract. However, Earth’s director explained the situation, “In the current contract we don’t have any [accountability processes]” (personal communication, March 17, 2000). This in fact was the feeling of many of the
charter school directors and representatives, that the accountability process needed further definition. According to the director of Kellogg Charter School, “Well I think [the accountability processes] are adequate as a beginning point . . . I think we are gradually becoming a little more sophisticated about how we handle those elements” (personal communication, March 16, 2000).

Moving out, away from the most focused lens this research also examined how the contents of Minnesota’s charter school law matched the patterns of practice in the contents of the charter contract. While there were certainly some differences in the contracts, most of the contracts matched the elements outlined in the law. When asked how the contents of the Marshall School District charter contract matched the intent of the law, the Marshall school superintendent said,

Right down the line. Everything that is in the law is there and the only difference between ours and [another charter contract] is that we tried to put some meat on the bones in terms of trying to delineate some idea of what it means to us.

(personal communication, March 20, 2000)

However, most of the interviewees expressed similar feelings to the Dare school superintendent who said, “We negotiated the contract [accountability elements] based on a poorly written statute” (personal communication, February 15, 2000).

Finally, examining the patterns of practice from the widest angle possible, How does the concept of a charter school match the patterns of practice in reality? In Minnesota, by January 2000, four charter schools had closed, two voluntarily and two were forced to close by the State Board of Education (Draper, 1998; MACS, 2000). In January of 2000, CFL listed the names of 69 charter schools. These two forced school closures represent approximately 3% of the total number of charter schools in Minnesota. Additionally, the findings of this research have shown that the accountability processes specified in the charter contracts in Minnesota are vague and unmeasurable. This finding leads me to conclude that the concept of a charter school trading autonomy for accountability is not a reality yet. The Esquire school superintendent said,

I am both a skeptic and an advocate [of charter schools]…I feel the results on charter schools are mixed. I think the sun is actually setting on the charter school movement. They have not developed into any kind of panacea. What everyone is
finding out, is that it is damn complex and hard to run a quality school. Good educational outcomes don’t happen by magic.” (personal communication, March 7, 2000)

Suggestions for Future Research

As this research comes to an end, I reflect on my experiences. Potential researchers in this field should be aware of several issues.

Problems

Perhaps the biggest problem that I encountered in my study was the small number of charter school directors who were willing to participate. Just as I was beginning to embark on the interview phase of my research, I was advised that charter schools in Minnesota are used to receiving a significant sum of money ($1000) in exchange for participating in research. This was a barrier I could not overcome.

Although my primary unit of analysis in this research was the sponsoring agencies, I had hoped to gain additional insight into the contract design from the charter school directors. On a daily basis, I left messages on voice mail and with secretaries about my research and my desire to have the specific director answer a few questions. I did not receive a single return phone call. As it turned out I was only able to interview four different charter school directors (one served as director of three different schools). Happily, these four were extremely gracious and expressed interest in my findings.

Positive Aspects

Early in 2000, CFL created a charter schools web site. This user-friendly site provided copies of all the CFL documents used in the charter school application and authorization process in Minnesota. I was also able to obtain basic information about all the charter schools operating in Minnesota. Among the information found on this web site was the address of the charter school, the name of the school’s director, and the school’s vital details such as its opening date and current enrollment. The availability of this information saved me a great deal of time.

CFL also does a tremendous job with their home page. I was able to obtain demographic information of all schools and school districts in Minnesota. Additionally, the continuous improvement process data for each school and school district can be accessed from CFL’s home page. This home page also contains links to Internet sites
explaining the state testing programs and graduation standards. Finally, I was fortunate enough to make contact with a CFL employee whose responsibilities include working with charter school accountability. The knowledge and willingness of this employee was of great value to my research.

**Connecting With Latest News**

Charter school legislation and the specific authorization procedures are in a constant state of flux. As states become more involved in charter schools, the interpretation of the law and the required procedures are often modified. A researcher in this field must keep up-to-date with the general literature and with the specific state news about charter schools.

**Future Research Projects**

An obvious extension to this project would be to complete a similar study in other states. Similar evidence from other states would shed light on the macro accountability aspect of charter schools. Data from several other states with comparable findings would provide a glimpse of the effectiveness of the charter school movement across the nation.

Another potential area for future research would be to compare the innovative practices being used in charter schools with those being used in the conventional public schools. Mintrom (as cited by Bowman, 2000) found Michigan’s charter schools are using innovative practices that have been in use by conventional public schools in Michigan for years. This is true despite the claims of charter school proponents who say charter schools, with their freedom from rules and regulations, will encourage educators to try new approaches. A potential study could duplicate Mintrom’s research methodology in other states to see if Mintrom’s findings are an anomaly.

Minnesota’s charter school law permits an individual without a valid school administrator’s license to perform administrative, supervisory, or leadership duties within the charter school. A potential study could involve an in-depth analysis of the charter school directors and their leadership skills. The study could also examine the climate of the school especially in the area of the school’s potential for successful implementation of change initiatives. Strong leadership is needed in today’s schools. A study of this nature could provide valuable information for the training of school administrators as
well as point out the potential problems that might be encountered when unlicensed personnel are given the responsibility of leading a school.

Finally, I have identified several interesting relationships between the three variables of self-interest, level of performance on state-mandated tests, and sponsoring agency representatives’ attitude about charter schools. While outside the scope of my research questions, the relationships might form the basis of another research project.

Final Reflections

“As most states have found, enacting charter legislation is one thing, implementing charter legislation is an entirely different thing” (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 1999, p. 14). The first few years following a state’s ratification of its initial charter school legislation are important ones. During these years the state agencies are busy interpreting the provisions of the law and making policy decisions for charter schools. The collective actions taken by all the states, for charter schools during this time span will ultimately determine the success or failure of the charter school movement (Public School Forum, 1999). Swanson (2000) has said, “sometimes policy is implemented without a clear focus and adequate research base” (p. 48). Is the charter school movement a prime example of this phenomenon? Only time will tell.
As this study has shown charter school micro accountability is an important yet challenging issue. Strong charter school micro accountability systems are achieved only through the collaborative efforts between sponsoring agencies and their charter schools. Together they must consciously design an accountability system with goals that are challenging, attainable, and measurable. Strong accountability systems provide the public with accurate and reliable information about an individual charter school’s performance. The information gained from these separate microaccountability systems will help to judge the effectiveness of the charter school movement as an educational reform strategy.

It is a constant source of amazement to me that so many people who truly have experienced and know the complexities of our social and institutional world forget what they have learned when they undertake the creation of a new setting. I consider what I have written about the creation of new settings to be glimpses of
the obvious. As the reader will undoubtedly attest, the obvious is something we find ourselves re-recognizing again and again. (Sarason, 1999, p. 34)