

## CHAPTER THREE

This chapter states the purpose of this study and the research questions that I used to guide my inquiry. A description of the research design, data sources, population and sample selection, and data collection and analyses procedures is included. Reliability and validity issues are also discussed.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe and to compare the oversight procedures used on a “micro” level by sponsoring agencies of charter schools in a single state whose law allows for multiple sponsors. Since charter schools trade partial freedom from rules and regulations for results, micro accountability, as defined by the specific oversight procedures assumed by the sponsoring agency, is an extremely important topic in the discussion of the effectiveness of charter schools. While generally a “stronger” charter law allows for multiple sponsors, there exists the possibility that multiple sponsors in the same state may develop and mandate different practices in reporting accountability. In reality, the methods adopted to monitor progress of an individual charter school are the result of a negotiating process between the individual charter schools and its sponsor. This study has been designed to describe the statewide patterns of practice in these accountability systems used by sponsoring agencies to monitor their charter schools.

### Research Questions

One central overarching question is addressed: How do the micro accountability systems of the multiple sponsoring agencies within Minnesota compare? In addition, several subquestions provided the framework for my research:

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

## Research Design

This research is best approached through the use of qualitative methods suitable for a multiple case study. Qualitative research is an inquiry form that seeks to provide understanding of a social phenomenon with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible (Merriam, 1998). According to Yin (1994), the case study methodology is best utilized to investigate contemporary events in which the researcher has no control over the associated behaviors. The case study provides a “thick description” of the “complex interrelationships” that exist among the phenomenon (Stake, 1995, p. 37). Multiple case studies, often called comparative studies, first involve the understanding of individual sites and then the comparison of the data from several sites to highlight similarities and differences (Yin, 1994).

The sponsoring agencies are the units of analysis in this multiple case study. Each sponsoring agency has been carefully selected employing “replication” logic (Yin, 1994, p.45). Using the replication logic, cases have been selected in an effort to present similar findings or show contrasting results for predictable reasons (Yin, 1994). This research will include an analysis of the accountability indicators used by the different types of sponsoring agencies. The final summary report will identify the patterns of practice in the field of charter school micro-accountability within the single state.

My initial task in this research involved the examination of the current state’s charter school law, maintaining a primary focus on the accountability requirements outlined in the law. As a second step in the analysis process, I analyzed documents provided to potential charter school developers by the state agency responsible for public schools. To complete this step in the analysis process, interviews were conducted with a representative of the state education agency, specifically, one who has been assigned to work in the area of charter school accountability. The interview and contents of the documents provided by the state education agency helped to establish how the law is interpreted.

Sponsoring agencies were selected through a criterion-based selection process to provide “information-rich cases” that is, those that provide a great deal of information about the issues under study (Patton, 1990). Among the criteria I used in the participant selection process were the number and type of schools sponsored by the specific agency,

the location and enrollment of these schools, the stated mission of the schools, and the number of years the sponsoring agency has been involved with charter schools.

Once the participating agencies were determined, the case research consisted of the analysis of all documents provided by the sponsoring agency to the charter school developers in regards to accountability, and also the actual charter school contracts in effect between the sponsoring agency and its schools. Interviews conducted with representatives of the sponsoring agencies and charter school directors provided information about the specific accountability process developed and required by each sponsoring agency. Interviews also helped establish the satisfaction level of the participants with their accountability system, as specified in their charter contract and the potential need for any improvements in the accountability process

Data collection and analysis were simultaneous processes. The general analytic strategy depended on the specific type of data that was to be analyzed. Data obtained from documents were analyzed by comparison to a benchmarking system I devised during the literature review phase of my research. This Benchmarking Matrix, shown in Appendix C, was constructed after analyzing the components of three exemplary state accountability processes identified in the literature review phase of this study. Specifically, I tabulated the components of accountability plans used in Chicago and Massachusetts. I also tabulated the elements of the accountability plan being promoted by the Colorado League of Charter Schools. At this time, Colorado does not require the use of this accountability plan.

The data obtained from interviews were analyzed using a coding system I devised in anticipation of answers to my interview questions. (See Appendix D.) Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest developing an initial list of codes which can be modified as the data analysis proceeds. Data fragments having like codes were grouped together and further analyzed and reconfigured under broader thematic categories (Merriam, 1998). This thematic classification system was continually refined as the data analysis proceeded.

Using the themes and categories identified in the data analysis, I completed individual case study reports of the accountability processes used by each type of sponsoring agency. Data from each type of sponsor were grouped into similar categories

in an effort to identify common patterns of practice across all types of sponsors. The final multiple case study report discusses these patterns of practice.

When working with qualitative research findings conventional definitions and measures of reliability and validity are difficult to achieve. Yin (1994) lists four tests that can be used to establish the trustworthiness of case study research: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. To increase construct validity, Yin (1994) suggests using multiple data sources. Conclusions drawn from multiple sources of evidence (data triangulation) are usually more accurate. This study used data from documents provided by both the state education agency and the sponsoring agencies. To increase construct validity, data was also obtained from interviews with a representative of the sponsoring agency and the charter school director.

The second test, internal validity, is of concern only in causal case studies (Yin, 1994). In this study, cause and effect were not an issue. According to Yin (1994), a method for increasing external validity in multiple-case studies involves the use of replication logic. Analyzing data with replication logic, I would expect to see similar cases presenting similar findings and contrasting cases show contrasting results for predictable reasons.

The fourth test, reliability, can best be addressed through use of a case study protocol. The protocol includes any data collection instruments and a general discussion of the procedures and rules to be followed during the data collection (Yin, 1994). See Appendix E for the research protocol utilized in my research.

In qualitative research, all four criteria are never proven without question. Patton (1990) explains that what is “true” depends on a person’s perspective, which is defined by the individual situational understanding of the phenomenon. The task, according to Patton, is to provide “fair, balanced, and useful information that constitutes a perspective on the phenomenon” which is as “accurate, valid, reliable and truthful” as the researcher can provide (1990, p. 485).

#### Researcher as Instrument

My interest in charter schools stems directly from my experience in both the public and the private school arena. I taught science for seven years in public high schools in Southwest Virginia. A need to relocate to another part of the state required me

to resign from my teaching position. Because I had become increasingly dissatisfied with the public schools, the relocation offered a welcome break. My frustration stemmed primarily from the school's inability to navigate important policies through the bureaucratic system within a reasonable time frame.

After a short sabbatical, I chose to teach in a local private, independent school. After four years as a teacher, I was appointed Upper School Director. This administrative experience allowed me to implement changes within the school as needed. As Director, I was able to operate under a small bureaucratic system consisting of only a headmaster and a Board of Trustees. Policies were designed and implemented with relative ease. After several years serving as a private school administrator, I became concerned by the elitist attitudes exhibited by some of the board members and parents of the school. This elitist attitude also extended to the local community where the board members and the parents tried to build and to maintain a perception of educational superiority.

I began looking at the issue of charter schools as a way to possibly combine the most positive aspects of my educational experiences. The ability of a school to gain autonomy and be freed from the bureaucracy of a public school system, while maintaining a mission of a fair and equitable education for all people intrigued me. My preliminary research in this area made me realize that the success of the charter school movement lies in a charter school's ability to define and to accurately measure individual student achievement as well as the school's overall performance. As I read more on this topic, I became fascinated by the existence of multiple sponsors in some states. The charter school movement trades autonomy for accountability yet there seemed to be very few guidelines to help the charter schools design and implement trustworthy accountability processes. The existence of multiple charter school sponsors within a state, all able to design accountability systems differently and require different reporting requirements, seemed like a potential problem. My data analysis was completed against the backdrop of my extensive experiences gained while working in several different educational institutions.

#### Site and Sample Selection

The focus of this study is the examination of the accountability processes used by charter school sponsoring agencies in a state whose charter school law allows for

multiple sponsors. Of the 37 localities that have passed charter school legislation, 14 have laws that allow for multiple sponsoring agencies: Arizona, Delaware, District of Columbia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and Wisconsin. In order to study the accountability processes of multiple sponsoring agencies within the state, I had to determine if all 14 states in the potential participant pool actually had charter schools sponsored by different categories of sponsors. Examination of the web pages for Florida and Wisconsin charter schools showed that, despite their charter school legislation, each state had charter schools sponsored by only one sponsoring agency. Because the focus of my study was on the accountability processes practiced by multiple sponsoring agencies operating under the same state law, I removed Florida and Wisconsin from the potential participant pool.

As a next step in determining the site of my study, I sought to ensure that there was an adequate number of charter schools sponsored by different categories of sponsoring agencies to form the basis of my study. Delaware, Missouri, Oklahoma, and New York all had less than 20 charter schools in operation. I removed all four of these states from the potential participant pool because I felt that the low number of charter schools in operation in each state, some with very little experience, would put restrictions on my data collection and analysis that were unacceptable.

Of the remaining seven states and the District of Columbia in the sample pool (Arizona, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas), I removed Massachusetts and the District of Columbia because at least one sponsor in each location has nationally recognized accountability processes. Components of both state processes were used in constructing the Oversight Matrix (Appendix G), which served as the basis for the benchmarking system I utilized in the data analysis phase of my research. Arizona was eliminated because of the recent negative press on the charter schools in operation in this state. Choosing Arizona as the site for my research might appear to some as if I had intentionally chosen a state with problems, in a sense predetermining the findings of my study.

I eliminated North Carolina because the charter school approval process and the monitoring duties are undergoing revision and becoming more standardized; all must submit a common application. As the state board takes on a greater role in monitoring the

performance of charter schools in North Carolina, less variance in the accountability processes among the multiple sponsors will be in evidence. I eliminated Texas because it has a large (89%) number of schools sponsored by the state education agency, which in reality means they are all chartered by the same sponsor. Three states remained in the potential participant pool: Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio. I decided to eliminate Ohio as a potential participant after allegations of gross mismanagement of charter schools within the state, surfaced (“More Oversight,” 2000).

At this point only two states remained in the potential site pool: Michigan and Minnesota. Because Wolfe’s (1998) work had already identified the patterns of practice in the majority of Michigan’s public school academies, I decided to eliminate Michigan as a possible site for my research. The lone, remaining state in the potential participant pool for this study was Minnesota.

More than eight years ago, Minnesota passed the nation’s first charter school legislation. Minnesota has the longest experience with charter schools, has an adequate number of charter schools from which to draw my sample selection, and also has charter schools sponsored by three different sponsoring agencies, the major criterion for my study.

The Children, Families and Learning Department’s Charter School Web Page (2000b) lists 27 different active sponsoring agencies; seven different post-secondary institutions, 19 different school districts and the State Board of Education. Nineteen of these sponsoring agencies have had more than one year’s experience serving as a charter school sponsor. These nineteen varied in their location and enrollment of schools, in their mission statements, and in their number of years’ experience as charter school sponsors. Since the first year in any new situation is a significant learning experience when policies and procedures are still being refined, I decided to limit my study to those 19 sponsoring agencies with more than one school year’s experience acting as a charter school sponsor.

The 19 sponsoring agencies are broken down into 15 different school districts sponsoring a total of 32 charter schools. The remaining four sponsoring agencies are represented by three post-secondary institutions and the State Board of Education. All 19 sponsoring agencies, operating during the 1998-1999 school year were invited to participate in this research. Twelve of the 19 eligible sponsoring agencies; eight different

school districts, three post-secondary institutions and the Children, Families and Learning Department (in January, 2000 this body assumed the duties of the State Department of Education), all agreed to provide documents and participate in the interview phase of my research. Pseudonyms have been used for all institutions and persons in order to protect confidentiality.

#### Data Collection Methods

Multiple data sources and data collection methods were used to allow for a comprehensive description of the sponsoring agencies' accountability procedures. This triangulation of data collection helped to confirm findings as they emerged as well as establishing validity for the study (Patton, 1990). The two primary methods of data collection used were document review and personal interviewing.

As a pilot, I initially phoned four sponsoring agency representatives in the identified sample to identify myself and also to raise their interest in participating in the study. All four agreed to participate and were willing to send me copies of their charter contracts. After being assured that there was interest in my research, I mailed all 19 potential participants a narrative of the proposed research as well as a Consent Form to participate in the study (see Appendix F). Participants returned the signed Consent Form as well as copies of any documents related to the accountability process. Upon receipt of the charter contract, charter school directors were contacted by letter to request their participation in the interview phase of the research (see Appendix G). Follow-up phone calls to each of the participants were made to schedule a time for the actual phone interview. Permission to tape the phone interviews was obtained from the participants. Additionally, field notes were taken during the interview. The audiotapes were transcribed for the analysis process. Confidentiality of the school names and interview sources was guaranteed.

The documents that were reviewed included Minnesota's charter school legislation, the Children, Families and Learning Department's (CFL) implementation guidelines for the sponsoring agencies, the guidelines, application packet, and reporting requirements provided to potential charter school operators by each sponsoring agency, and actual charter agreements of the individual schools. These documents provided basic information about the accountability processes followed by each of the sponsoring

agencies. These documents also provided the basis for questions that were pursued during the interview phase of the research.

Charter school operators and their sponsoring agency representatives were interviewed following the document review. Interview questions dealt primarily with the satisfaction level both have in using the current accountability system and the degree to which they believe the current procedures used actually match the intended accountability measures specified in the state's charter school legislation. The interview also addressed their ideas for improvement in the accountability process. In some cases interview questions served to clarify information that emerged from the document review and analysis phase of the research. (See Appendix E for the research protocol.)

#### Data Management and Analysis

The techniques used in data management and analysis depended on the type of data being collected and analyzed. Data obtained from charter contracts were analyzed with the help of the Benchmarking Matrix (See Appendix C.) Accountability elements found in the charter contract were marked on the Benchmarking Matrix. I also used this Benchmarking Matrix to make note of the location of each accountability element in the contract and the presence of any unusual wording describing the specific accountability components. Using the Charter Analysis Summary form (see Appendix H), I summarized the major elements of each charter contract. These forms, developed during the literature review process, helped define the categories to be considered during the data collection process. According to Yin (1994), the use of such data frameworks helps to identify exactly the required data and also helps to ensure that similar data are being collected at each of the sites within a multiple-case study.

The transcribed interview notes were reviewed line by line and then analyzed using Tesch's techniques of "decontextualization and recontextualization" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.30). The first step, decontextualization, involves the division of the data set into portions. These fragments are small enough so that its precise intent can be easily understood, but of sufficient size to have meaning in relation to the full data set and the research process. These individual pieces of data are then examined in relation to categories of an organizational scheme. The codes that appear in Appendix D were developed prior to beginning the interview phase of my research as I sought to identify

potential answers to my interview questions. Additional codes were developed during the data analysis process when the data did not fit into the established organizational scheme.

The second step, recontextualization, involves separating the data fragments from their original context, and organizing them by groups according to the fragment's assigned codes. In this way the data fragments are given new context. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), "Decontextualizing and recontextualizing help to reduce and then expand the data in new forms with new organizing principles" (p.31).

Interpretation of the data involved examining the fragments of data that have been assigned similar codes. The next step involved close scrutinization of the code categories and the data assigned to each. In some cases, this process resulted in data being reassigned to a different code group. Code groups were combined together to form broader concept categories. The resulting scheme was displayed using large pieces of paper, each containing the broad concepts and the data that support each of the concepts. After studying and analyzing the conceptual displays, individual case reports for each type of sponsoring agency were written. These three individual case reports discuss the patterns in the accountability processes of each type of sponsor. The next step of the data analysis involved examining the data and the individual case reports in an effort to identify patterns or components of the accountability processes in use by all the sponsors. This analysis was conducted with use of a meta-matrix, master charts combining data from the multiple case reports in a standard format (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each cell within the meta-matrix held the condensed case-level data of each category. The condensation of data was accomplished by grouping the data with similar themes and patterns together. These replicated themes and patterns form the basis of multiple case study report.

#### Timeline

After defense of the prospectus in December 1999, an Application for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects was filed with the Virginia Tech Office of Sponsored Programs. Documents needed for the document analysis phase of the research were procured during the first three months of the year 2000. Document review and analysis began as soon as the documents were received. Interviews and other necessary data were collected simultaneously with the document review phase of this research. The

individual case studies, cross-site analyses, conclusions, and final writing and correction of the dissertation were completed during March. The final defense was held in April 2000.

#### Summary of Outcomes

Chapter Four of the dissertation contains the research findings in the form of the three case studies and the cross-site report. These reports were written using the procedures detailed in the Data Management and Analysis section of this dissertation. Chapter Five contains the conclusions and recommendations for further studies. Conclusions were formulated using the broad themes and general patterns found during the cross-site analyses. This research helped to further the understanding of the accountability processes required by multiple sponsoring agencies that operate under a single charter school law. This knowledge will help sponsoring agencies in Minnesota and in other states that have passed charter school legislation to better understand the multiple processes sponsoring agencies may employ when assuming oversight responsibility for a charter school.