

When Accountability Comes Knocking, How Do Charter Schools Respond?

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2009

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Across the nation and particularly in Michigan, accountability has had a great impact on public school policies and school practice, gaining wide support among policymakers in response to concerns about failing public schools. Charter schools are at the heart of the debate around accountability because they are one of the least understood phenomena in American education (Hill, Lake & Celio, 2002). Do charter schools let educators teach in any way they like regardless of whether children learn, or do they make educators strictly accountable for performance (Wells et al., 1999)? The root of the disagreement around charter schools is accountability. Some charter advocates think that those who run charter schools are responsible only to maintain professional standards and a clientele of satisfied parents. Others think that those who run charter schools are responsible to show government and the general public that their children are learning what they need to become responsible, productive citizens (Hill et al., 2002).

Charter schools are autonomous public schools that are designed to have greater autonomy than traditional public schools to create environments and offer programs that foster academic and personal success for each individual student. This hopefully enables the student to reach the highest possible level of academic success. Accountability measures may challenge charter schools' creativity and flexibility in developing curricula by constraining principal and teacher autonomy (Gawlik, 2006) and constructing the most successful individual work plans for each student. Meanwhile, encouraged by increased test scores (Grissmer et al., 2001), state and federal policymakers continue to support accountability as an effective means to improve public schools, including charter schools.

This paper seeks to understand how local charter school educators are responding to the accountability measures being imposed upon them. Encouraged by early indications of increased test scores, state and federal policymakers continue to support accountability as an effective means to improve schools. Surprisingly, there has been little research on local educators' experiences with and responses to such reforms. This lack of research is striking because teachers, principals, and superintendents are directly responsible for the implementation of accountability mandates, including administering tests, teaching

to the state standards, and implementing state-approved curriculum packages. In an effort to understand teachers' and administrators' experiences with public school accountability, this study explores how educators in five charter schools in Michigan understand recent accountability mandates, the impact of accountability on classroom and pedagogical practices and their sense of professionalism, and their efforts to address inequities in student achievement within the context of accountability.

Accountability Defined

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) advocates believe that school accountability and the standards-based movement is the means to implement wide-scale public education reform that will transform the public school system into a more beneficial model for all students. This includes providing a spotlight on traditionally underperforming students. The philosophical intent of the reform is noble and stands for an important principle that no child will be left behind and all children will receive a high quality education despite their potential disadvantaged status (Borowski & Sneed, 2006; Guilfoyle, 2006; Haycock, 2006; Hess, 2006; Hess & Petrelli, 2005; Kane, et al., 2002; Lewis, 2006). *Accountability* is a word frequently used in connection with education but is rarely defined. In most education settings, accountability is a muddled concept that has many meanings for political leaders as well as education officials. Sometimes, accountability is used synonymously with "responsibility" and other times it is associated with oversight authority, as is the case with most charter schools. Accountability may be directed toward either a process (Brown, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1992) or outcomes such as standardized test scores. This article focuses on the central component of accountability to government—that of performance accountability or accountability for educational outcomes.

Michigan's Accountability System

The history of the Michigan School Accountability System started in 1990 with the approval of Public Act 25, which initiated an accountability system along with school of choice (Education Policy Center, 2000). The accountability system included a mandate on school improvement initiatives by schools, the creation of a core curriculum and learning outcomes for all students, school accreditation, and an annual report that was required for completion by all schools. In 1995, the law was amended to include pupil performance on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test, which was used as part of the school accreditation process in Michigan. The accountability system in Michigan continued to evolve during the year 2000 when a task force was created to evaluate the accountability system and make recommendations for reforming the accreditation process in Michigan. The MEAP was used to measure achievement status, achievement change, and achievement growth. Michigan was one of the first states to implement the Adequate Yearly Progress formula prior to NCLB in order to meet the goals of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (Center on Education Policy, 2005). While the underlying theory is that charter schools vary somewhat from state to state, a central part of that theory is that they are more accountable for educational performance than traditional public schools, largely because authorizers have the ability to revoke or not renew charter contracts (Kolderie, 1990; Nathan, 1996).

Responses to Accountability

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There is emerging evidence that while public school accountability continues to gain national prominence and federal support, such policies may have negative impacts on teachers and their work in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Elmore, 2002). In Michigan in particular, there is significant concern that policies such as NCLB would lead to a lack of control, causing teachers to leave the profession. Yet, as this study's interviews reveal, teachers are responding to accountability in complex ways. While there are clear feelings of frustration with the current accountability regime, teachers recognize the need of an accountability system and appreciate certain aspects of the system.

Districts are often overlooked when it comes to public school accountability. Most state policies, Michigan included, target schools as the unit of change and do not hold districts directly accountable. But recent research shows that districts do matter; they often respond by either buffering or paying little interest to state policy (Firestone & Fairman, 1998) or they add on another layer of accountability by mandating their own assessments and performance incentives (Chrispeels, 1997; Geortz et al., 1998). Previous research has shown that in traditional public schools, the districts have expanded testing considerably (Woody et al., 2004).

There's no question that leadership is an important ingredient in implementing educational reform (Fullan, 2001; Glickman, 1993; Senge, 2000) especially in the context of state-driven accountability systems and state-mandated testing (Smith, 1991). While state and district mandates have an impact on teachers' work, principals can have just as much impact on teachers' understandings and implementation of accountability reforms (Herman, 1990). This study reveals that principals often play a pivotal role in how teachers experience both state and federal accountability measures.

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Methods

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This study provides an opportunity to listen to teachers and administrators as well as foster communication between educators and policymakers. Using qualitative case studies, the investigator will seek to document educators' experiences with state and federal public school accountability systems. This study relies on qualitative methodology because of its naturalistic inquiry and is appropriate for the issues being explored in this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research is unique in that it adds an additional dimension to the existing quantitative data of student achievement, which is often used to assess accountability. While those measures of achievement are important, they provide little understanding of the impact of accountability on school and classroom practice and the lives of educators and students (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Using established interview protocols for teachers, principals, and district administrators or superintendents, the principal investigator has conducted in-depth interviews with educators in five charter elementary schools in southeast Michigan. The investigator has inquired about topics such as their knowledge and understanding of recent accountability mandates, the impact of accountability on

classroom practices and their sense of professionalism, and their efforts to address inequities in student achievement within the context of accountability. In addition, classroom observations will be conducted.

Research Sites

The research sites selected for the study focused on educators' experiences in elementary charter schools due to a lack of research on accountability at that level as well as an interest in the impact of accountability during the earlier grades of state testing. Five elementary charter schools were selected throughout the southeast part of Michigan. In order to capture the diversity of Michigan's charter schools, the sites represented a range of student populations, community characteristics, and student achievement levels. Charter schools were selected if they (a) were elementary schools, (b) were schools of choice, (c) had student populations of 100 or more, (d) had accountability systems based on performance, and (e) were public schools. While the sample of schools is small, it is far from homogeneous. These five schools vary in size and administrative structures, feature different approaches to instruction and assessment, and have different histories of experience with choice and accountability.

Data Collection

During the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years, each of the five charter schools will be visited several times during a four-month period. The intensive visits include:

- Interviews with all first-, third- and fifth-grade teachers.
- Observations of a first-, third- and fifth-grade classroom.
- An interview with the principal.
- An interview with the superintendent or other district leaders.

Interviews follow a semi-structured protocol, covering a set of themes while allowing participants to shape the interview based on their own unique experiences. Interviews last approximately 45 minutes to an hour and are audiotaped. Where appropriate, documents such as meeting notes, charter board memos, and charter operators' memoranda are examined in order to triangulate to assist with the development of patterns.

Teacher and administrator interviews thus far have focused on the following themes: 1) the interviewee's professional background, 2) the school and district context, 3) the interviewee's experience with and responses to accountability, and 4) equity issues. In total, this study will interview five principals, four district administrators and approximately forty teachers individually.

Data Analysis

Charter school accountability is embedded in the shared education philosophies and the social context of each school; therefore a case study of several charter schools is appropriate because multiple schools allow multiple contexts to be studied (Merriam, 1998). A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The constant comparative method is an appropriate method for this research because it is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research. The constant comparative method of data analysis was used to make comparisons between start-up charter schools and conversion charter schools. These comparisons led to tentative categories that were then compared to each other and to other instances.

The principal investigator has reviewed the material weekly throughout the process of data collection and analysis to examine site visits and emerging themes. Extensive field notes were prepared for each interview. All interviews were transcribed and coded using a qualitative software package, NVivo 4.0. The thematic coding scheme was modified as necessary to accommodate emerging themes and complexities. The findings presented in this report represent teachers' and administrators' experiences across a variety of school contexts. Despite differences in school and charter school leadership, student populations, and achievement levels, the interviews conducted thus far reveal common perspectives regarding the impact of the state's accountability system on educators' professional lives and their efforts to improve student achievement.

Preliminary Findings

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Teachers and principals alike find the accountability mandates both at the state and federal levels to be frustrating and overwhelming. However, at the same time they recognize the need for school accountability and appreciate certain aspects of the system. For example, the standards are seen as a useful aspect for teachers. The testing, on the other hand, is problematic because results often arrive too late for there to be any real impact and rewards and sanctions were looked upon as arbitrary and biased.

Charter school teachers mentioned that they considered the state curriculum standards to be a useful tool, providing them with focus and ensuring uniformity across the state. There was evidence that standards encouraged teachers to hold their students to higher expectations. Furthermore, Michigan's recent efforts to align its annual test with standards as well as embracing a growth model may provide educators with further understanding of the ways to enhance student learning because curricular efforts will be more directly reflected in students' test results. Yet, while educators believed the current system of accountability contained worthwhile components, many felt it was heavy on regulations and short on solutions.

Charter school teachers' responses to Michigan's system of accountability reflect some of the complexity of the issues involved. Some of the teachers interviewed thus far were not necessarily resistant to the idea of being held accountable. They supported certain aspects of accountability such as curriculum standards, which they felt facilitated, not hindered, their efforts to improve student achievement. They also offered critiques of those and other aspects, such as standardized test data,

which did not meet their needs. Finally, teachers provided examples of alternative accountability efforts, such as the use of an ongoing classroom assessment program. This may ultimately lead to adjustments to the current state system.

Principals are particularly important when it comes to accountability. Principals either act as "buffers" shielding teachers from testing pressures, or as an added source of pressure emphasizing increasing test scores and raising the school's rankings. Principal style of leadership and influence also affect how teachers respond to accountability mandates as well as state policy. Principals would accept or reject certain state reforms and this was reflected in teachers' critiques or acknowledgement. Some teachers referred to the charter principal as "test-driven," particularly the third- and fifth-grade teachers who had explicitly been told by the principal that they needed to raise their students' scores on the MEAP tests. Teachers often identified the pressure they were feeling to raise test scores as coming from the district, characterizing the state as "breathing down" their necks, but it was the principal who reportedly conveyed the state's message to them.

Discussion

One key assumption is the idea that the school is the primary locus of change, teachers are the primary actors of school change, and the expected outcome is improved instruction resulting in higher student achievement. Another assumption is that teachers will be motivated to enact change through a system of external rewards and punishments.

Interviews with charter school teachers and principals reveal that putting policy into practice is a complex endeavor and goes beyond setting policy guidelines. Even though the school may be the ultimate locus of change, it cannot be considered as a solitary unit. The school is situated within a district, with its own set of policies and influences. Similarly, teachers are not the sole actors within a school, but instead work in relationship with school administrators and students towards the goal of student learning.

Michigan's accountability policy not only assumes that charter school teachers will be in a position to enact change, but that they will be motivated to do so by a system of rewards, such as punishments, labeling ranging from a low-performing school label to the threat of state takeover. This research suggests that such mechanisms do not have a significant effect on teacher motivation, in large part because the promises or threats of the policy are not perceived as real. Charter school teachers pointed out that pressure and public shaming are not effective means to motivate teachers to improve instruction and instead may lead to negative or unintended consequences for student learning and professional satisfaction. This finding coincides with previous studies that have examined similar questions (Woody et. al., 2004).

Accountability reform seeks to draw attention to gaps in achievement across groups of students and to hold schools responsible for addressing various forms of inequities. Standardized test score can be disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status and linguistic subgroups. This research shows that while charter schools attempt to use test score data, they are not always using it to develop pedagogical

change and academic improvement. In fact, educators do not believe that accountability policies could address achievement gaps given the flaws in the current system. What seems to have been overlooked by both administrators and policymakers is the school-level challenges of ensuring access to data, skills to analyze the data and any opportunity to design and implement solutions to existing gaps in achievement.

In order to attach consequences to performance measures, accountability systems must be viewed as valid and reliable measures that distinguish between schools where a desirable level of learning is taking place and others where learning is inadequate (Elmore et al., 1996). For charter schools, these demands of fairness and defensibility are even greater than for state assessment systems, because the sanction of revoking or not renewing a contract is high. This challenge parallels the challenge of using standardized test scores to assess the performance of individual charter schools, which often aim to offer non-traditional educational programs. Although authorizers are clearly monitoring the test scores of students in charter schools, it is extremely important to distinguish between *collecting* information about school quality and *using* that information for improvement and accountability purposes. More often than not, charter schools must adapt their programs and curricula to serve the needs of students who enroll at the school, who may or may not match the students expected by the founders. As the Hill et al study notes, "Finding ways to measure not only student achievement on standardized tests but the value-added qualities of charter schools has proven to be a challenge" (Hill et al., 2001, p. vi).

Implications of this Study

- Findings from this research have policy implications concerned with charter school accountability. As state and federal policies continue to expand, it is essential that policymakers listen to teachers and administrators. Understanding and disseminating information concerning charter schools and accountability issues will contribute appreciably to the dialogue among policymakers as accountability mandates continue to be implemented and studied at the state level. The perceptions, concerns and opportunities for voice among charter educators will strengthen their capacity to learn from their own experiences and how to be more effective in the classroom setting. Moreover, future findings will be applicable to traditional public schools nationwide as they learn to sustain improvement in educational performance by promoting the informal exchange of knowledge.

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