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Hill, Paul T.; Lake, Robin J. with Celio, Mary Beth. (2002). *Charter schools and accountability in public education*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

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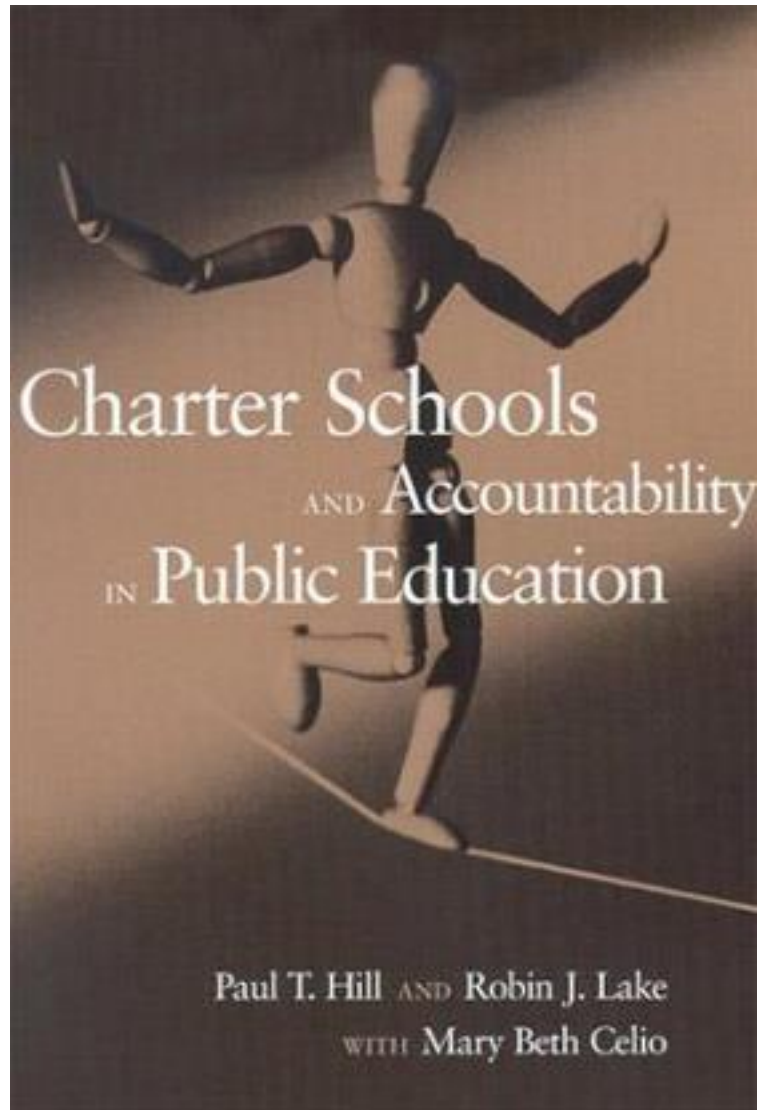
In the present era of accountability in education, one more work on the subject seems, at first consideration, redundant. A search on accountability and education in a typical journal article database produces thousands of sources, and the same search in the *Books in Print* database yields approximately a thousand titles. But narrowing the search to accountability and charter schools generates surprisingly few—surprising because, as Hill, Lake, and Celio describe in this book, the definition of accountability for charter schools is arguably one of the most important characteristics of the very idea of charter schools. For this reason, the book represents, primarily for the uninitiated, a useful introduction to the issue of accountability and charter schools, particularly since the latter are, as the authors note, one of the “least understood phenomena in American education” (p. 1). This is not to say that accountability enjoys widespread understanding and consensus. In fact, defining accountability and applying such definitions to charter schools remain among the most debated issues in charter school policy.

Accountability and Charter School Context

In the broadest sense, accountability involves holding individuals and organizations responsible for agreed-upon promises to perform. Typically, the accountability relationship between two or more parties includes structures that track results to determine if the parties involved live up to their agreement (Manno, 2004). In education, accountability has traditionally followed a compliance approach where bureaucrats and/or elected officials create rules and regulations according to which schools are micromanaged by various levels of administrators (Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 2000), such as deputy superintendents, assistant superintendents, curriculum directors, assessment directors, executive directors, principals, assistant principals, and the like. This model has been referred to as bureaucratic accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1988).

With the first charter law in the early 1990s, charter school accountability took a different approach. Manno, Finn, and Vanourek (2000) refer to it as a horse trade: Public charter schools were given operational, financial, and program autonomy in exchange for being held accountable for specified results, a model similar to what Levin (1974) called performance accountability. This approach is primarily results-driven, not resource, input, or rule driven. An additional initial idea of charter accountability focused on marketplaces (Kirst, 1990): A school's clients and stakeholders reward its successes, punish its failures, and send signals about what needs to change. A vernacular description of such accountability is "voting with their feet" (Stillings, 2005).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the performance and market accountability models began to receive increasing criticism due to a lack of clear standards or dependable performance data (May, 2006). First, charter schools often designed their own assessment systems customized to their specific contours (Petrilli, 2005) or lacked the capacity to create such systems (Crawford, 2001), which led some to complain of standards that were "vague" or "ill defined" (Olson, 2000). Second, the performance accountability model appeared to fail in its ability to weed out unsuccessful charter schools. By 2000, less than five percent of charter schools had closed and only a few of those due to poor student achievement (Manno et al., 2000).





Paul T. Hill

Third, the market model appeared ineffective. While charter parents overwhelmingly felt charter schools provided a more positive experience than the public schools from which they withdrew, May (2006) noted a “perception gap” between the poor or moderate student academic achievement in charter schools and positive reports by parents. Fourth, the rapid expansion of nonclassroom-based charters (see Carpenter, 2005 and Carpenter, 2006 for a description of such schools) raised concern about the ability of any accountability models to provide necessary oversight (Huerta, González, & d’Entremont, 2006). Finally, Rhim (2001) and McLaughlin (2007) highlighted the fundamental philosophical gap between the performance and market accountability models of charter schools and the highly regulated bureaucratic models inherent in educating children with special needs (i.e., those with an IEP).

Also during the 1990s and early 2000s, the state standards movement gained strength, and elected representatives decided it was appropriate to expect all public school students, including those in charters, to be held to standards via statewide assessments. Then came *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), which further defined charter accountability consistent with mainstream public schools (May, 2006; Petrilli, 2005). Taken together, accountability for charter schools appeared to shift away from the more flexible performance and accountability models of the early 1990s and align more with bureaucratic and stricter performance accountability models.

Yet, some have expressed concern that this shift undermines one of the central ideas of charter schools (Stillings, 2005) and may produce a dynamic where standards and choice work at cross-purposes (Shober, Manna, & Witte, 2006). The original philosophy of charter school accountability sought to take bureaucracy out of education via more flexible performance and market models, thereby spurring innovation. Indeed, in the first 11 states to pass charter school legislation, the most common motivation or purpose was to facilitate innovation (Crawford, 2001). But Opfer (2001) and others (Finnigan, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Stillings, 2005) opine that bureaucratic accountability models only make charter schools more like conventional public schools, crippling their potential for innovation and effectiveness.

Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education

It is dynamics like these that Hill, Lake and Celio seek to describe in *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education*, and few are better equipped to write about this topic. Paul Hill is the John and Marie Corbally Professor at the University of Washington’s Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, directs the Center on Reinventing Public Education, and boasts a long list of publications germane to this topic. Robin Lake serves as associate director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education and has been involved in national charter school research and policy development since 1994, also producing numerous works on charter schools. And Mary Celio is a statistical consultant to the Center on Re-Inventing Public Education.

In this particular project, they used funds from the U.S. Department of Education and several foundations to “explain how charter school accountability works in practice” (p. 11). They did so by focusing on six states—Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Michigan. According to the authors, these states contained the most active charters at the time, represented major differences in state charter school laws, and came from major regions of the country. The study involved 150 schools and 60 authorizing agencies, and the methods included interviews of those involved in charter schools (from parents to legislators and governors’ staff members), extensive case studies of 17 schools, and a nationally representative survey of charter schools. Results from their work encompass four of seven chapters of the book (chapters two through five),

followed by a chapter of recommendations and a final chapter on “Learning from Charter School Accountability.”

Their results begin with a look at charter laws and the politics that make them, focusing primarily on four theories about the charter school movement that “provide a starting point for understanding the implied accountability methods” (p. 19):

- The Innovative/Experimentation Strategy: Create new schools to serve as laboratories for successful teaching strategies.
- The Standards-Based Reform Strategy: Free schools from rules so they can meet higher expectations.
- The New Supply of Public Schools Strategy: Open the system up to a set of new school providers.
- The competition/Market Strategy: Let parent choice drive the entire system to improve.

The authors develop the theories from a review of the various state charter laws, the latter of which actually contain an amalgam of these different theories. Because of the compromises inherent in politics, charter laws across the states do not necessarily subscribe to one theory exclusively. Table 2-1 in the book outlines the different purposes articulated in the various charter laws, how those purposes align with the four theories, and which state laws contain which purposes and theories. Predictably, such incoherency of purpose makes for disjointed accountability policies. As the authors conclude, “The political process churns out more than mixed signals about the purpose of the law. Accountability provisions of the law are often similarly vague or misaligned within a particular piece of legislation” (p. 21).

Internal Accountability

Chapter Three then begins the focus on three broad domains of accountability identified from the authors’ research by discussing “internal accountability.” They define this as, “the set of processes whereby teachers apply shared expectations to their own work and to that of their colleagues” (p. 25). In other words, it is a model wherein those working within a school (teachers, administrators, board members) hold each other accountable for the agreed upon vision and expectations that define that school—a social contract of sorts. Of the different types of charter school accountability discussed in the literature, this is one that tends to receive comparably little attention, making Hill et al.’s discussion an important contribution to the larger debate.

As idealistic as this type of accountability may sound, it is not without difficulties. The authors rightly note that internal and external accountability can and often are incompatible. As charter accountability evolves from more flexible performance and market models to structures that parallel those of traditional public schools, this incompatibility likely grows even more pronounced.

A second issue involves building and maintaining the shared vision and expectations inherent in internal accountability. Due to the daily pressures of opening and running a school, establishing a coherent vision can be difficult. In addition, not everyone who works in the school necessarily begins in the same place in the visioning process. The authors note that it takes approximately three years to establish and regularize internal relationships and structures such that internal accountability takes shape.

Hill et al. also note that internal accountability includes families. Because their funding comes directly from student enrollment, charters must attract parents by making, or at least implying some promises. The authors’ research finds that charter principals think often about parents’ aspirations and try to deliver on them. But Hill et al. also acknowledge that this is not always possible, creating its own share of difficulties. Because new charters take a few years to establish

coherency, parents can be disappointed in initially unfulfilled promises. Moreover, parents attracted to choice but uninformed about a school's guiding principles also may hold certain expectations for the school, only to be frustrated and disillusioned.

Despite such difficulties, however, the authors believe this relationship between schools and parents created by choice leads to a new form of accountability—"reciprocal accountability"—as parents and schools each attempt to meet the other's expectations. Hill et al. conclude, "...it is one of the charter school movement's greatest contributions to public education" (p. 36).

Authorizing Agencies

Moving outside of the confines of the school building, Chapter Four considers accountability relationships between charter schools and authorizing agencies, such as state and local departments of education, other state agencies, and universities. The official accountability mechanism in these relationships is the charter itself. The authors note, "At their most basic level, school charters are agreements between authorizing agencies and individual schools about goals, basic modes of operation, and performance requirements. In theory, a well-drafted charter could be the quintessential accountability mechanism" (p. 47).

Yet, as Hill et al. note, "The reality...is much different than the theory" (p. 48). Whether it be local school boards, universities, or state agencies, most authorizers are "learning on the job" in how to fulfill their accountability responsibilities. Moreover, the authorizers are assuming these accountability duties on top of their routine operations, which means they often lack the staff, time, or resources to devote to systematic oversight of a charter (or charters). Consequently,

In our survey, only 27 percent of the chartering agencies surveyed reported having written accountability standards, and an additional 4 percent said they were under development. Similarly, only 38 percent of the agencies surveyed had a formal renewal process. Another 6 percent were developing such a process at the time of our survey. (p. 50).

The more typical accountability mechanism for authorizers included a formal report of progress toward goals, a summary report from the school, and a financial audit, particularly the latter. Actual site visits were infrequent, and student achievement data appeared to play only a minor role. Hill et al. conclude the chapter with a typology of authorizers. "The vast majority of authorizers fit into one of four categories: (1) overeager approvers, (2) reluctant authorizers and suspicious auditors, (3) ambivalent approvers and indifferent managers, or (4) professional authorizers and competent stewards" (p. 55).

Accountability to Others

An additional external accountability audience for charter schools includes organizations not typically present in the public school accountability equation, such as vendors, political interest groups, non-profit agencies, and/or governmental bodies other than the authorizer. These accountability relationships are created as schools seek additional funding and other resources, political support, or goods and services for daily operations of the school. Hill et al. note the following types of voluntary associations charters routinely enter into:

- Partner organizations (community non-profits such as youth centers)
- Space and facility providers
- Groups that donate goods and services
- Sources of private or government grants
- Educational management organizations

- Providers of legal advice and insurance
- Charter school associations and technical assistance organizations
- Accreditation agencies
- Researchers

The authors note that in addition to the goods, services, or resources provided by these organizations, the relationships can also create constructive pressure for continuous improvement and additional oversight in fiscal and resource management, areas that contribute most to charter school closure (Manno et al., 2000). Yet, while such voluntary associations can strengthen a school's performance, they also threaten a school's ability to remain focused on its core mission (teaching and learning), its distinctive principles, and its other relationships (parents, teachers, and authorizers).

Recommendations

As Chapters Two through Five demonstrate, charter schools operate in a situation of mixed accountability, with multiple audiences, influences, and expectations. While this inevitably creates some amount of confusion and incoherency, Hill et al. conclude that multidirectional accountability can work. For it to function most effectively schools must develop a strong system of internal accountability in order to respond to the needs of students, teachers, and families, and also to respond to the demands and pressures from outside audiences.

Beyond that, the authors also draw a series of more specific recommendations for the various parties involved in charter school accountability. First, charter school boards need to steer, not row. Second, charter school leaders need to establish and maintain good communications with authorizers and others, articulate clear expectations with parents, teachers, and the board, and accept if not embrace various forms of measurement of progress and process. Third, teachers should actively hold leaders and boards accountable but expect to be challenged and work under performance expectations. Fourth, authorizers should establish routine monitoring systems rather than waiting for a school to fall into trouble before paying attention. Fifth, state agencies should hold authorizers accountable for their responsibilities. Sixth, the federal government is too intrusive and needlessly disruptive in the operations of charter schools. Finally, friends of the charter movement should continue to provide resources, tools, and expertise for schools to succeed, but they also should expect schools to measure progress toward goals.

Such recommendations align with others who have written about charter accountability. For example, Gam and Cobb (2001) discuss the multidirectional approach and assert bureaucratic, performance, and market models can complement one another and better inform all constituents about the performance of publicly funded schools without sacrificing autonomy or innovation. Manno et al. (2000) and Stillings (2005) also stress that although the standards and assessment movement may exert some level of standardization on charter schools, assessments are an unavoidable part of the accountability picture.

Hill et al. also discuss the relationship between standards-based reform and charter accountability, but their view is not as resigned as others seem to be. They state, for example, "Charter schools and standards-based education are different faces of the same reform" (p. 98). Moreover, "With respect to accountability, no conflict exists between standards and chartering; in fact, the two reinforce each other" (p. 100). Although the authors do not discuss explicitly how charters reinforce standards, they state that standards provide a necessary common metric against which charters are judged, which is particularly salient given the aforementioned criticisms of vague and ill-defined accountability standards.

Although the authors' positive portrayal of the relationship between standards-based reform and charter schools is debatable, there are a few other assertions made in the book that are even more

questionable. For example, in the final chapter, "Learning from Charter School Accountability," Hill et al. state, "In general we have shown that charter schools' multi-directional accountability can work, in the all-important sense of promoting effective instruction for children" (p. 97). Unfortunately, the data and discussion fall short of showing either the effectiveness of multidirectional accountability or the promotion of effective instruction. The authors may possess information that show one or both of these things, but such data are not presented in this treatment. In another example, the authors begin the book by stating, "We think this book has implications outside the charter school world for the national debate about school reform" (p. 2). Perhaps, but other than the final few paragraphs of the book, specific recommendations to that end remain wanting.

Conclusion

For those already familiar with charters, accountability, and the intersection of the two, *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education* will not provide a tremendous amount of new information. Moreover, as the authors themselves acknowledge, the landscape is evolving such that this book provides merely a snapshot look at accountability, a snapshot that is already dated. For example, the work Hill et al. completed for the writing of this book pre-dated NCLB, the implications of which are briefly mentioned above.

Finally, this is not a detailed, comprehensive examination of all the ins and outs of charter school accountability. Instead, this book provides a primer to those unfamiliar with accountability in the charter school context and lays a foundation for those who might be interested in delving further into the policy nuances and other research on this topic. Those interested in doing so will want to consider books by Wells (2002), Miron and Nelson (2002), and Finn, Bierlein, and Manno (1997), and the various journal articles referenced in this review.

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