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# Moving Beyond the Rhetoric: Charter School Reform and Accountability

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**ABSTRACT.** The author examined how local charter school educators respond to the accountability measures being imposed on 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, the author explores how educators in 4 charter schools in Michigan understand recent accountability mandates with respect to school reform.

**Keywords:** accountability, charter schools, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), policy

The past 40 years have witnessed a slew of advocates including conservative free-market economists, religious fundamentalists, moderate democrats, and progressive or child-centered educators who have argued for various types of school choice policies (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996; Henig, 1994; Wells, 1993). During the last decade or so, members of each of these groups have united in their support for charter school reform. The diversity of political support for charter school reform has been noticeable since its inception, which was part of a larger phenomenon of deregulation and marketizing public education and a clear demand for local and community control of schools (Nathan, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Despite its varying political origins, charter school reform has come to symbolize various things to various groups of people, including policymakers who propose, pass, and implement legislation.

One of the most consistently cited benefits of charter school reform is that charter schools are held accountable for student outcomes in ways that traditional public schools are not because a chartering agency can, in theory (and sometimes in practice), close a charter school that fails to either attract students or does not meet specified performance outcomes. So charter schools are not simply held accountable for meeting regulations on inputs with a system of outcome-

based accountability, and therefore, the threat of being shut down for not achieving results forces charter schools to be more accountable (Kolderie, 1992; Finn, Manno, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1997; Hassel, 1996; Millot, 1996).

In this article I examine how local charter school educators are responding to the accountability measures being imposed on 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, I explore how educators in four charter schools in Michigan understand recent accountability mandates with respect to school reform.

## *What Does No Child Left Behind Mean for Charter Schools?*

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; 2002) reform aims to hold educational agencies and states accountable for improving the quality of education for all students. It further seeks to identify and transform low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students into successful schools. The accountability provisions in NCLB intend to close the achievement gap between high- and low-achieving students and especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students along with advantaged and disadvantaged students. The reform expects to accomplish this goal using state assessment systems that are designed to ensure that students are meeting state academic and grade-level content expectations.

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The implementation of the NCLB goals calls for high-level standards that are measurable for all students. There is no doubt that NCLB has provided for an increased focus on student populations that have traditionally performed at low levels (Borowski & Sneed, 2006; Guilfoyle, 2006; Haycock, 2006; Hess, 2006; Hess & Petrelli, 2006; Kane, Douglas, & Geppert, 2002; Lewis, 2006). The measurement tool used to accomplish this is Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). However, there are some faults with the AYP measure, and there is a question as to whether AYP is able to provide an accurate measurement of the goals that are stated in the Title I purpose statement of the NCLB legislation. Some of those faults include states being allowed to develop their own standards, test score proficiency levels, and statistical measurement formulas under AYP (Harris, 2007; Olson & Jacobson, 2006; Popham, 2005; Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005; Wiley, Mathis, & Garcia, 2005). Cronin, Dahlin, Adkins, and Kingsbury (2007) found that 50 different educational measurement standards are implemented across the United States. Students in one state could meet proficiency standards on the state AYP assessment, and one state's achievement standard might fall below that of another state. Students who pass in one state may fail to meet another state's AYP standards.

Almost a decade into the reform, NCLB is a large and complex piece of legislation that elicits a focus on public school education. However, the language of the federal NCLB is fairly straightforward. Section 1111(b)(2)(K) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by NCLB, states:

Accountability for Charter Schools—The accountability provisions under this Act shall be overseen for charter schools in accordance with State charter school law.

March 2003 saw the release of a U.S. Department of Education document entitled "The Impact of the New Title I Requirements on Charter Schools: Non-Regulatory Guidance." Non-regulatory guidance is not law—it is guidance. Following the guidance will subsequently minimize issues for state legislators. Charter schools are public schools, and thus they are accountable with a state's Title I accountability requirements. Therefore, charter schools must participate as any other public school. However, it should be noted that a state's Title I accountability plan may not replace or duplicate the role of authorized chartering agencies. Thus, state plans should respect the unique nature of charter schools. The guidance recognizes the contract between the charter school and the authorizer. If the contract exceeds the Title I accountability requirements of NCLB, then the authorizer should ensure that the school abides by the contract under state law, even if the school met AYP. In other words, charter schools should be held to the highest standard, either the contract or AYP. If a charter fails to meet AYP requirements, then the authorizers must take action as required by NCLB. This suggests that states permitting alternative authorizers (e.g., universities, municipal governments) should move to

ensure these authorizers have the resources necessary to perform the duties assigned to them under NCLB.

### *Accountability Defined*

NCLB advocates believe that school accountability and the standards-based movement provide 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. In this article I focus 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 AYP formula prior to NCLB to meet the goals of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (Center on Education Policy, 2005). Although 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*

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. Although there are clear feelings of frustration with the present 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; Goertz, Massell, & Chun, 1998). Previous research has shown that in traditional public schools the districts have expanded testing considerably (Woody, Buttles, Kafka, Park, & Russell, 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). Although 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 state and federal accountability measures.

*Research Questions*

The phenomenon or process studied in the present study was the extent to which teachers and principals experience accountability in their respective charter schools. This study was guided by three overarching research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What is the nature of accountability in the context of school reform?

*Research Question 2:* How do local educators perceive and understand accountability mandates in charter schools?

*Research Question 3:* What is the impact, if any, of accountability on classroom and instructional practices?

**Method**

School accountability and its implementation is embedded in the shared education philosophies and the social context of their schools; 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 following sections detail charter schools in Michigan, population sampling, data collection, and analysis.

*Overview of Charter Schools in the Detroit Metropolitan Region*

The charter schools selected for this study were from Detroit metropolitan region. Three counties (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb) make up the Detroit metropolitan region as a whole and contain over 4,012,766 people, fully two fifths of the state's total population of 10,003,422 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Detroit, situated in Wayne County, is the region's and the state's largest city with a present population of 912,062—down substantially from its peak population of 1,849,568 in 1950. A downturn in the city's population deepened in the aftermath of the Detroit riots of 1967, which saw White citizens begin to flee Detroit in large numbers to surrounding suburbs in Macomb and Oakland counties. And that downturn continues to the present day, driven by the virtual collapse of the auto industry and continued devastation of Michigan's economy. Michigan is home to 283 charter schools statewide, serving 99,660 students. Michigan has the sixth strongest of the nation's 40 charter laws, which makes it a good site for a case study (Center for Education Reform, 2010). Detroit itself has 42 elementary schools, eight high schools, and 17 combined schools.

Michigan allows for three kinds of state-supported charter schools: (a) Public School Academies (PSAs) chartered under Part 6A of the revised school code, (b) Urban High School Academies (UHSAs) chartered under Part 6C of the revised school code to operate within Detroit, and (c) Strict Discipline Academies (SDAs) chartered under Public Act 23 of 1999 to serve suspended, expelled, or incarcerated young people (Michigan Department of Education, 2010). Michigan, to date, has 283 existing charter schools (Center for Education Reform, 2010). The majority of charter schools in Michigan are housed in southeast Michigan and represent approximately 50% of the total.

Charter schools may include Grades K–12 or any combination of those grades. They may not charge tuition and must serve anyone who applies to attend; that is, they may not screen out students based on race, religion, sex, or test scores. Students are selected randomly for admission if the number of students applying exceeds the school's enrollment capacity. In addition, charter school teachers must be certified and highly qualified; charter school students are assessed annually as part of the MEAP (Michigan Department of Education, 2010).

The schools sampled for this study had somewhat similar demographics, with the majority of students listed as African

American, followed by Hispanic at one site. More than half the student population qualified for free and reduced-price lunch at each charter school. All charter schools in this study attained AYP for the duration of their tenure. The percentage of students proficient in mathematics on the MEAP typically exceeded that of English language arts. All charter schools in this study had attendance rates that exceeded 90% and teacher–student ratios varied from as high as 1:26 to a low of 1:17. Finally, special education students comprised anywhere from 3.7% to 12.7% of the total student population at these charter schools.

### *Charter School Population Sampling*

Teachers and principals within four selected charter schools from the Detroit metropolitan region were interviewed because chartering legislation is considered to be strong as well as its autonomy and this state has a number of charter schools in operation (Center for Education Reform, 2010). Charter schools were selected if they (a) were elementary schools, (b) were schools of choice, (c) had student populations of 300 or more, (d) had accountability systems based on performance, or (e) were a public school. A minimum of five teachers from each of the four charter schools sampled who had taught for at least one year was interviewed, yielding 30 teacher interviews. Principals were also invited to interview; however, only three were available at the time of data collection. Documents, such as pamphlets, brochures, and profile data that relate to the school's charter and mission, were also collected to provide greater explanation and insight between the school's philosophy, areas of influence, and accountability.

Site selection was purposeful and the charter schools in Michigan were selected based on selective sampling. Selective sampling of charter schools would involve identifying and seeking out those that represent the widest possible range of characteristics of interest such as student population, teacher race, and district location for this study. Although the sample of schools is small, it is far from homogeneous. These four schools varied in size, administrative structures, different approaches to instruction and assessment, and have different histories of experience with authorizing, choice, and accountability.

### *Data Collection Strategies and Analysis*

The interviews conducted at the chosen charter schools were standardized, using a semistructured interview protocol.<sup>1</sup> Interview questions for teachers were developed from the research questions, the School and Staffing Survey of 2003–2004 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004), and previous literature. Generally, interview questions asked focused on the influence of accountability on the charter schools as a whole. Moreover, questions were asked that sought the meaning of accountability and its impact on school

performance, professional development, and everyday life at the school building. The wording and sequence of questions were predetermined and followed the same order for all teachers and principals. This reduced interviewer bias; however, standardized questions tend to constrain the responses of the interviewee. Therefore, probes were used when appropriate to expound on existing responses. By relying on standardized, semistructured interview questions, the research was able to compare responses across charter schools and teachers (Patton, 1990). All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo 7.0.

The purpose of the analysis was to (a) determine to what extent teachers experience accountability in charter schools and (b) document how charter schools differ from one another along key accountability measures for teachers and principals. Data analysis was based on emerging themes and categories derived from the variables identified in the data source. Data from the teacher and principal interviews at the charter schools were categorized to comply with the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). Interviews and documents were the two sources that provided analysis of multiple perspectives. They were then compared to other incidents in the data and comparisons were made which led to tentative categories. As the categories got refined and subcategories were created, a framework for patterns and relationships among the coded categories began to develop. The evaluation of discrepant cases and triangulation were among the techniques used to assist the development of patterns.

## **Results**

### *School Reform and Ties to School Accountability*

Each of the charter schools discussed here had somewhat similar experiences with school reform and accountability. Despite the similar experiences among these charter schools, each struggled to define themselves within the charter school accountability movement. Hence, the stories of these schools address broader issues about what aspects of charter schools are tied to accountability, specifically NCLB. Moreover, the emergent themes of teacher accountability and autonomy, testing and achievement, as well as school improvement within charter schools are discussed.

### *Perceptions of Present Climate of School Reform and Charter Schoolwide Issues*

There was general agreement among educators that school reform was dramatically altered with the passage of the NCLB. As one teacher stated, "I guess No Child Left Behind was a gut buster. It changed a lot of things although they weren't necessarily bad things; we just had to do things differently at that point." By drawing attention to accountability, NCLB influenced charter schools to refocus on core subjects and content matter. But beyond that, NCLB

altered the very way charter schools did business by changing the mindset of the teacher and principals interviewed. Many teachers and principals believed that under previous policies there was limited accountability; however, now “everybody has to held accountable.” Several teachers commented that accountability was directed to all members of the school and even the community.

There was acknowledgment by the principals in this study that the implementation of NCLB varied from charter school to charter school. Although some seemed to be tackling the legislation head on, others were floundering. One charter school principal had this to say about his school:

We’ve maximized our teacher potential and we continue to write grants that will help us with professional development. So, we’ve counter-attacked the reform movement by being proactive and looking for ways to meet the needs of our students and provide them with what they need to meet the challenge because with nicklebee, every couple of years, you have to raise your standards, your scores, so proficiency levels have to go up.

Furthermore, implementation entails that all participants have a shared understanding of what is expected of them. Because teachers and educators have varied meanings of legislation it is sometimes difficult for charter school principals to employ a common vision and understanding. Moreover, the reform movement is being matched by some charter schools taking a more proactive stance rather than purely reactive.

The present climate of school reform and accountability for most charter school educators was indeed important. Teachers and principals alike expressed a sense of not experiencing choice anymore when it comes to being an alternative to traditional public schools. As one teacher put it,

if you don’t make your scores or the grade you don’t receive finances so it’s like we are between a rock and a hard place so I don’t think there is an option out there for us . . . I think maybe for some schools it works and some schools it doesn’t depending on your administration, but now with No Child Left Behind it says what you have to do.

There was a clear link made between the purse strings and school survival. Tying funding to performance was an issue that arose several times among charter school educators, but they felt particularly pinched in comparison with traditional public schools because they were operating on lower budgets. They also pointed out that they don’t have the district as a support system for their operations. So, essentially, they have to do more with less. This left some charter school educators disillusioned with the system of accountability under NCLB. However, teachers, in particular, felt that on the whole accountability made them more aware of “what’s going on against the trends and how teachers are performing, and how the kids performed.” There was a positive note by some teachers that accountability facilitated the achievement of their goals and that each year “we set the bar higher.”

In the most basic sense, accountability is a direct articulation of what students, parents, and teachers are expected to do for their schools. But the facilitation of accountability was constrained by a few charter-school-wide issues that seemed pervasive throughout the study. Numerous teachers remarked that their charter schools confronted obstacles that placed unrealistic demands on them and therefore affected their ability to implement portions of the NCLB accountability act.

The first issue reported by teachers is students who are English as a second language (ESL) learners. A lot of the students attending a couple of the charter schools in this study could not speak, read, or write in English. Although there was a department devoted to ESL, writing scores were reported to be low and the schools identified with large ESL populations were struggling to find funds for paraprofessionals and had difficulty hiring bilingual teachers. Resources were stretched thin. But some teachers saw this as an opportunity to meet a demand. One teacher interviewed mentioned, “I am getting more training on ESL and I am getting my endorsement in that as well.” Others were involved in enrichment programs and encouraged parents to work at home with their children.

The second cited issue among teachers and principals was declining enrollment. Enrollment was on the decline for most of the charter schools in this study. This is due, in part, to an exodus of families from the state of Michigan and, in particular, the Detroit metropolitan region because of the high unemployment rates. But the other reason cited by principals was competition from traditional public schools, parochial schools, private schools, and other charter schools. Principals cited this as a big issue and that it “was on everybody’s shoulder and on everybody’s mind” because funding is tied to their enrollment. In the same vein, teachers reported that class size is a big factor. Although for some charter schools, the high schools “are busting at the seams” the schools are facing low enrollment for the lower grades. One teacher had this to say:

Last year, I had a class size of 27. Yesterday I had 11 kids present so the class sizes are a definite issue because that’s how we get our funding and that’s how the school is able to give us our supplies and things of necessity.

Despite their overall efforts to attract new students at their charter schools, some principals and teachers interviewed felt that enrollment and class size were constraints on them in the context of the accountability school reform movement.

#### *Achievement, Testing, and Instructional Approaches*

Teachers in all four charter schools spoke extensively about testing required by the state, namely the MEAP in addition to achieving AYP. Because of the immediacy and frequency of state tests, some teachers identified the state as the entity to which they feel they are being held

accountable. This is not surprising given that who teachers see themselves being held accountable to is often influenced by what they see themselves being held accountable for (Abelman & Elmore, 1999). The teachers who named the state as the agent of accountability also identified that state and federally mandated tests were not reflective of student performance but also of teacher performance.

Interestingly, when teachers were asked to report on whether they felt that the MEAP coupled with AYP was an accurate representation of their school, there were mixed feelings. One teacher had this to say:

Yes, because in a way, it's telling us what we are doing and how we are doing . . . we weren't making it [AYP], then that a red flag for us for what is happening in the school . . . everything comes back to us as a score . . . it shows our weaknesses and our strengths . . . we need to focus on those weaknesses so that we can do better.

Similarly, another teacher noted that the MEAP was a "snapshot" of performance:

But in my heart I know that some of the kids might not do well on the MEAP. They are knowledge-based and their abilities are far exceeding what the MEAP snapshot tells us. So it is not our sole source for accountability in terms of academic growth. It is a component, but you weigh it for what it's worth.

Yet another charter school teacher stated,

I would say no, because they just basically focus on the MEAP test. There are other ways that you can find out about the students who are within the classroom . . . the MEAP test doesn't test everything in the class.

It is notable that most charter school teachers reported that they administered various other assessments to supplement the MEAP to determine placement and achievement for their students.

The state's role in mandating testing clearly had an impact on how teachers perceived the usefulness of the MEAP. State-mandated tests were generally viewed as a source of pressure and stress for teachers, rather than a means to improve teaching. However, additional assessments chosen by teachers and principals were seen as more useful.

Charter school teachers provided a great amount of detail describing the testing climate in their respective schools. Words and phrases such as *intense*, *nerve wracking*, *stressful*, *top priority*, and *big deal* were used to describe the school building conditions during testing month. There was no mistaking that the teachers in these charter schools were focused on the test. As one teacher put it,

[w]ell, that is where the focus is. Our focus is on the tests. Whereas we are doing what we need to do and teaching them in a certain way to make sure that they are ready and they know how to take these certain type of tests in their way.

The beginning of the school year is devoted to review and test preparation for the students in the charter schools. The charter school's orientation to the testing culture is evident in the MEAP-driven activities that are implemented schoolwide and in the classrooms. For example, pep rallies

were held for students to get mobilized about taking the MEAP. Reward systems were set in place for students to do well such as providing snacks, breakfast, water, and frequent bathroom breaks. However, testing month was still hectic in all the charter schools in this study.

The charter school teachers interviewed expressed a great deal of concern about the impact of accountability reforms on their classroom and instructional approaches as well as the material covered. Charter school advocates have deemed charter schools as sites of innovation where teachers experience considerable autonomy to implement new instructional practices. Increased state testing has resulted in charter school teachers devoting more time to test preparation and administration. This runs counter to what the original intent of charter schools has been. The MEAP test foci are reading, writing, and mathematics, and this has reduced the time charter school teachers can spend covering other subject areas, such as social studies, the arts, and science.

Teachers were also reflective about their instructional approaches toward teaching and learning for their students. Charter school teachers expressed a learner-centered approach to instruction where "all children can learn" especially those in an urban setting. Most teachers believed that "there is no such thing as an unteachable child. Children learn at different rates, each child learns differently and as a teacher it is your job to find and be able to reach each child's learning style." They expressed strong beliefs that "an educator should incorporate the different learning styles for all children in their classroom." They cited necessary skills such as higher order and critical thinking but felt that the mandated state test forced them to "teach to the test." The variability in student ability as well as their different learning styles left a handful of charter school teachers at a loss for implementing effective teaching strategies.

When asked if accountability mandates such as NCLB had affected their classroom work, one teacher had this to say:

Truthfully, it has because you are more goal centered, as I say MEAP oriented . . . when I first came here this school was MEAP driven to me—this is all they do . . . but I understand that you have to abide by the laws of the state and they have to pass criteria, so yes, it changes a lot to me in the classroom . . . a lot of things that you may have wanted to do, you can't. There were even more learning lessons so now I really cannot do this because I have got this goal to meet. So it does to me.

Despite their overall support of NCLB and accountability, teachers were nonetheless frustrated by their not having the ability to run their classrooms as they saw fit. However, this did not stop some charter school teachers from implementing various teaching strategies that they found useful.

Besides practicing differentiated instruction, teachers implemented project-based learning in their classrooms. There was extensive professional development around project-based learning and acquiring technologies to employ it. Teachers reported taking classes at a local university to obtain further training in the technique. One of the claims

of charter advocates is that innovation in the classroom is indicative to the charter school movement. How innovation is defined is open to debate; however, most teachers felt that there was authenticity to their teaching and learning strategies.

#### *Charter School Accountability and Links to the NCLB Reform*

Teachers overall were more accepting of accountability reforms when they felt they had played a role in their adoption at the school site. This often took hold in the form of school improvement plans and general enrichment programs made available to students. In particular, teachers reported that they felt they offered a lot of different programs typically not found in traditional public schools. Charter school teachers attributed their charter schools with offering each child a “wide range of opportunities.”

The NCLB reform was viewed by teachers as placing more accountability on them as a whole, and as one teacher stated,

[w]ell, I have to say that with the new No Child Left Behind we don't have a choice if we want to be nontraditional or traditional. If you don't make your scores or that grade you don't give me finances . . . so I don't think there is an option out there for us.

Ironically, not having an “option out there” runs counter to the philosophy of choice embedded in the charter school model. Nonetheless, there is a sense that teachers feel constrained by the NCLB law but they expressed hopeful intentions that the law would be revised with the Obama administration. The biggest advantage cited by charter school teachers regarding NCLB was its ability to aid their school “to stay on course” but acknowledged that there is “no wiggle room” within the law. Moreover, charter school teachers expressed that they never analyzed classroom data in depth as they do now.

Principals took a slightly different view of the NCLB law. Although they each indicated that they have been able to implement the law and maximize their potential, they emphasized that

[t]rends come and go. Some of the trends that are here now were here 20 years ago and they come back in some shape or form. So, just as some of the teachers that have been around for 15 years, for example, have seen certain things that are happening now. But it seems to happen over the years they either forgot about them or didn't implement them. So now, it's the accountability factor. That's one of the things that NCLB has made me, as a principal, more aware.

It was evident that charter school principals in this study felt that the NCLB law was a tide in a never-ending sea of school reforms that have swept education over the past few decades. However, they acknowledge that the NCLB reform enacted a shift in mindset that was necessary to run the charter schools in a way that reflected the goals of the legislation. Even though they were held accountable to their authorizers prior to the NCLB legislation, they now expe-

rienced additional accountability to the state due to the federal legislation.

#### *Charter School Teacher Accountability and Autonomy*

As indicated previously, teachers reported that certain aspects of accountability via testing are a source of pressure, not motivation or inspiration. Time pressure resulting from frequent testing combined with performance pressure stemming from testing and public reporting of test scores, together have serious implications for teachers' work and students' educational experiences. In addition, these data suggest that accountability has resulted in a reduction in teacher discretion over classroom decisions and a decrease in professional satisfaction. The vast majority of teacher interviews touched on the issue of autonomy under accountability:

It [accountability] definitely affects it [autonomy] in a negative way because we feel like you can't veer off the course in any way. We have to stick to the curriculum. We have the set of skills met by a certain date and time and so it affects it, however, we still try to work within that limitation. We still try to, you know, exercise our teaching, individuality, so we just try.

There are some proponents of the accountability system that argue that the loss of autonomy is not altogether negative because it seeks greater uniformity in teacher practice with the goal of more consistent student outcomes. However, one teacher offered a reminder of the premise of charter schools:

It is not how charter schools were set up to be—they were set up to have more individualized instruction, smaller classrooms, teachers who have more input on curriculum . . . so we still have input on the curriculum . . . we can decide on the textbooks we want—how we're going to implement our lesson plans but as far as things like what you're going to be teaching, we don't have any say.

This research indicates that many teachers feel the pressure of accountability and, as a consequence, have experienced a loss of professional satisfaction.

We had evaluations three times a year where someone comes from administration into our classroom to make sure we're teaching what our lesson plans say that we're supposed to be teaching.

On the other hand, some teachers noted the benefits of accountability and its impact on them:

Well, even here in the past few years, I feel that upholding teachers accountable is definitely a reform that is going to help because I am accountable to teach certain standards and if I am accountable for that I am going to do that and present it to the kids.

The narrowing of the curriculum, performance pressures, and loss of autonomy have caused most of the teachers consulted in this study to derive less satisfaction from their work. Erosion of professional satisfaction may hold serious consequences since satisfaction is related to commitment to teaching (Fresko, Kfir, & Nasser, 1997). The prevalence of these

themes throughout the sample suggests that future monitoring is needed. Charter school teachers often seek their positions because of the greater autonomy provided them (Gawlik, 2007). Consequently, erosion of satisfaction and autonomy among charter school teachers may have serious implications for the charter community to staff classrooms with highly qualified teachers.

## Discussion

One of the ultimate goals of the charter school reform movement is innovative curriculum, which is encouraged through performance-based accountability and the state's willingness to waive targeted regulations (Miron & Nelson, 2002; Reyes, Wagstaff, & Fusarelli, 1999). As previous research in Maryland and Kentucky has shown, the effects of accountability systems and high-stakes testing on elementary curricula and teacher's work is far from innovative (Mintrop, 2003). This research confirms that testing causes charter school elementary teachers to increase the time spent teaching tested subjects and decrease the time spent teaching subjects not being tested such as science and social studies (Jones et al., 1999; Stecher & Barron, 1999; Whitford & Jones, 2000). However, the continued reliance on testing and accountability for school reform has led to the failure of such efforts to emphasize curriculum.

Charter school teachers find high-stakes testing extremely stressful and believe it negatively affects their students. The government's efforts to motivate improvement under NCLB may be undermining the very goal they set out to achieve. Some charter school teachers perceived the tests as an invalid measure of teaching and learning and they resented shouldering the responsibility (Mintrop, 2003). This study confirms and extends these findings to charter schools by documenting elementary school teachers' experiences with accountability in Michigan. Furthermore, educators expressed concern that NCLB mandates that all students meet proficiency standards by 2014 may result in the dismantling of public schools across the nation.

As stated previously, Michigan was one of the first states to implement the AYP formula prior to NCLB to meet the goals of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (Center on Education Policy, 2005). So their system of accountability is grounded in the assumption that curriculum standards coupled with testing may focus teacher instruction and produce improved student outcomes. This research confirms that the system of accountability is indeed influencing teacher work in charter school classrooms. At times accountability produces unintended consequences and potentially negative results. In particular, test preparation and testing displace other instructional activities and narrow the curriculum in ways that run counter to the charter school philosophy.

There are two competing tensions that have emerged from the NCLB accountability reforms in Michigan. On one hand, federal and state accountability measures have directed teachers to focus on a broader range of curricu-

lum standards in the same instructional time. On the other hand, the MEAP focuses on only English language arts and mathematics. Many teachers reported that they respond to the pressures of raising the scores on these tested subjects by narrowing the curriculum in elementary grades. The fact that language arts and mathematics are the only tested subjects signals to teachers what needs to be emphasized in the classroom.

One of the assumptions underlying accountability systems is giving teachers explicit instructional guidelines and materials may focus and improve instructional activities and ultimately improve student outcomes. In fact, charter school teachers suggested that they make a concerted effort to employ differential instruction, project-based learning, and various instructional strategies. But it comes as no surprise that teachers feel more pressure due to the increased scrutiny of teacher and student performance. Policymakers have a tendency to argue that pressure is a desirable component of a system that demands more from teachers. However, most respondents felt that the pressure was not motivating them to be better teachers. In addition to the negative effects on teacher motivation and the increased pressure, accountability mandates may exacerbate other consequences of the accountability system. For example, sources of pressure that include frequent testing, public reporting of test scores, and labeling of schools as low-performing only work to highlight the mechanisms that have negative impacts on teacher work efforts and professionalism.

The data from this study suggest that accountability has caused a reduction in teacher discretion over classroom decisions and an overall decrease in professional satisfaction. The aggressive accountability system seeks to remedy the ills of schools by implementing a policy of sanctions and rewards that cripple teacher autonomy. The NCLB policy places tighter control over teacher work in the classroom and the vast majority of teachers commented on the issue of autonomy under accountability and felt that they had decreased autonomy. Some proponents of the accountability system argue that a loss of autonomy is not necessarily a negative consequence because it seeks greater uniformity in teacher practice with the goal of more consistent positive student outcomes (Woody et al., 2004). However, the teachers at the charter schools in this study are a reminder of how loss of autonomy can discourage teacher engagement and performance. This research indicates that the charter school teachers feel constrained in their ability to teach and as a consequence have experienced a loss of professional satisfaction.

The charter principals in the study said they felt pressure related to accountability; however, their version of accountability was twofold. They were held accountable to the state but also to their authorizer. This double layer of accountability placed an extra burden on principals when it came to administrative tasks. Just as in traditional public schools, charter schools report to the intermediate school district, which then moves up the chain of command to the super-

intendent of instruction, the state board of education, and finally the state legislature. In addition, charter schools in Michigan receive fiscal, legal, and academic oversight from their authorizer. Charter schools receive performance-based contracts, and they must meet school specific measures in conjunction with school improvement in order for their contracts to be renewed. But principals pointed out that it is the parents who hold the entire system accountable by exercising choice.

Principal attitudes toward accountability-related reforms impacted teachers a great deal. Whenever possible, principals provided capacity building to support teachers with testing implementation and data usage and analysis. Mandated packages were discussed with teachers and they were overall accepting of accountability reforms when they felt they played a role in their adoption at the charter site. Principals reported that teacher-initiated processes received more support throughout the charter schools. Moreover, the sites that implemented site-based decision making tended to view accountability in terms of responsibility to one another as well as to their students.

As the experiences of teachers and administrators bring to fruition, educators did not always respond to accountability according to the assumptions or intentions of the policy. However, their responses did not merely reflect a resistance to the system of accountability and at times compliance, but also an acknowledgment of its complexity. Despite their critiques of the system, teachers and administrators also recognized its benefits. One noticeable result of recent accountability reforms is an increased awareness of issues surrounding student achievement, in large part the result of the AYP system and subsequent publication of school test scores and rankings. Moreover, charter school administrators and teachers show evidence of data usage to make more informed decisions about pedagogy and instructional tasks.

Although public school accountability continues to gain national and federal prominence, concerns remain about how these policies are negatively affecting schools and those in them. Charter schools in particular are founded on the premise of being deregulated and decentralized, yet they are now subject to the same policies as traditional public schools. There is no doubt that public schools must be held accountable, charter schools included. The question is to do so responsibly and fairly. As this study shows, responses to accountability are not as uniform or unilateral as some policymakers would assume them to be. By drawing attention to the inefficiencies within the accountability system, future researchers should examine how to sustain improvements in teaching and learning without alienating educators. Moreover, policymakers may want to rethink what motivates individual teachers and what nurtures their commitment to the profession. As this research suggests, when moving beyond the rhetoric of legislative efforts, accountability has negatively impacted the hoped-for innovation of charter schools in Michigan and charter school teachers' job satisfaction.

## NOTE

1. Principal and teacher interview protocols are available from the author.

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