

Internal Accountability Versus External Accountability: Why Developing an Internally Accountable School is Vitally Important to Long-Term Viability

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Introduction

According to Hill, Lake, & Celio (2002), the theory of loose coupling in education is challenged by the charter school movement. They state:

By making schools' existence dependent on their ability to demonstrate performance, chartering can reward effective combined action and punish unproductive fragmentation. In theory, charter schools, free to improve their methods and forced to maintain their authorizers' support and attract parents, will work hard to say what teachers will do and what students will learn. Also, in theory, charter schools will try to create attractive jobs for teachers and try to recruit teachers who will be happy and productive in the roles available. Moreover, charter schools that cannot come together in these ways will, in theory, be forced by their authorizers and other constituencies either to change or to close their doors (p. 26).

The demands of operating an effective charter school place them in a "unique set of interdependent relationships" (p. 24). According to Hill et al. (2002) to meet the demands of its key stakeholders, charter schools must do the following:

To meet all of these obligations, schools must be able to discipline their internal work. The need to maintain relationships of trust and confidence with the government agencies that authorize them and to retain the support of independent members of their own governing boards as well as of teachers and parents motivate intense internal collaboration that leads to internal accountability. Control over spending and staffing decisions makes internal accountability possible (p. 24).

For the purposes of this article, I utilize Hill et al.'s (2002) definition of internal accountability which they define as, "[a] belief that [a] school's performance depends upon all adults working in concert, leading to **shared** expectations about how the school will operate, what it will provide children, and

who is responsible for what” (p. 3-4). Internal accountability has been found to be a stronger indicator of long-term viability than external accountability in charter schools (Hill et al., 2002; Polk, 2004; Polk, 2006). According to Hill et al. (2002), chartering creates certain pressures that “favor” schools that have collaborative cultures and “trouble” for schools that cannot develop internal accountability. They describe these three pressures that favor internally accountable schools as follows:

- First, responsible authorizing agencies demand to know whether schools are operating as promised and producing positive student results.
- Second, parents choose a charter school because they think it is set up to educate their children in ways they find legitimate. Once children start attending school, not all parents are pleased with what they see. Although few parents pull their children out of charter schools, many insist that the schools keep their promises.
- Third, teachers and administrators accept positions at a charter school on the basis of some understanding of goals and conditions of professional work. They, too, have strong incentives to take action when the school is not operating as promised.

External Accountability

In its January 2012 publication, “Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Charter School Laws, Third Edition”, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NACSA) (<http://www.publiccharters.org>) ranked states according to the strength of their charter school laws. For example, NACSA ranked the District of Columbia 11 out of 41 states and the District of Columbia. As external authorizers, the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board and many charter authorizers across the country take their authorizing responsibilities very seriously in order to ensure that charter school trustees and leaders are fulfilling their schools’ mission and goals to parents, staff and students. Hill et al. (2002) describe these types of authorizers as follows:

Though many authorizers do not take their responsibilities seriously, some do. Those authorizers that make a serious monitoring effort can readily tell when a school is floundering. In general, schools that do not present and fulfill clear promises to parents about climate and instructional program, that do not present themselves clearly to potential staff and live by their promises, or that look shaky to their authorizers are in for serious trouble (p. 28).

Internal Accountability

One of the schools in my dissertation research was the Alain Locke Charter Academy in Chicago, Illinois. In September 2007, the U.S. Department of Education recognized Alain Locke as one of seven schools in the nation that has been successful in closing the achievement gap (www.alainlocke.org). I focused my research on charter school leaders and key stakeholders (i.e., trustees, teachers, and parents) because my initial study indicated that these groups more directly impacted the development of internal accountability. I selected schools based upon their having successfully undergone the renewal process and recommendations from the Chicago Public Schools Charter School Office.

My dissertation research findings implied that the role of the instructional leader and his relationship to key stakeholders (i.e., trustees, teachers, and parents) is essential to the development of strong internal accountability. In addition, the development of relationships among key stakeholders (i.e., other administrators, teachers, trustees, and parents) is also critical to the development of strong internal accountability. My findings also implied that the instructional leaders' ability to create an instructional culture of achievement that leads to strong internal accountability is essential to long-term viability. I used these findings to develop the TEACH the POSSIBILITY Internal Accountability Framework for charter schools: Instructional Culture+Internal Accountability=Collaborative Relationships (i.e., principal leadership, teacher leadership, board leadership, and family engagement) that I use as the foundation of my work with charter school leaders, founding groups, and trustees. Building collaborative professional relationships is essential for creating instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability and close the achievement gap.

Researchers have referred to instructional culture as climate or ethos for decades (Deal & Peterson, 1999). These authors maintain:

[T]he term culture provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't and how teachers feel about their work and their students (Deal & Peterson, 1998, p. 2-3).

Hill et al. (2002) maintain that internal accountability is especially important for schools, "where people play specialized roles and the product—student learning—is not created by one person alone but by many people acting

in combination” (p. 25). The instructional leader’s role in creating an instructional culture of achievement that leads to strong internal accountability and closes the achievement gap is centrally important to long-term success (Hill et al., 2002; Polk, 2004; 2006).

Conclusion

At the end of my dissertation study in 2006, one question remained that I believed merited future study. The question is: How does external accountability help to facilitate internal accountability? I define external accountability as the role of the charter authorizing agent. To date, one of my major findings indicates that external accountability helps to facilitate internal accountability as follows:

- It provides charter schools with the impetus to examine the effectiveness of their professional working relationships (i.e., school leaders, teachers, parents, and trustees) in order to create instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability and close the achievement gap as the charter authorizer has the authority to extend or revoke the charter.

However, timing is everything, and the responsibility to become internally accountable is ultimately upon the charter school and not the charter school authorizer. According to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), charter authorizers have two important decisions that they make regarding chartering. NACSA states as follows:

There are two critical decisions that an authorizer must make in the life of every charter school. The first is whether to approve the application for a charter. The second is whether to renew the charter at the end of its term. These decisions are challenging both substantively and politically. On the substance, the decisions require expertise around educational program and performance, financial management, and organizational capacity. Merit-based decision making depends on independent judgment as well as expertise (<http://www.qualitycharters.org/authorizer-development/what-we-d0>).

According to Hill et al. (2002), some charter schools struggle with the belief that it is the responsibility of their external authorizer to intercede and resolve their problems. The authors maintain: “Some schools will never overcome the expectation that someone on the outside (for example, a school board or district central office) will intervene to solve their problems. Few of these survive, though some are still in existence” (p. 29). Therefore, I would argue that in order to help ensure long-term viability, charter school leaders and

trustees must undergo the essential work to create instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability and close the achievement gap; however, this work must be proactive, deliberate, reflective, and, most importantly, well-timed.

References

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