

**CHARTER SCHOOLS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF EMPOWERMENT
WITHIN THE OPERATION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS**

Steve P. Jefferson

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An educator is one who is dedicated to the improvement of all students no matter how they may be perceived by others. Educators are innovative and find ways to communicate their message to all people. The ultimate educator is someone who will sacrifice for the benefit of others. Their rewards are in their students' growth. When they leave this earth, there is a definite loss. Not many people can live up to this standard, but one who did was the late Dr. Ron Hockwalt. I dedicate this book to him and thank him for his guidance and inspiration. He will be missed by all.

I wish to thank Dr. Keith Larrick and Virginia Stewart for making my experience at Discovery Charter School enjoyable. Thank you to Dr. Joy Bjerke for mentoring me through this project. Appreciation goes also to Dr. Michael Ramos for his confidence in me, and to Dr. Don Hays for his critical eye and skillful editing. I also extend a deserved thanks to Dr. Barbara Peterson. Her tremendous leadership was key to the completion of my doctoral work and dissertation.

Finally, I must acknowledge my parents. My mother and father have been extremely supportive through all of my endeavors. Their love has helped me achieve goals I never imagined.

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CHAPTER 1

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

The charter school movement has captured the attention of urban, suburban, and rural communities across America. Reports from the U.S. Department of Education estimate that nearly 2,695 charter schools serve 684,495 students in 36 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (Center for Education Reform 2003).

According to Nathan (1996), Ray Budde, an educator, used the metaphor “charter” in 1975 to describe innovative schools. Budde suggested school boards give innovative teachers permission to create an alternative instructional program. He compared this concept to early explorers who reported their discoveries to royal sponsors. The charter idea—innovative programs created by teachers—sparked the interest of educational reform advocates all around the country.

Minnesota initiated charter school reform in 1991. Over time, this adoption of charter-school legislation created innovative public school choices (Nathan 1996). Following Minnesota’s lead, other states began to question conventional educational practices. This ignited a movement that has spread across the nation.

Hassel (1999) reports that charter proponent Ted Kolderie’s recommendations for Minnesota in 1991 became the prototype for charter school reform in other states. Many of Kolderie’s principles initiated regulatory waivers, delineation of fiscal/legal autonomy, and performance expectations for charters.

The charter school movement has reached new heights since its inception in 1991. The U.S. Department of Education’s first-year report of 1997 (part of a four-year national study on charters) interviewed educators in 225 charter schools in ten states. The report revealed that over sixty percent of charter schools had fewer than two hundred students. These charters were primarily new schools, although some existing public schools had converted to charter status. Additionally, the report revealed that charters were more racially diverse. However, charters enrolled slightly fewer students with special needs than traditional schools in the states (U.S. Department of Education 1997).

In 1997, the Hudson Institute produced a survey supported by data from students, teachers, and parents of fifty charters in ten states. According to the survey, charter schools were considered a haven for children who suffered negative educational experiences elsewhere. Furthermore, this research revealed that sixty percent of parents surveyed agreed charters were better than their children’s previous schools. These findings were evident in terms of teaching quality, individual

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attention from teachers, curriculum, discipline, parental involvement, and academic standards (Vanourek et al. 1997).

Nathan's (1996) book on charter schools, entitled *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education*, cited three important factors for the rapid progression of charter school growth. First, states such as California, Colorado, and Minnesota have renewed charter agreements because of achievement gains in educational outcomes. These efforts also included improvements in academic achievement among students from economically depressed communities. Second, the implementation of charter schools has stimulated new ideas in educational reform. For example, Massachusetts charter laws granting applicants the ability to apply directly to the state board for a charter helped convince Boston to create its own "Pilot School" program. The last factor in the charter school movement's growth was the implementation of charter proposals by civil rights and advocacy groups in socioeconomically "at-risk" communities. Organizations such as the National Urban League (2003) and the Association for Community Organization Reform Now (ACORN) (2003) have led the charge in this area of educational reform. As more states join the charter school movement, there is great speculation about upcoming legislation. After surveying education policy experts in fifty states, Mintrom and Vergari (1997) presented a report at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association entitled *Political Factors Shaping Charter School Laws*. The study revealed the following data: (a) charter legislation is readily considered by states with poor test scores and Republican legislative control; and (b) support for strong legislation has increased the chances for some states to adopt stronger laws in the charter school movement.

The term "strong laws" refers to states in which charter proponents empower a wide variety of groups to start a charter school. These groups are also given an opportunity to petition entities other than the local school board to obtain charter status. Subsequently, this power gives charter schools autonomy in their curriculum, teaching practices, and operations. It also authorizes the creation of a large number of new institutions (Mintrom and Vergari 1997).

By contrast, "weak laws" limit state legislatures and the range of groups eligible to initiate charter schools. In addition, these laws allow only existing public schools to form charters. As a result, local school boards are given veto power over charter schools in their jurisdictions and limits are placed upon the number of new charters (Hassel 1999).

States with strong charter school laws are an example of the recent proliferation of charters throughout the nation. For example, Arizona and California were given autonomy to grant multiple charter-granting agencies. The freedom to grant multiple charters has motivated many education reform advocates to open new schools. As a result, this development has given some charter schools a level of funding consistent with the statewide per pupil average (U.S. Department of Education 1998).

The threat of vouchers and bipartisan support for charters has forced some advocates of educational reform to initiate union-charters. The American Federation of Teachers (1996) chapters in Houston and Dallas have inaugurated several charter schools. In addition, the National Education Association (2003) has allocated \$1.5 million to assist members in starting charter schools. According

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to educational reform activist Joe Nathan (1996), “Charters offer teachers a brand of empowerment, employee ownership, and governance that might be enhanced by union assistance” (96).

Many parents, teachers, and community leaders searching for educational programs that produce measurable results form charter schools. Local sponsoring educational agencies or school districts can approve charter contracts. Thus, students attend charter schools by choice and parents are expected to participate as volunteers (Birkett 2000).

The choice of educational programs and curriculum has attracted many educational reform advocates to charter schools. Curriculum “alternatives” such as the Montessori theory have been adopted by a large number of charter schools throughout the nation (Becker, Nakagawa, and Corwin 1997). This curriculum model is based on the universal teaching of Maria Montessori. Her theories relating to the early cognitive development of a child’s mind and gross motor skills have been instrumental in establishing innovative curriculum choices.

The nonsectarian marketing base of charter schools provides an organizational structure free from routine government restrictions. Nonsectarian is defined as not supporting a particular religious group and its beliefs. Charter schools produce curriculum that incorporates decisions from the entire school faculty. Subsequently, these institutions must achieve academic success within a five-year period or the sponsors can revoke their charter (Birkett 2000).

The charter school movement attracted private management companies seeking to benefit financially from educational reform in the twenty-first century. Private management companies became more involved in this viable market. Since 1997, more than two dozen private companies increased their share of a “more hospitable and entrepreneurial market” (Nathan 1996, 8). Boston-based Advantage Schools, Inc. (2003) runs charter schools in New Jersey, Arizona, and North Carolina. According to Stecklow (1997), the Education Development Corporation managed nine nonsectarian charter schools in Michigan in 1997.

Columbia University Professor Frank Smith (1997) viewed the charter school movement as a chance to involve the entire community in the education process. He suggested the movement will redesign schools and convert them to “client-centered, learning cultures” (B1). Furthermore, Smith admired the Advocacy Center Design process used by state-appointed Superintendent Laval Wilson to transform four failing New Jersey schools in 1997. This process allowed Wilson to involve community leaders and parents in key decisions about curriculum. Smith regarded Wilson’s effort as a positive example of community-involvement and empowerment. In addition, Smith argued building stronger communities via newly designed institutions creates a favorable learning environment for students, parents, and teachers (Smith 1997).

One vital factor in the development of charter schools is community empowerment. State mandates and recent legislation empowered communities to develop charter schools for social and educational reform. In 2000, Heather Koger Devich documented a case study that revealed the results of an Arizona inner-city community’s struggle to provide adequate education to its children. The NFL/YET Academy in Arizona was the answer to that community’s debilitating problems with

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drugs, violence, and school dropout. As a result, this venture became an effective community-supported project that offered a viable model for other groups facing similar challenges.

Devich discovered in her study that community empowerment played a significant role in the way students were educated. She described the following pertinent variables that contributed to the development of a successful charter school: “(1) the critical impetus that finally mobilized the community, (2) the reasons a Montessori hands-on school curriculum was embraced, and (3) the improvements in student performance” (2000, 7). Devich discovered the community rallied to offer hope for the future education of inner-city children, the Montessori theory was embraced because of its high academic standards, and student performance improved because the community was involved in creating the school’s curriculum. Furthermore, in her findings, Devich disclosed that community-empowered schools must demonstrate the following criteria:

“(1) people who can support a common mission statement; (2) individuals committed to work long-term together; and (3) people who submit their egos to the common good, and engage in open communication, conflict resolution, and arbitration” (2000, 95). Finally, Devich challenged other communities to study these same variables that pertain to community empowerment (Devich 2000).

In 1996, the Little Hoover Commission conducted a study on educational reform in California. The study revealed California public schools were not meeting the educational goals of students. In addition, the Commission suggested the charter school movement could help address the shortcomings of today’s educational system. The Commission visited twenty-six charter schools in California and discovered strong community links occurred when teachers, parents, and others were given an opportunity to implement their own programs and procedures (Little Hoover Commission 1996).

Such was the case in Tracy, California. In January 1999, the city was faced with a dilemma. A federal prison was slated for construction on two hundred acres known as the “antenna farm” because it was once used by the Federal Aviation Administration in controlling aircraft entering the San Francisco airspace. The mayor of the city contacted Keith Larrick, Superintendent of the Tracy Unified School District, and asked him to develop alternative solutions to cultivate this area (Van Der Meer 2002).

Larrick decided this was an excellent opportunity to incorporate his innovative strategies for educational reform. His vision of combining industry and business with education led to the inception of the Tracy Learning Center. Discovery Charter School was the first phase of the Tracy Learning Center. This school has attempted to address the educational needs of the community. The campus also provided an opportunity for high-tech industry to become actively involved in youth education. The charter/district network was expected to embrace the business philosophies of companies such as Compaq, NEC, and Siemens with a standard educational curriculum (Stackhouse-Hite 2003).

The charter/district network could become a model for other communities interested in building alliances with agencies dedicated to meeting the educational needs of children. Larrick developed a unique way to form a partnership among businesses, government agencies, and a local school district. In addition, this joint venture between the Tracy Unified School District and California established a

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rare unification in the charter school arena. Tracy Unified School District is one of only a handful of public school districts to collaborate with charters. Through the collaboration of the Tracy Unified School District with a charter and local businesses, Larrick hopes to provide valuable resources to promote student learning within the community of Tracy. I selected Discovery Charter School to study because of its fifth- to eighth-grade setting, group-dynamics teaching philosophy, and the Montessori theory-based curriculum. These same factors existed in Devich's study of the NFL/Yet Academy in Arizona. Additionally, I wanted to compare and contrast the same variables that Devich found in an inner-city school system in Arizona with what existed in Tracy, California (Van Der Meer 2002).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Throughout the nation, public schools are faced with issues of accountability and governance. Additionally, public schools must find viable ways to meet the educational needs of all children, regardless of social and environmental conditions. In response to the growing concern with public education, charter schools provide options for parents and children. Traditional schools are compelled to focus more closely on student achievement and incorporate ideas about accountability. As a result, the charter school movement is an alternative form of public schooling.

The goals of charter schools are to lift restraints found in public schools and improve the academic performance of students. According to Nathan (1996), "Charter schools are designed to give significant autonomy to individual schools and, in turn, to hold those schools accountable for results" (9). Nathan adds, "A charter is essentially a contract, negotiated between those people starting the school and the official body authorized to approve the charter. The charter spells out how the school will be run, what will be taught, how success will be measured, and what students will achieve" (Nathan 1996, 9).

Parents and educators must come to know if, in fact, the charter school movement will improve the academic dilemma of public education. Parents and educators also need to know if charter/district networks along with community empowerment will improve student learning.

Previous studies have evaluated the need for educational reform. Children throughout the nation have demonstrated difficulties with the current educational practices of the public education system (Hassel 1999). This particular study took an in-depth look at how one partnership among several businesses, the public school district, and a charter school facilitated academic success among students.

This study documents the results of one rural community's efforts to meet the challenges of educational reform. Therefore, it also provides strategies and suggestions for other communities interested in creating an innovative learning environment for children. Heather Koger Devich's (2000) case study documented the results of one inner-city community's endeavors to produce a quality educational program for children by creating a community-supported charter school. Her case study described the methods used by the community to establish a charter school under adverse conditions.

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Leadership expert Ken Blanchard has stated, “The real essence of empowerment comes from releasing the knowledge, experience, and motivational power that is already in people but is being underutilized” (Carol Roberts 2001, CD). Leadership consultants, Bennis and Nanus (1999) remarked in their book, *Managing the Dream*, “that empowerment is the collective effect of leadership. In organizations with effective leaders, empowerment is most evident in four themes: (a) people feel significant; (b) learning and competency matter; (c) people are part of a community; and (d) work is exciting” (15). They strongly suggested that the journey to empowerment is one of the most challenging any group of people can undertake.

This particular study is a quasi-replication of Heather Koger Devich’s (2000) research, completed at the University of San Francisco, in which she described the variables of community empowerment as they pertained to a charter school in Arizona. This study also identifies the affiliated partnerships with both district and for-profit businesses that sought to increase the performance of educational reform through parental and community involvement. The study of the organizational theories of power and empowerment is vital to the improvement of organizational leadership. According to leadership expert Ann Howard (1998), empowerment implies giving away power. Power should rest further out from the central coordination of the organization. Community empowerment allows parents and community leaders an opportunity to become involved in the decision-making process of designing school curriculum. Therefore, examining public education will help to establish the importance of community involvement and empowerment in educational reform.

This particular study is dissimilar from Devich’s (2000) study primarily because this study is based in a rural community in California. In addition, I did not address the theoretical basis of Paulo Freire’s (1970, 1994) work in Devich’s study. My rationale was that Paulo Friere’s work applied to social improvements for oppressed communities. The community of Tracy did not encounter these same factors. Research questions and variables have been adapted to the specific purposes of this study.

The purpose of this study is to describe the variables that contributed to the establishment of a charter school in an urban Arizona district and in a rural California district, noting the similarities and dissimilarities, and to disclose the factors used to justify the implementation of the Montessori method. Another purpose of this study is to describe the guidelines for maintaining a charter school, and the evaluative methods and factors used in the school’s unique experience with staffing and funding.

The following research questions elucidated the factors involved in charter school development within two different environments, one urban, the other rural:

1. To what extent were the variables that contributed to the establishment of a charter school in an urban Arizona district and in a rural California district similar?
2. To what extent did the decision makers justify the implementation of the Montessori theory of education through similar factors?
3. To what extent were the procedures used to implement and maintain a charter school from the fifth through eighth grades alike?

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4. To what extent were the evaluation methods used to ensure students' academic achievement similar?
5. To what extent were the factors in the schools' unique experiences with staffing and funding similar?

This qualitative study is significant because it analyzes the importance of community involvement and empowerment in the decision-making process of curriculum development. The study describes the characteristics of a community that provided valuable resources to promote student learning. It also describes the behavior and attributes used by this community to establish a charter/district network model in building alliances with agencies dedicated to meeting the educational needs of children. These descriptions provide a source of information to those interested in organizational leadership and school governance. As a resource of qualitative information, this study was designed to give insight and knowledge to aspiring communities seeking to implement the organizational theory area of empowerment through the charter school model. As a result of this case study, communities seeking knowledge and insight in today's charter school movement will have a valuable resource in providing alternatives to traditional public education that empower parents, community leaders, and teachers to give vital input for educational practices throughout the country.

Like any case study, there are limitations in the degree to which the results of the study can be generalized. In this study, the data were available for only one charter school. Other schools could be included in future studies. Another limitation is the use of one-on-one interviews. Interviews are time consuming and require an interviewer to be skilled in the interview process. Since the interviewees may have biases or differences in their willingness to participate, the instrument must be administered in a way that ensures consistency.

1.3 Organization of the Book

This chapter has introduced key concepts on educational reform and charter schools. The significance of the study provides insights into the current perceptions of community-empowered and affiliated partnerships between school districts, businesses, and charters. The rest of the book examines the area of empowerment in organizational theory and how it impacts organizational leadership...

Chapter 2 provides a review of applicable literature in the organizational theory of power and empowerment as it relates to the charter school movement. Chapter 3 describes the methodology adapted from Devich's (2000) descriptive study on community empowerment in the area of charter schools. Chapter 4 reveals the responses from the Tracy Unified School District's former superintendent, the director of learning, the curriculum director of Discovery Charter School, the teachers, and the stakeholders, which, collectively, provide a wealth of knowledge that will serve as a basis for further studies on community empowerment in educational reform. Chapter 5 provides conclusions and illustrates implications for action in other communities pursuing educational reform through charter school formation.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth examination of community empowerment within charter schools. It examines findings in literature that clarify concepts related to: (a) history of the charter school movement, (b) community empowerment, (c) governance and decision making, (d) accountability, (e) Montessori theory, (f) Devich's study, (g) charter schools in rural areas, (h) charter school laws in Arizona, (i) charter school laws in California, (j) comparisons of California and Arizona charter schools laws, (k) special education services, (l) student improvement and evaluation, and (m) commitment of founders and staff.

The charter school movement is a recent phenomenon viewed as one alternative to public education. Examination of the organizational structure of charter schools reveals that the philosophies of charter school founders vary. The one commonality charter schools share is the commitment to educate all students. In addition, many charter school advocates support a concept of public education that is knowledge-driven instead of entitlement-driven. Consequently, state charter school laws target the enhancement of academic achievement for every child (Center for Education Reform website 2003).

2.2 History

The origin of charter schools is traced back to Ray Budde's (1988) book entitled *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*. The author focused on an alternative education movement that grew in the 1960s and 1970s. Concerned parents expressed interest in the creation of a school format operated by committed teachers. Budde suggested that alternative schools were effective for multiple reasons, including the element of choice in attendance.

Budde further developed the alternative schools concept by adding a formalized contract between teachers and school districts. This union between the two groups placed the idea of alternative schools in the context of changing the ways schools are governed. Budde (1988) believed charter school education achieved the following four goals: it "(1) redefined the roles of teachers and administrators, (2) changed the way school boards operate, (3) improved curriculum on a continuing basis, and (4) forced the identification of the knowledge base for the entire school curriculum" (33).

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Budde's innovative views of permitting teachers to enter into a charter with local school boards to operate alternative education programs were articulated in a 1988 speech by American Federation of Teachers' President Albert Shanker. Shanker adopted Budde's beliefs and supported the idea of teachers operating under educational guidelines developed by parents and community groups (Center for Education Reform 2001).

By 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass charter school legislation. According to Nathan (1996), a former newspaper reporter named Ted Kolderie initiated the first charter school proposal for Minnesota legislators in 1990. California followed Minnesota in 1992, becoming the second state to pass charter school legislation (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek 2000).

The initial theories behind charter schools were modified from Budde's and Shanker's original ideas. Charter school legislation varies from state to state, but usually follows common threads (Bierlein and Muholland 1995). The organizers, who may be parents, teachers, or community leaders, commit to an educational approach guaranteed to produce measurable results. A sponsoring educational agency or a school district approves this contract. In return, the school must achieve academic results or the charter can be revoked. Students attend charter schools by choice and parents are often required to commit to some level of participation as volunteers (Birkett 2000).

Charter school proponents are divided into two distinct camps. Many charter school advocates see the movement as an experiment that allows the identification of methods and practices duplicated by traditional schools. This implies some charter schools are mirroring traditional schools in curriculum practices. However, other charter school supporters see charters as an opportunity to force change throughout existing traditional school practices. These proponents strongly feel that if parents are permitted to engage in the decision-making process of school reform, innovative concepts on curriculum will emerge for children (Specter 1999).

The enthusiasm for charters is passionate among believers, but charter schools also have opponents. Some opponents fear charter schools are isolated, elite campuses that leave other children to endure mediocre education. Other opponents worry that charter schools are a backdoor way of subsidizing religious teaching with public dollars. In addition, some public education administrators also believe relaxed or nonexistent rules are an invitation to corruption, graft, and scandal (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek 2000).

These concerns have forced charter school advocates to investigate ways to involve the community in educating children. Community empowerment is a key component linked to the success of the charter school movement. The organizational theory of power and empowerment plays a major role in the decision-making process of creating charter schools. Consequently, empowerment helps to create community-based support for charter schools needed to successfully educate children.

2.3 Community Empowerment

The charter school movement has created many schools operated by community-based nonprofit organizations. Many of these nonprofits have provided invaluable resources for charter schools across

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the nation. Nonprofits are organizations that participate in community projects without any incentive to earn profits. These partnerships have developed new strategies for community-based organizations (CBOs) and charter schools to work in collaboration for the improvement of public education (U.S. Charter Schools 1998a).

Nonprofits, especially those serving families and children, have established partnerships with schools to increase the impact of their programs and services. At the same time, school leaders understand that children and families face many challenges. Students' successes hinge on the ability of the school and community to unite and overcome learning barriers (Center for Education Reform website 2002).

The charter school movement has given vitality to the increase in school-community collaboration. Charter school organizers have designed schools free of barriers that have historically impeded school-community collaboration. In the past, community-based groups encountered resistance from schools when attempts were made to build a collaboration or partnership (Nathan 1994). Now, many community organizations play vital roles in the establishment of new charter schools.

The area of power/empowerment in organizational theory defines the premise of community empowerment. Power, as defined by organizational theorists, is the capacity to control the attitudes and behaviors of others. Empowerment enables all participants to be involved in the decision-making process. Community empowerment is the mobilization of a community to provide improvements in educational resources for children. Charter school advocates consider traditional school system practices as the power structure in the field of education that discourages competition for other educational alternatives (McCune 1994). Therefore, public schools for over the last four decades have dictated the educational parameters of children nationwide. Nevertheless, charter school proponents advocate empowering parents, teachers, and community leaders to create innovative schools for the academic performance of students. This theory of organizational development involves the entire community in the decision-making process of educating children. Consequently, the community is able to make decisions about the way its schools are operated and governed.

2.4 Governance and Decision Making

The Center for Education Reform (1998) estimated that 1,129 charter schools existed nationwide in September of 1998. Many schools were found in the South and West. More than half of the charter schools were in three states: Arizona, California, and Michigan. Another quarter of charter schools were found in four other states: Colorado, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas. The number of charters has increased since 1991. However, these schools represented only 0.5 percent of public school students in charter school states during the 1996-1997 school year. It is unclear how many charters were in rural areas (Center for Education Reform 1998).

This increase of charter schools throughout the nation has produced different concepts on school operation and philosophies. In addition, many of these states give charter schools considerable

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autonomy, while others exercise more control. Charter school sponsors may be school districts, state education agencies, teachers, parents, or other community members (Molnar 1997).

Like other site-based management reforms, the charter concept grew out of a critique of the organizational principles of traditional schools and makes three organizational assumptions about education. The first assumption involves the nature of the educational task (Sarason 1998). Most charter school advocates promote reform through decentralization and argue that education according to the “one-size-fits-all” approach is unlikely to work well. The “one size-fits-all” approach refers to the concept that decision-making procedures are centralized and fit all children in public education. Bruce Fuller (2000), in his book entitled *Inside Charter Schools: The Paradox of Radical Decentralization*, remarked, “It is almost impossible for traditional public schools to make changes when elected boards find themselves restricted by state education codes, union contracts, and highly regulated categorical aid programs” (28). He adds, “Nor is it easy to find more than a few parents who participate in this highly bureaucratized form of school decision making” (28). Fuller believes that decentralized decision-making practices in public education will help to meet the academic needs of all children.

The second organizational assumption regarding education addresses the motivations of stakeholders. In general, charter school advocates feel teachers, administrators, students, and parents are more likely to make strong personal investments in schools if they have a high degree of influence in the school operations and decision-making practices (Fuller 2000). As a result, charter school stakeholders are more likely to support the school’s mission and methods if they are involved in the decision-making process (Chubb and Moe 1990).

The third organizational assumption of charter school advocates regarding education deals with how to design organizations around a particular task. The traditional hierarchical structure of schools makes sense only if one believes that education is essentially a routine task in which one can prescribe “one-size-fits-all” educational interventions for large groups of students. This concept conflicts with charter school advocates’ assessments of educational tasks and is a highly visible variable. Most charter school advocates argue that charter schools are mini-learning institutions that concentrate on decentralizing decision-making practices to achieve academic success for students (Fuller 2000).

Sarason (1998) states that Director of Educational Reform Abby Weiss noted in a first-year report that charter schools experienced problems with governance in the following areas: (a) creation of an efficient, collaborative decision-making structure, and (b) isolation from other charter schools. Sarason also reports that policymaker Elizabeth Steinberger examined districts and charters in three states in 1997 (Colorado, Oregon, and Wisconsin). According to Sarason (1998), Steinberger discovered that the success of charters relied heavily on their ability to balance the quest for autonomy with the need for accountability.

WestEd (2003), a nonprofit research, development, and service agency, conducted a two-year study on the governance issues within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The final report, entitled *Transforming Los Angeles Schools: An Evaluation of the Los Angeles Unified School District*, revealed that structural barriers in governance inhibited educational reforms from taking hold in the

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district. These findings were attributed to the top-down bureaucratic policies that governed the school district. In addition, bureaucratic policies and a lack of decentralized decision-making practices among administrators created political gridlock. As a result, WestEd recommended LAUSD develop stronger community support networks and decentralize decision making. These recommendations were expected to take place over an eight-to-ten-year period (WestEd 2003).

Decision-making practices play a significant role in the development of charter schools. For example, decisions regarding curriculum choices demonstrate the importance of governance. Charter school advocates view this process as a viable way to illustrate accountability within school systems. As a result, accountability helps to maintain vision and direction for future educational practices.

2.5 Accountability

One of the most complicated issues facing the charter school movement is student accountability. A Finn, Bierlein, and Manno (1996) report entitled *Charter Schools in Action: What Have We Learned?* outlined two categories for charter school accountability. The first category of accountability is the “macro” efforts by state agencies or private groups to create accountability systems that appraise the accomplishments and failures of charter school programs. The second category of accountability, “micro” efforts, is the way individual charter schools collect and provide evidence of their results, as promised within the terms of their contract or charter (Vanourek et al. 1997).

According to Vanourek et al. (1997), former U.S. Education Secretary Lamar Alexander refers to accountability as “old-fashioned horse-trading” (2)—the horse-trade of operational freedom in return for tangible performance, a combination seldom seen in conventional public education. They strongly advocate that this combination appeals to many of the challenges with charter schools. As a result, research has garnered evidence that much of the combination is within uncharted territory. At either the “macro” or “micro” level it is difficult to determine how well American charter schools are actually performing. According to Vanourek et al. (1997), the evidence is so fragmented that accurate data do not exist.

The 1997 document entitled *President Clinton’s Call for American Education in the 21st Century* revealed recommendations for public school choice and accountability in public education (Clinton 1997). The document disclosed that public school choices should be more flexible to both parents and students. The concept of “one-size-fits-all” in American education has created a resurgence of options in public school choices. A greater concern for higher standards has propelled charter schools into the forefront of promising strategies toward accountability in public education (Center of Education Reform 2002).

The research of Vanourek et al. (1997) also revealed changes that have occurred over the last third of the twentieth century in the way educational quality is judged. Formerly, educational reform experts viewed quality in terms of resources, services, and efforts. However, in recent years, policymakers have placed a great deal of emphasis on what students achieve. Therefore, according to Vanourek et al., advocates of these concerns share the following core strategies: “(a) specify what all children are to learn, (b) ascertain whether they have learned it, and (c) hold everyone involved in the

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process accountable” (1997, 17). Thus, the end results are the consequences of achieving or failing to achieve the intended results.

The Vanourek et. al. report revealed that this approach of accountability has found its way into today’s educational reform efforts. The educational reform movements of the 1970s established minimum competency tests for students. Subsequently, this example of educational reform spread to such areas as the preparation of teachers and administrators. As a result, teachers and administrators are required to pass knowledge-based tests to demonstrate competency.

The nation’s governors embraced this results-oriented approach in their 1986 report, *Time for Results*. It received further impetus in 1989 when President George H.W. Bush convened the nation’s governors to establish national education goals. Bush’s efforts led to the setting of national standards in education (Vanourek et al. 1997).

Educational reform activist Bryan C. Hassel (1999) felt stronger charter laws would garner support for the issue of accountability. Hassel’s studies revealed that states with stronger charter school laws are able to provide evidence of accountability. Therefore, compliance for results and associated consequences have also placed charter schools in a dilemma to produce positive results or lose their chance for renewal. Hassel’s studies also disclosed that stronger laws recognize a distinction between “ends” and “means” and exempt charter schools from many state and district laws, regulations, and contractual provisions.

Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000) reported that typically “stronger” laws establish four general criteria for holding schools accountable: “(a) the school must produce satisfactory academic achievement by its students on state or district tests, (b) the school must demonstrate success in meeting its academic goals, (c) the school must use public funds, and (d) the school must comply with applicable laws not waived for charter schools” (71-72). In addition, they strongly felt the charter idea was doomed unless states used a variety of ways to monitor the academic performance of schools. Thus, Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000) recommended that government agencies recognize the huge difference between holding schools tightly accountable for results and keeping them on a tight leash with respect to means. According to Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform (1998), “the vast majority of people who started charter schools saw something lacking in the accountability aspect of the traditional school system” (1)

Tom Watkins (1995), director of the Detroit Center for Charter Schools, viewed charter school advocates as one of three types: (a) zealots (like Chester Finn of the Hudson Institute and William Bennett, former Secretary of Education), who believed in the supremacy of market values and private education; (b) entrepreneurs (like the Edison Project charter schools) who wanted to make money from running schools; and (c) child-and teacher-centered reformers, who wanted to expand public-school options and improve all schools. In addition, the Center for Education Reform’s (2000) national and state studies evaluated the effect of charter schools on home districts. The studies revealed “positive ripple effect” (1) manifested in low-cost reforms (like informational campaigns and teacher retraining), high-cost reforms (like full-day kindergarten), increased accountability, improved

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academic programs, and adoption of innovative, “charter-like” practices (American Federation of Teachers 1996).

Accountability serves as the backbone to educational reform. Charter school supporters strongly advocate that if schools are to become accountable, they will need a viable curriculum. This curriculum must motivate children to meet their academic needs of the future.

2.6 Montessori Theory

Across the nation, the Montessori curriculum has been the top choice of many charter schools (Becker, Nakagawa, and Corwin 1997). The early philosophies surrounding the charter school movement were developed based upon the research of Maria Montessori (1994). Her concepts reflect the practical ways children acquire skills in learning. As a result, the Montessori strategies are used by many around the world and were the theories behind the charter school movement in the early years. Montessori’s success as a prominent surgeon helped her to focus on other areas of medicine such as brain research. In addition, she was one of the first medical physicians to integrate brain research with children’s learning styles. This expertise helped Montessori develop an effective research-based curriculum to meet the educational needs of all children (Devich 2000).

Montessori’s research led to the writing of early works, *The Secret of Childhood* (1966) and *The Discovery of the Child* (1967). She documented the development of innovative teaching methods and materials. Her scientific training and observation are discussed in the book, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (Standing 1998). Montessori was a pioneer in the field of brain research in education. She discussed the functioning of the brain in data taken from her early research in the book *The Absorbent Mind* (1994). Montessori explained that from birth to seven years, a child’s mind absorbs all stimuli rapidly without judgment of good or bad information. In addition, this process is never again duplicated during one’s life span. According to Montessori’s research, the brain is at its highest and most sensitive stage of learning during this period. She called this stage the “sensitive period.” Montessori developed this theory through observing children in various stages of growth. She believed the cognitive development of children was largely dictated by the biological stages identifiable from changes in the teeth (Devich 2000).

In addition, Montessori also classified the hands as the most vital apparatus for acquiring learning. “The hands are the instrument of man’s intelligence” (27), remarked Montessori (1994). “The refinement of all the senses at this early age is essential, as sensitivity will be permanently lost if not stimulated and developed before seven years. Free and unrestricted movement is essential to the development of the mind, as well as to the development of fine and gross motor control,” (81) explained Montessori (1994).

Recent research has supported Montessori’s philosophy of the absorbent mind. Montessori’s philosophies revealed languages are freely learned during this stage. Therefore, the child will absorb motor and language acquisition skills more easily during this period (Montessori 1994).