

High-Stakes: Findings from a National Study of Life-or-Death Decisions by Charter School Authorizers

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Executive Summary

The rhetoric about charter school accountability is very clear: if charter schools do not meet their performance targets, they will be shut down. But will charter school authorizers - the public bodies empowered by law to oversee charter schools really close charter schools that are not working? The question has been the subject of vigorous debates in the political realm and among academic observers of charter schools. This study aims to shed some empirical light on these important questions. It does so by taking a unique approach: focusing on the high-stakes decisions that charter school authorizers have made about whether to renew, not renew, or revoke the charters of individual charter schools. Drawing on 50 randomly selected examples of such decisions, the study provides new information about how charter school authorizers are carrying out their responsibilities, the factors that influence their approaches, and the implications of experience to date for policies and practices related to high-stakes school accountability.

Data and Methods

The authors compiled a list of all 506 high-stakes decisions made by charter school authorizers nationally as of fall 2001. From this list (using a process described more fully in the main body of the paper), we randomly selected 50 cases for inclusion in the study. With each of these cases, we conducted an extensive interview with a representative of the authorizer. We also interviewed school officials and third-parties, reviewed official documents related to the school and the decision, and surveyed any available media coverage of the decision. These methods yielded a wealth of quantitative and qualitative information about the cases and made it possible for the research team to arrive at "judgments" about the following questions for each case:

1. To what extent did the authorizer set clear, measurable expectations that the school must meet in order to attain renewal or avoid revocation?
2. To what extent did the authorizer gather information that allowed it to determine whether the school met these expectations?
3. To what extent did the authorizer make its decision based on a comparison of actual performance with expectations?

Key Findings (excerpts)

Many authorizers have proven willing to close under-performing schools. Of 506 high-stakes decisions made nationally by fall 2001, 84% resulted in renewal. Though this is a substantial majority, it means that 16%, or 82 times, authorizers were willing to close schools that did not live up to expectations. In our 50 cases, we found only one in which the authorizers failed to close a school despite clear evidence of underperformance. By contrast, we found four cases in which authorizers closed schools where evidence of underperformance was less clear.

While almost all of the decisions we reviewed were "correct," in many cases authorizers lacked one or more of the basic systems needed to make a merit-based decision.

Common problems and challenges prevented authorizers from reaching the ideals of expectation-setting, information-gathering, and merit-based decision-making.

Certain characteristics of authorizers predicted their success at establishing clear expectations, gathering sufficient data, and making merit-based decisions.

Authorizers' activities often lack "transparency," making it difficult for the general public (or researchers) to find out basic information about the terms they have set in charter contracts, the information they have gathered, or the reasons for their decisions.

For more recent information on closed charter schools, see "The Accountability Report 2009: Charter Schools," by the Center for Education Reform, 2009, www.edreform.com.