

Chapter Eleven

Accountability and Oversight

Act 22 states that a charter school “shall be accountable to the parents, the public and the Commonwealth” [24 P.S. §1715-A(2)]. Charter school accountability to parents is achieved largely through parents “voting with their feet” and enrolling their child(ren) in, or removing them from, a charter school. Accountability to the public and the commonwealth manifests itself through various reports, tests, and evaluations designed to monitor and measure charter school performance.

This chapter begins by addressing the various components of the Commonwealth’s charter school accountability plan. Next, we discuss accountability as it relates to a charter school’s mission. We then address how clearly charter schools are delineating their goals and examine how they relate to their mission statement. Finally, we explore whether or not the goals are measurable and examine the scope of evidence used to ascertain the status of their goals.

11.1 Accountability Plan for Pennsylvania Charter Schools

The accountability plan for Pennsylvania charter schools has a number of components that cover the various aspects of accountability. The seven most distinct components of the accountability plan are as follows:

1. Annual report to PDE and host districts as required by 24 P.S. sec. 17-1728-A(b)
2. Student performance on state achievement test
3. Local and state audits
4. Annual financial report
5. Federal grant monitoring visitations
6. School profiles
7. External evaluation by The Evaluation Center

Charter school accountability includes, but is not limited to, students’ scholastic achievement. We distinguish three areas for accountability: (i) *performance accountability*, (ii) *regulatory accountability*, and (iii) *market accountability*

Performance accountability refers to the understanding that charter schools will be accountable for achieving the goals and objectives established in the charter

contract. These goals and objectives should reflect the school's mission and they should be measurable. If they are not measurable, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if they were achieved. Student improvement, in terms of learning and performance on standardized tests, is the most important of these goals and objectives. The publicly available results on the state achievement tests as well as the annual reports that charter schools submit to PDE comprise two forms of reporting on performance accountability.

Regulatory accountability refers to compliance with existing and applicable rules and regulations. The local and state audits, the annual financial report, and the federal grant monitoring visitations are examples of how this form of accountability is being reviewed. The annual reports to PDE also address some aspects of regulatory accountability.

Market accountability refers to the market aspect of this reform where parents are consumers who choose a commodity (i.e., a school for their children). If parents are not satisfied, they will move their child(ren) to another school, and money will follow the child. Schools are suppliers or producers of the commodity in question and, in the education marketplace, the demand will increase for good producers. Charter schools that do not perform well will have few parents choosing to enroll their children and therefore will receive little public funding. According to this logic, poor performing schools will be closed when there is a lack of demand, and schools that perform well will receive more students and more of the public funds that follow the students. Indicators of market accountability are the number of students enrolled in the school (have all places available been filled?) and the size of the waiting list (how many applied but could not get in due to the limited number of available places?).

One important component of the Commonwealth's accountability plan for its charter schools is the external evaluations commissioned by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). In 1998, PDE contracted with The Evaluation Center to conduct an initial evaluation of charter schools. This evaluation was formative in nature and aimed to provide feedback to schools for improvement as well as information for policymakers and oversight agencies to help them strengthen the reform. Act 22 requires that an external evaluation take place five years after the start of the charter school reform. This legislatively mandated evaluation was also contracted to The Evaluation Center and began in April 2001 and will end in October 2003.

11.2 Mission-Driven Schools

PDE requires charter school applicants to "describe the core philosophy or underlying purpose of the proposed school" (PDE, 2001b). The department mandates annual reports, and each charter school is required to list its mission, refer to specific research or philosophical convictions that drive the charter school's mission, describe how the mission statement drives decision making at the school, and describe how the curriculum matches the school's mission.

Our review of school mission statements reveals wide variations. In order to simplify exposition, we have identified nine core themes. Most mission statements

include more than one theme. We have excluded student achievement from our list, since almost all mission statements refer to it in one way or another. The most common themes included the following:

- college preparatory
- science and technology
- bilingual and bicultural education
- family and community
- discipline and responsibility
- leadership
- at-risk students
- career focus
- lifelong learning

As one would expect, these themes tend to appear in clusters. That is, mission statements that include one theme are more likely to also include a related or similar theme. With some exceptions, schools targeting at-risk students tend to reside in low income communities. Moreover, schools targeting at-risk students are more likely than others to emphasize character, community service, other values, and preparation for work. Finally, schools targeting lower grade levels are slightly more likely to focus on character issues, while schools focusing on higher grade levels are slightly more likely to focus on science, technology, and bilingual education.

Our review of charter school mission statements suggests that Pennsylvania charter schools provide a reasonably wide variety of educational choices. A diversity of choices in school profiles is crucial for meaningful school choice.

For more details about stakeholders' perceptions and level of satisfaction with their mission statement, see chapters 6, 7, and 13.

11.3 Demonstrating Success: Goals and Objectives Based on Mission Statement

PDE requires information about a prospective charter school's goals (both academic and nonacademic) in an application for the charter. The application seeks "clear goals with measurable objectives" (PDE, 2001b) and asks how the goals will be measured. PDE's required annual reports include a listing of charter school goals, descriptive information, and evidence about the attainment of goals. One component of these annual reports also asks how the goals are related to Pennsylvania standards of performance (PDE, 2001a).

We analyzed the stated goals and objectives contained in the charter school annual reports submitted to PDE in August 2001 and August 2002. Our analysis first considered the number of goals noted in the annual report. Then we examined the nature of these goals in terms of whether they addressed academic or nonacademic objectives and whether they were process goals or outcome goals. We also assessed how measurable the objectives were. Finally, we examined the appropriateness of the evidence regarding whether or not the goals were met.

A major limitation is that some schools may have presented their goals and the status of attainment in different sections in their annual reports. We can only comment on what was presented to us in the given format. If the pages that we were presented made a specific reference to data elsewhere, we assumed that they

were present. When it was ambiguous whether documentation existed elsewhere, cells were left blank. If a school did not have any goals listed, we did not include them in our analyses. In 2001, 61 schools (of the 66 that were open throughout the 2000-01 year) provided complete data regarding goals in their annual reports. The following year, a total of 65 schools (of the 76 that were open throughout the 2001-02 year) provided data regarding their goals.

Number of goals. According to the contents of the 2000-01 annual reports, the charter schools averaged about 5 goals and/or objectives. Some schools reported only 1 objective, while 1 school reported 13 objectives. Given the wide-reaching mission of the charter schools, the number of goals and objectives indicated in the 2000-01 annual reports seemed insufficient.

The following year PDE revised its annual report format, which gave more emphasis and space to the reporting goals as well as the status of each of the listed goals. The mean number of goals in the 2001-02 reports increased to 7.5, with a range of 1 to 58. Not surprisingly, the 17 schools that utilized the old annual report format had substantially fewer goals listed than the schools that used the new format. Further, it was often difficult to quantify the goals listed in the old report format. Presumably, because the space for listing goals was so limited, it was often filled with compound sentences that obscured each measurable goal. For example “empower students to strengthen their critical thinking, problem solving, social and creative skills” could be seen as either 1, 3, or 4 goals depending on interpretation. The new template suggested that each goal was a separate unit with its own specific status of attainment. Interestingly, there were 9 rows on the template, and the modal number of goals listed was 9. Four schools used their own unique templates, including the school that listed 58 goals.

Academic or nonacademic nature of objectives. We examined the degree to which a school’s goals and objectives are academic vs. nonacademic by determining the percentage that fell into one or the other category. Therefore, if a given school’s annual report listed 10 objectives and 8 of them addressed academic goals, then 80 percent of the schools’ objectives would be academic and 20 percent would be nonacademic. Some examples of academic goals include the following:

- Students will exceed Pennsylvania state standards.
- School level results on the PSSA will increase across all grades and subjects.
- Students will develop their ability to master subject matter and achieve academically.
- All students will speak and write fluently in at least one world language.
- Students will expand their knowledge of their own culture and those of other nations.

Examples of nonacademic goals include the following:

- Students will learn social skills.
- The school will promote character education and teach students about honesty and responsibility.
- Students will develop feelings of self-worth.

- Students will learn and demonstrate respect for the rules of society.
- Students will develop “soft skills” including teamwork, punctuality, and perseverance.

These examples, although they are paraphrased, are based on actual charter school goals found in the annual reports. In 2000-01 we found that around 61 percent of the goals were academic in nature, while 39 percent addressed nonacademic goals. These nonacademic goals often referred to aspects of the school mission. In 2001-02, approximately 57 percent of the goals were academic, while 43 percent were nonacademic. Again, the nonacademic outcomes often involved other aspects of the school’s mission, such as discipline.

Process goals vs. outcome goals. Given that the annual report is intended for an external audience and given that these reports are an important component of the Commonwealth’s accountability plan, we would expect the goals and objectives to focus on outcomes. This, however, was not always the case.

We rated the degree to which a school’s goals are process goals vs. outcome goals. A school identifying goals that were completely process-related would rate 100 percent for process and 0 percent for outcome. A school identifying goals that were evenly divided between process and outcome would rate 50 percent for process and 50 percent for outcome. Examples of process goals include those listed below:

- The school will establish a standards-based curriculum.
- The school will integrate technology into all classes.
- There will be no more than 26 students per class.
- The school will implement a longer school day.
- The school will select a standardized test that aligns with the Pennsylvania state standards.
- The school will hire a full-time reading specialist.

Examples of outcome goals include these:

- Students will demonstrate progress with a significant percentage of IEP objectives.
- Students will develop a sense of self-discipline.
- Children will master or exceed age-appropriate skill development in mathematics.
- Students will achieve in excess of one year's growth each year based on a variety of valid assessments.
- Eighty percent of students will demonstrate a gain in their Terra Nova math scores.
- The number of violent incidents will decrease.

Charter schools are given greater autonomy in determining how the schools will operate as well the curriculum they will use and the instructional methods that will be utilized. In exchange for this autonomy, the schools are accountable for outcomes. For this reason, the process goals should be of little or no interest to oversight agencies. What is important is whether or not the charter schools are achieving the outcomes promised. Therefore, in the annual report we should expect to see only outcome goals. The process-oriented goals might be mentioned in some sections of the report including improvement plans or plans for the coming year. They should not be included among the general goals and objectives.

Our breakdown of the reported goals for the 1999-00 reports found that 57 percent were process-oriented goals and 43 percent were outcome goals. The following year's reports yielded very similar findings, with 58 percent process-oriented goals and 42 percent outcome goals. This suggests that the charter schools still need to be clearer in the way they present their goals in the annual reports.

However, the average number of goals per school increased about 36 percent from 2001 to 2002. Thus, schools tended to report more outcome goals and more process goals. Again, the modal number of goals was 9, the same as the number of rows on the template regarding goals and status of attainment. The school staff may have felt obligated to fill all 9 rows with goals and thus included less relevant, process-oriented goals.

Scope of coverage. We rated the extent to which a charter school's reported goals covered the various aspects of the school's mission (see Figure 11:1). We rated each charter school on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 referring to no goals or

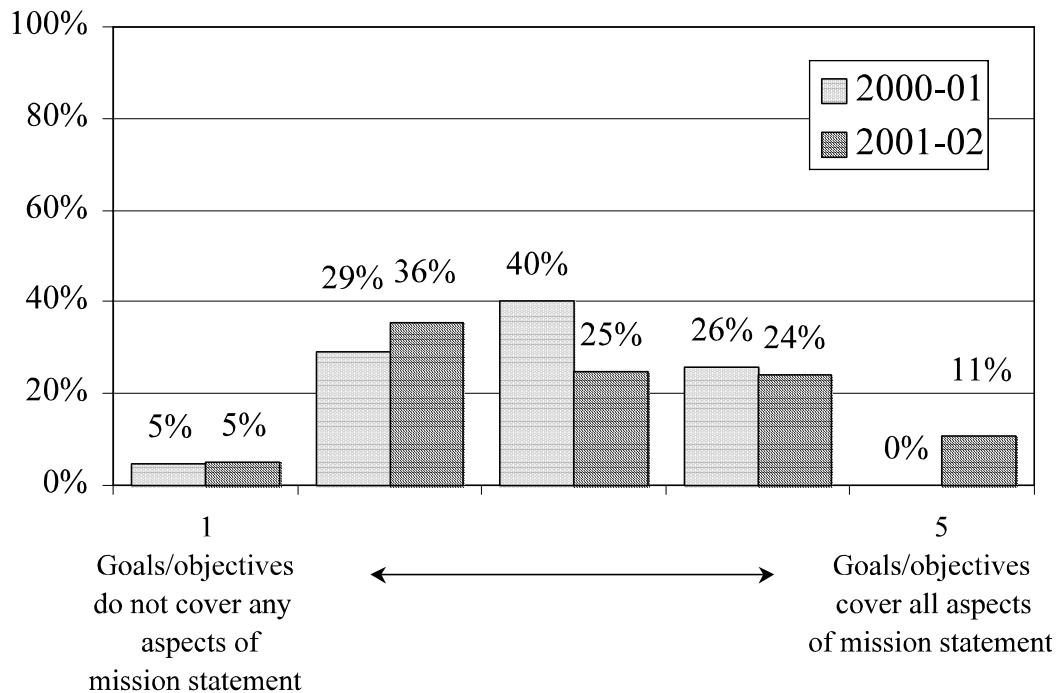


Figure 11:1 Ratings of Goals and Objectives in Terms of the Scope and Coverage of School Mission

objectives related to the mission statement and 5 equivalent to all aspects of the mission statement addressed by goals and objectives. Given that many mission statements were quite nebulous, it was difficult to reliably assess what proportion of each mission statement was covered by its respective goals.

Our analysis of the 2000-01 reports indicated that the schools had a mean score of 2.9. More than 60 percent of charter schools rated 3 or 4, while slightly fewer than 5 percent rated 1. None of the schools received a 5. The 2001-02 reports had a mean score of 3.0, with 5 percent receiving a score of 1 and 10.5 percent receiving a score of 5. Reliability issues notwithstanding, this indicates some improvement in terms of scope and coverage.

Measurability of goals and objectives. We obtained the charter school mission statements and goals from information reported in each school's annual reports to PDE. It is likely that many charter schools have specified goals in addition to those enumerated in these annual reports. The charter school application calls for "clear goals with measurable objectives," which are essential if the annual report is going to serve as an accountability mechanism. For example, if goals are measurable, one can review or collect information to determine if the school is living up to its contract; if the goals and objectives are not measurable, this is nearly impossible.

Therefore, we rated the measurability of charter school goals. Again, we rated each school on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low measurability and 5 referring to a high degree of measurability. A goal such as "decrease suspensions by 25 percent from the previous year" would likely receive a 5 because it specifies a clear and objective indicator and includes a benchmark or cutoff point. A goal such as "create a school with pathways that emphasize math, science, and technology" would probably receive a 1.

Results from our analysis of the goals and objectives in the 2000-01 annual reports had a mean score of 1.7. Only 3 percent of schools rated 4, and no schools rated 5. More than half of the schools received a rating of 1, which indicates that none of their mentioned goals or objectives were measurable. However, there was a dramatic increase in measurability scores the following year, with the mean score rising to 3.8. For the 2001-02 annual reports, only 11 percent scored 1, while 43 percent scored 5. However, possible interrater reliability issues must be taken into consideration. Figure 11:2 illustrates our findings regarding the measurability of the goals and objectives.

As stated earlier, outcome-oriented goals are far more relevant to demonstrating a charter school's success than process-oriented goals. However, process-oriented goals are often more easily measurable than outcome-oriented goals. The measure may be as simple and straightforward as, "was it done or not done?" Outcome-based goals are sometimes challenging to measure, especially goals regarding expansive concepts such as raising students' self-esteem. Finding the right measure and sources of evidence with which to measure progress on such goals may be difficult.

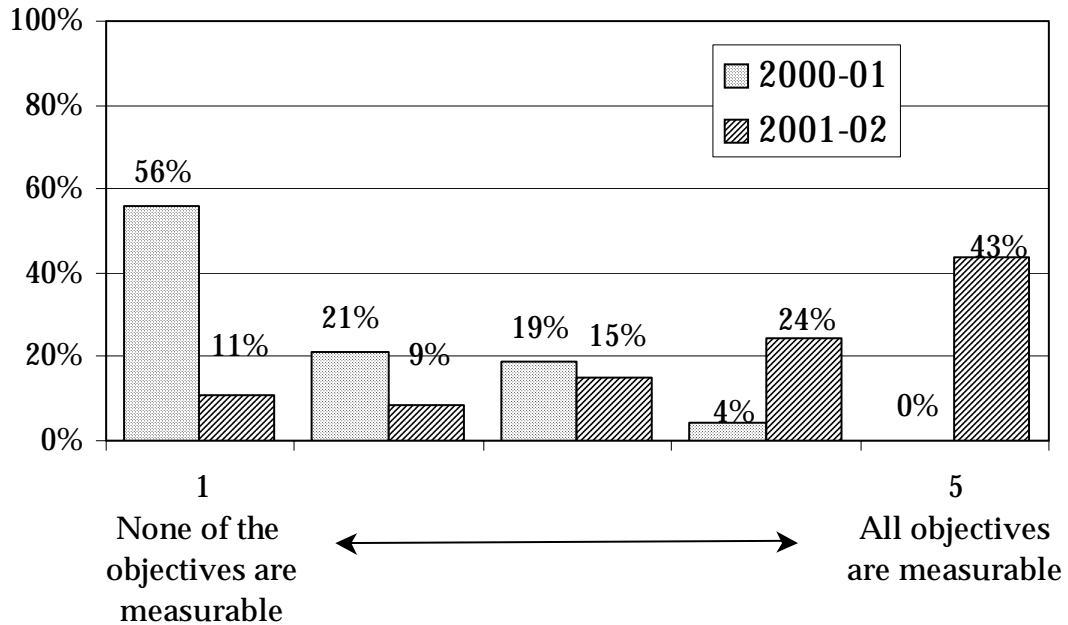


Figure 11:2 Degree of Measurability of Charter School Goals and Objectives

Scope of evidence. The quality and scope of the evidence used to ascertain fulfillment of a goal is also crucial. However, the annual reports for 2000-01 demonstrated that the schools often had difficulty with this concept. Frequently, progress on goals—even concrete, outcome-based goals—was erroneously “measured” by describing the processes used to approach them. For example, a school may list as a goal, “75 percent of students will pass the PSSA” but list as evidence for status of attainment, “A remedial program was initiated.” The latter describes a process used to approach the goal, but provides no information regarding whether or not the goal was met. Clear evidence would include the percentage of students who passed the PSSA. At times, there was no clear link between the goal and the evidence used to assess its status. For example, one school’s goal was to “Raise students’ academic achievement and improve their attitudes towards school so that they achieve the recognized standard.” Status on this goal was measured with “Increased attendance by 3 percent.”

As Figure 11:3 displays, our assessment of the scope of evidence for the charter schools’ goals appears rather polarized. Some schools (27.9 percent) had clear evidence regarding process on all their goals; these were given a rating of 5. Some schools (30.9 percent) provided no evidence at all or provided evidence that was irrelevant to progress on the goals. These schools were given a rating of 1. Schools where evidence was somewhat clear and comprehensive, or had clear evidence for some goals but not others, received ratings of 2 through 4.

Again, scope of evidence was but one element by which the quality of the goals were assessed. All the components of each goal work together to create reports with which charter schools can accurately report the status of their progress. Some schools did an excellent job in describing measurable, outcome-oriented goals that provided an adequate scope of evidence to determine whether

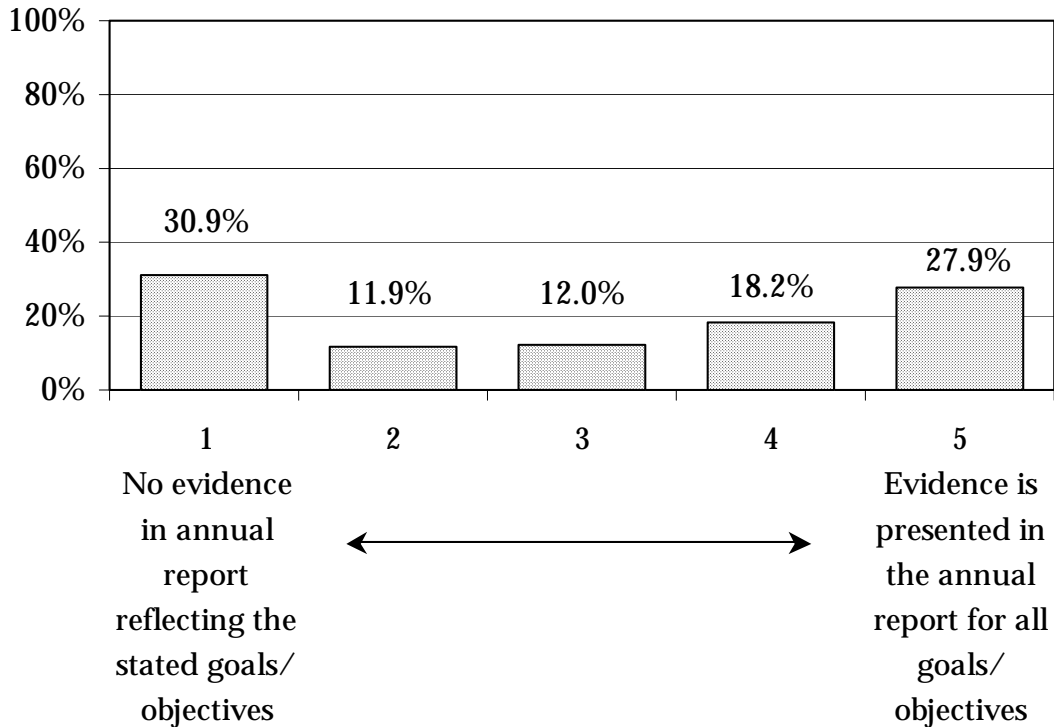


Figure 11:3 Scope of Evidence in the 2001-02 Annual Reports Relevant to the Stated Goals and Objectives

or not they were meeting their goals. However, these schools were in the minority. Most schools provided insufficient evidence to determine whether or not they were living up to their intended outcomes. Therefore, we cannot yet state that Pennsylvania charter schools as a whole are demonstrating performance accountability. On the other hand, the improvements in the annual reports from 1999-00 to 2000-01 suggest that the charter schools are improving the development and reporting on adequately measurable goals.

It is important to note the differences in the quality of reported goals depending on whether the old or new annual report format was used. As Table 11:1 displays, the ratings for the scope of coverage, measurability, and scope of evidence were all significantly ($p < .001$) higher for the schools that used the new form. Four schools used their own template; these schools were not included in this analysis due to their widely varying styles and content. We presume that a more consistent use of this new form may lead to a more consistently high quality of reporting on goals and attaining them.

Additional improvements could be made to these templates; for example, clearer explanations of the concepts or labels used and more specifically defined expectations. Model responses or examples may be quite helpful. Further, technical assistance should be available to schools that have difficulty developing and assessing progress on measurable outcome goals. When the reports are improved and contain truly measurable objectives and specific data on attaining

these objectives, the annual reports can become an accountability tool that provides evidence on attaining mission-related objectives. This type of evidence is needed to complement the more readily available student achievement results.

Table 11:1 Quality of Goals by Type of Form Used for Reporting Goals and Status of Attainment in 2001-02 Annual Report

	<i>Old Format (N = 15)</i>	<i>New Format (N= 46)</i>
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Scope of Coverage	2.1 (0.6)	3.2 (1.1)
Measurability	2.1 (1.1)	4.4 (1.0)
Scope of Evidence	1.6 (1.2)	3.6 (1.5)

11.4 Findings From the Auditor General

The Pennsylvania Auditor General (AG) conducts school audits to ensure that districts receive accurate state funding, that state funds are spent according to applicable laws and regulations, and that the operations guiding their expenditures are proper. The audits also aid school administrators in identifying ways to improve certain recordkeeping procedures. Since 1997, the AG has produced audits of 21 charter schools, including the 6 that opened during the 1997-98 school year, 14 that opened during the 1998-99 school year (1 schools had its charter revoked after 1 year of operation), and 1 school that opened during the 1999-00 school year (this school closed in 2002 after having its charter revoked). The audits, covering the 1997-98 and 1998-99 school years for the first 6 schools, and the 1998-99 and 1999-00 school years for the other 15, focused on the following areas:

- School records supporting membership
- School records supporting health services
- School records supporting grants
- School records supporting Social Security, Medicare, and retirement contributions
- School insurance and bond coverage
- Minutes of the school's board of trustees meetings
- School professional certification

Since charter schools operate under a different set of laws and regulations than do traditional public schools, the audits of charter schools focused on slightly different areas. The charter school audits had the following objectives:

- To determine whether the school complied with certification requirements for charter schools

- ❑ To determine whether the school received the funds to which it was entitled directly from the state and through the payments from school districts mandated by 24 P.S. § 17-1725-A
- ❑ To determine whether the school complied with applicable laws, regulations, and guidelines falling within the scope of the audit

Each audit produced findings regarding a school's weakness in specific areas. The most common finding concerned the level of professional certification for charter school staff (see Table 11:2). Seven charter schools were found to have weaknesses in their compliance with the 75 percent professional staff certification requirement. There is a difference in the way the AG and PDE construe the 75 percent requirement. PDE, under its "Cluster Certification" Statement of Policy, permits the assignment within curriculum clusters of certificated persons who possess the qualifications consistent with achieving the school's educational objectives. The AG's position is that the charter school law requires that at least 75 percent of the professional staff members of a charter school hold state certification in their area of administrative responsibility or the subject area in which they teach. The audits identify charter schools that failed to meet the 75 percent mark under each standard.

Following are some of the other findings from the charter school audits:

- ❑ Eleven of the 21 charter schools failed to meet the 75 percent mark even under the "cluster certification" standard.
- ❑ Fourteen of the 21 charter schools had some finding of weakness in their reporting of student membership information. Many of these errors stemmed from inexperience or lack of training with PDE reporting forms.
- ❑ Twelve of the 21 charter schools had some finding of weakness in reporting financial information. Most issues concerned incorrect reporting of Social Security, Medicare, or retirement information.
- ❑ Three of the 21 charter schools had some finding of weakness in documenting student instructional time.
- ❑ Two of the 21 charter schools had a finding of weakness in student health services. Both schools had failed to hire or contract with a school nurse.
- ❑ Two of the 21 charter schools had some finding of weakness in maintaining proper documentation of board meetings and minutes.
- ❑ Two of the 21 charter schools had some finding of weakness in all areas except board meeting records.

Some areas of deficits, however, are similar between district schools and charter schools.

- ❑ Eight of the 15 host districts had some finding of weakness in certification.
- ❑ Eight of the 15 host districts had some finding of weakness in reporting financial information. This included incorrect reporting of retirement wages, improper control of student activity funds, and failure to remove students from active role, resulting in overpayments.

- ❑ Six of the 15 host districts were found to have internal control weaknesses in the are of reporting membership data.

Table 11:2 displays the percentages of all the charter schools and the percentage of all the host districts that had findings in each of six categories. It is important to know that there is not a 1-1 correspondence with charters and host districts. One district hosted eight of the audited charter schools, two districts each hosted two charter schools, one school was hosted by two districts, and one school was hosted by three districts. However, in the aggregates in Table 11:2, each charter school was counted once and each host district was counted once. This comparison with recent AG audits of the audited charter schools’ host districts¹ shows that the districts received slightly fewer “findings” related to weaknesses or noncompliance. It is important to note that districts are not examined on exactly the same criteria as charter schools since they have different requirements than do charter schools. Each district and charter school is audited in accordance with its own requirements.

Table 11:2 Proportion of Schools/Districts With Findings of Weakness Identified in Audits Conducted by the State Auditor General

Type of School	Certification Percentage	Financial Information	Membership Data	Instructional Time	Nurse/Health Records	Board Meeting Records
Charter Schools (N = 21)	52.4%	57.1%	66.7%	14.3%	9.5%	9.5%
Host District Schools (N = 15)	53.3%	53.3%	40.0%	0%	0%	0%

Notes: *Certification percentage* concerns the 75 percent certification requirement for charter school professional staff. *Financial information* concerns control measures for handling and reporting funds. Examples include reporting retirement contributions or Social Security/Medicare taxes. *Membership data* concerns controls for documenting and reporting student membership data. *Instructional time* concerns controls for documenting and reporting student instructional time. *Nurse/health records* concerns meeting the standards for maintaining student health records and the employment of a school nurse. *Board meeting records* concerns the proper scheduling of board meetings and the maintenance of board minutes and attendance records.

The Pennsylvania Auditor General is but one body that is responsible for oversight of charter schools. We now look at the agencies that have primary responsibility for holding the charter schools accountable: the PDE and the local districts.

¹ Host district audits covered school years ranging from 1993-94 through 2000-01.

11.5 Roles and Responsibilities of PDE

The Office of Education Initiatives at the Pennsylvania Department of Education has played a crucial role in the implementation and expansion of the charter school reform. This office provided technical assistance to charter schools and has conducted compliance visits to charter schools.

Relative to other states, the PDE Office of Education Initiatives has done a remarkable job of providing targeted technical assistance and support for new charter schools. It has used both carrots and sticks to ensure that new charter schools apply for all available resources (both federal and state). All divisions and units at PDE have been responsive to questions and requests for assistance from charter schools. The technical assistance provided by PDE and the resource centers found at each end of the state have helped make charter schools aware of relevant laws and regulations and better prepared to complete and submit the litany of reports and forms required for all public schools.

PDE plays an important indirect oversight role by collecting and presenting general data on all public schools in the state. Each year, PDE produces detailed school profiles that are available on the web for parents to access, regarding each public school in the Commonwealth, including charter schools. These reports contain performance and other data, and allow parents to compare their local district-run schools with charters and allow host districts to have a look at data concerning charter schools they host. PDE has also contracted with Standard & Poors to prepare even more detailed reports about each public school in the Commonwealth. These are also available from the Web.

In addition to the requests for information and data that all public schools receive, PDE also requests annual reports from each charter school which are due in August. In terms of oversight or compliance visits, PDE has been responsible only for compliance visits related to the federal funds that charter schools receive. These visits have typically involved question and answer periods with the CAOs and no review of documentation and evidence to support responses. In recent years, as the number of schools has increased and as the Office of Education Initiatives has taken on more responsibilities for other reforms or initiatives, the frequency of site visits has decreased considerably.

11.6 Roles and Responsibilities of Local Districts That Grant Charters

Local districts or LEAs that grant the charter are the primary oversight agency. LEAs decide which applications to approve (although appeals can be made to the Charter School Appeal Board to overturn LEA decisions). LEAs also make decisions about renewal or nonrenewal when the contract runs out. Finally, LEAs have the right to revoke a charter when a school is not living up to its contract or when it is found to be violating serious rules or regulations regarding the governance or operation of the school. Given that LEAs have primary responsibility for ensuring that these goals are met, a related question is how well LEAs discharge their oversight responsibilities.

From interviews with representatives from chartering LEAs and charter school administrators, we learned that the LEAs vary considerably in their understanding of oversight responsibilities. Some LEAs have requested completion of specific forms and reports for the district, while others make no formal requests for information from the charter schools. A few districts have conducted what we might consider a compliance visit, while others only visit for ceremonial purposes. In Philadelphia and in many other parts of the Commonwealth, most charter schools report that they receive no visits at all from representatives of the host school districts. We did find that local districts engaged in oversight activities just before charter contracts came up for renewal.

One possible reason for the limited oversight by LEAs is that it can be costly both in human and financial resources. A few districts cited this as a reason for not visiting the schools more often. Another partial explanation is the uncertainty on the part of the LEAs regarding their actual right or responsibility to conduct compliance visits.

The School District of Philadelphia—having done little charter school oversight—planned to conduct extensive site visits at schools that were coming up for renewal in 2000. At that time, however, the charter schools and PDE representatives protested, claiming that such visits would be redundant and disruptive. Instead, it was suggested that the district could receive the information obtained from PDE site visits. Even after a formal request, however, this information was never shared with district officials. In September 2002, Philadelphia announced a new plan for “intensive evaluation” of several district schools—including 14 charter schools facing renewal. This will include site visits and examination of academic achievement, school safety, and financial stability.

Revocation or nonrenewal of a charter is the strongest action that can be taken by LEAs. Thus far, only two charter schools have been closed in Pennsylvania, which represents a much lower proportion of closures than found in other states. This would suggest that charter schools are doing an extremely good job, or it could imply that LEAs are lax in providing oversight.

The relationship between the charter school and its host district should also be taken into consideration. As chapter 9 details, these relationships range from cooperative to indifferent to hostile. This undoubtedly affects the LEA’s amount and quality of communication with the charter schools and their willingness to provide timely, beneficial oversight.

11.7 Conclusion and Summary

This chapter addressed the various components of a charter school’s accountability plan, discussed accountability as it relates to a charter school’s mission, and addressed how well charter schools are clearly delineating their separate goals and objectives. It also described the oversight provided by PDE, LEAs, and the Auditor General.

Charter schools can be viewed in terms of performance accountability, regulatory accountability, and market accountability. Each of these three areas affects the others. A charter school’s performance accountability should affect its market accountability because parents will be less likely to send their children to a school that is not achieving its goals. Performance accountability will influence

regulatory accountability because a chartering agency will be less likely to extend the charter of a nonperforming school.

A charter school's annual report to PDE and its host district is one of the seven primary components of a charter school's accountability plan. For a charter school to be fairly and accurately evaluated, its annual report must show clear goals that are related to its mission, measurable, and assessed with appropriate evidence. Our analysis found that charter school goals (as reported to PDE in annual reports) have improved from 2001 to 2002 as far as clarity, scope, and measurability. However, as a whole they still did not provide enough information to determine whether or not they were meeting outcome-oriented objectives. Adequately developing, assessing, and reporting goals for a charter school takes time, effort, and practice. The revised form for reporting goals and attainment of them appeared to facilitate these improvements. More consistent use of the new format among all the charter schools may improve the overall quality of the annual reports. Most importantly, the status of attaining outcome-oriented goals must be relevant and clearly stated.

PDE should continue to improve and streamline its annual report format. Moreover, it would be wise to continue searching for other ways to improve the format including, but not limited to, clarifying definitions of key concepts and ensuring 100 percent response rates to all questions. Ideally, these reports should be posted on the Web so they would be more easily accessible to LEAs, parents, and other interested groups.

Since 1997, the Pennsylvania Auditor General (AG) has produced audits of 21 charter schools. A number of charter schools had deficient findings as far as percentage of certified staff, reporting of financial inputs and expenditures, and student membership records. However, the host districts also had substantial findings in each of these areas. A few charter schools also had findings regarding inadequate instructional time, the employment of school nurses, or board meeting records—issues that are more challenging to charter schools than to host districts.

We had far less data regarding the findings of the LEAs and the PDE. There have been some difficulties with the oversight from these parties. First, there is an unclear division of labor when it comes to overseeing the charter schools. Timing is another issue that hampers the effectiveness of oversight from both the LEAs and PDE. Generally, the charter schools are not thoroughly assessed and given feedback until just before decisions about their renewal must be made. Earlier feedback could help schools identify and remedy their shortcomings. This could help charter schools become more successful in the long run.

Policymakers should consider undertaking a systematic assessment of LEAs' capacity (both human and fiscal) to provide meaningful, timely, and consistent oversight of the charter schools they sponsor. PDE might then be able to provide technical assistance targeted to areas of greatest need. Similarly, policymakers should consider a review of the current division of labor between PDE and LEA on issues of oversight. This might provide an opportunity to clarify roles and to direct resources to areas of highest need. Act 22 is clear that LEA overseers are an important partner in assuring quality in charter schools and should be an integral part of attempts to improve charter school quality and accountability.

The findings and issues discussed in this chapter suggest a number of possible approaches for consolidating and building upon improvements in Pennsylvania charter school accountability. There is great potential for further improvements in holding Pennsylvania charter schools more accountable to their regulatory and performance goals. This will provide more data for informed parental choice of schools and thus influence their market accountability as well.