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COMMENTARY

A Bargain Half Fulfilled

Teacher Autonomy and Accountability in Charter and Public Schools

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Public charter schools (hereafter "charter schools") are theorized to succeed more than traditional public schools (hereafter "public schools") because of a bargain struck between schools and charter-granting entities: charter schools are given greater autonomy from the standard rules and regulations and, in return, are held more accountable. Early theorists expected that this dynamic would operate in two ways. At the system-level, charter schools would have the latitude to experiment with new approaches to education. If they performed well, they could maintain their charters; if they did not, they could lose them. Additionally, these theorists expected heightened autonomy and accountability inside schools: compared to teachers in public schools, teachers in charter schools would have greater freedom to diverge from curricula and rules while, at the same time, having their jobs more closely linked with student success.

Although there have been many changes to the U.S. public education system since these early theorists wrote, and the charter sector has grown and evolved, these intermediate goals—enhanced teacher autonomy and accountability—remain central to arguments in favor of charter schools. Despite this, we have little robust, up-to-date information about whether teachers in charter schools actually enjoy greater autonomy or are held more accountable than teachers in public schools. As such, the first goal of this research project was to study whether hypothesized differences in teacher autonomy and accountability actually exist. Second, the research looked inside the charter sector to explore why some teachers enjoy greater autonomy and are held more accountable than others. In particular, it explored whether one of the major changes to the charter sector in recent years—the growth of schools operated by Educational Management Organizations (EMOs)—might explain differences in teacher autonomy and accountability. To compare teachers in these different settings, this research used nationally-representative teacher survey data collected by the U.S. Department of Education.

In this study, our findings suggest that the charter school bargain, insofar as teacher autonomy and accountability are concerned, remains half fulfilled. Teachers in charter schools reported greater autonomy than teachers in public schools; nevertheless, they did not feel more or less accountable than teachers in public schools. Inside the charter sector, the analysis showed that teachers in EMO-run and independent charter schools had similar experiences with accountability; however, teachers in EMO-run charter schools reported having less autonomy than teachers in independent charter schools. In fact, the analysis shows that teachers in EMO-run charter schools were statistically indistinguishable, in terms of autonomy, from teachers in public schools.

Finally, the research explored some potential factors that might have caused these findings and non-findings. It argues that differences in teacher autonomy were likely connected to differences in red tape: teachers in public schools were more likely to report encountering burdensome rules and regulations, that did little to advance any educational objective, than teachers in charter schools.

Similarly, within the charter sector, teachers in EMO-run charter schools reported encountering more red tape than teachers in independent charter schools. The paper suggests that the non-finding about accountability may have resulted from teachers' similar experiences with administrators: although charter schools are often praised as having more dynamic, connected leaders, this research showed no support for such claims.

These findings have implications for practitioners and policymakers. First, it is important for public school administrators to ask how public school teachers might be granted more autonomy to exercise their professional expertise. One solution is to reduce or remove unnecessary administrative duties and paperwork. Although rules and regulations are often rationalized as a way to maintain accountability, this research suggests that this gain is not being realized (teachers in public schools did not report feeling more accountable than teachers in charter schools). Second, charter school administrators need to ask why the accountability part of the bargain is not being met and how they might work to enhance teacher accountability. Finally, EMO-run charter schools are a growing part of the charter sector. This research suggests that the growth in franchising has the potential to affect how teachers in these schools behave and, at the macro level, how the sector as a whole compares with public schools.

The full study is in Zachary W. Oberfield, "A Bargain Half Fulfilled: Teacher Autonomy and Accountability in Traditional Public Schools and Public Charter Schools," American Educational Research Journal April 2016 vol. 53 no. 2 296-323

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