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How Are Charter Schools Being Held Accountable for Results?
Preliminary Findings from a National Study of High-Stakes Charter School Decisions

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Introduction & Background

Included in this document are summaries and excerpts from our *preliminary findings* from a two-year national charter school accountability project. This project was funded by the Smith Richardson Foundation with an initial advisory board of authorizers and education researchers from around the nation that helped steer the research design of the project.

The aim of the study was to examine the process of some of the first “decisions” made about charter school performance in relation to accountability standards. In other words, we wanted to learn about “how charter schools are being held accountable for results” by the authorizers that sponsor them. To do this, we focused on three components of particular importance to an effective accountability system: (Hassel and Herdman, 2000). First, an authorizer needs to establish *clear expectations of schools*. A second component is a *system of measurement* that reliably provides information about the extent to which a school has achieved the performance targets. A third requirement is a *decision-making process* through which an authorizer compares actual with expected results and uses the data to hand out rewards, offer assistance, or impose sanctions accordingly.

Setting expectations

Setting expectations requires answering a series of difficult questions. What standards will we ask *students* to meet? Whatever those standards are, how will we rate schools’ success at helping students attain them? Will we look at the percentage of students at a school who achieve standards, or the progress or growth students make over a period of time? Aside from students’ mastery of standards, what other expectations will we have of schools? To what extent will we let these expectations vary from school

to school, reflecting schools' differing missions and purposes? Whatever our expectations, how good is "good enough"? Will we compare a school's performance to some external benchmark, or look at its performance relative to other schools? Will we factor in the advantages and disadvantages a school's student body brings to the schoolhouse?

Designing Systems of Measurement

Even with agreement on expectations, measurement creates another set of challenges. What sorts of assessments will provide reliable information about the extent to which students and schools are living up to our expectations? How much reliance should we place on standardized tests — quantifiable and reliable, but typically narrow in their focus? If we step beyond standardized measures in an effort to broaden our understanding of school performance, can we feasibly create reliable, consistent assessments? Can these be administered affordably and practically (Fuhrman, 1999; Hassel and Vergari, 1999; Hassel and Herdman, 2000)? Given a set of measuring tools, how can we analyze the results they yield in ways that generate appropriate inferences about schools' true performance, rather than random "noise" not related to real school quality (Kane, Staiger & Geppert, 2002)?

Making decisions

Even with clear expectations and valid and reliable measurements, authorizers are not necessarily in a position to make decisions based on comparisons of expectation and evidence, for two reasons. First, the agencies responsible for accountability often lack the resources or capacity to engage in the kinds of complex analysis required to complete such comparisons, especially for multiple schools (Hassel and Vergari, 1999; Fuhrman,

1999). Research on both charter and other public school accountability systems suggests that a great deal of the data gathered through such systems is never used in decision-making (Garn and Stout, 2000; Bulkley, 2001; Duffy, 2001; Hunter and Brown, 1999).

Second, and more fundamentally, the organizations overseeing schools are almost always political institutions, whether they are directly elected local or state boards of education, or whether they are appointed to their posts by other elected officials. And a long line of research in political science suggests that such public agencies will find it difficult to make use of evidence-and expectation-based decision-making processes. Instead, they are likely to weigh political considerations alongside performance evaluations in their decisions. As Hess (2001) elucidates, Olson (1971)'s "logic of collective action" suggests that a particular school's stakeholders, with their very concentrated, intense interest in the school's survival and their ease of organizing, will tend to win out over those advocating a broader public interest in closing a bad school. The broader public's interest in non-renewal is likely to be less intense than that of school supporters'; and the broader public will have more difficulty organizing. On the other hand, opponents of charter schools are often politically powerful groups to begin with, and having lost a battle over the charter law may seek to win the war through skirmishes in the politics of charter revocation and renewal. This possibility might arise in particular where authorizers are reluctant — those that are chartering schools only because of an appeal decision from a higher authority, or have perhaps granted a token charter or two to appease particular constituencies. These authorizers may unite with the anti-charter interest groups in using renewal or revocation decisions to get rid of unwanted or no-longer-wanted charters. In either case — a successful mobilization by a charter school to

stave off non-renewal or by opponents to ensure non-renewal – political factors can undermine the objective expectation and evidenced based decision-making of accountability theory.

Research Questions

Bearing in mind the challenges and questions presented above, our study followed these main research questions:

1. To what extent are authorizers setting clear, measurable expectations that charter schools must meet in order to attain renewal or avoid revocation?
2. To what extent are authorizers gathering information that allows them to determine whether schools are meeting these expectations?
3. To what extent are authorizers making decisions based on a comparison of actual performance with expectations?
4. To the extent that authorizers are facing challenges related to questions 1 through 3, what are the sources of these challenges?
5. What practical recommendations emerge from these findings for authorizers and state policy-makers?

Data and Methods

Case selection

The first step in implementing our research design was creating a database of charter school decisions. This database is nationwide in scope and includes decisions whereby an authorizer is making a final determination on the status of a charter. These authorizer decisions fall into three categories: renewals, nonrenewals, and revocations. In a “renewal,” the charter authorizer agrees to extend the school’s charter for another

period of time. In a “nonrenewal,” an authorizer refuses to extend the charter, and the school ceases to be a charter school at the end of its term. In a “revocation,” the charter authorizer rescinds the charter prior to the end of its term.

Gathering information on decisions was difficult due to the lack of centralized data collection at the state level for states with large numbers of local authorizers. In our first year of gathering charter school decisions in 2000-2001, we identified a total of 355 decisions. In late fall of 2001 we finished the second round of decision-identification with a total of 151 new or previously unidentified decisions. Table 1 shows the distribution of cases by decision-type and authorizer-type. Of the 506 decisions, 84% resulted in renewal, 12% in revocation, and the remainder in nonrenewals. Most of the decisions to date have been made by local school boards (70%).

Table 1. Decision Population by Authorizer-Type and Decision-Type

Decision Type	LSB Decisions	LSB % of Total	SBE Decisions	SBE % of Total	U Decisions	U % of Total	Totals by Decision Type (#)	% by Decision Type
Renewal	304	83.79	91	17.98	29	5.73	424	83.79
Revocation	32	54.24	24	4.74	3	0.59	59	11.66
Nonrenewal	15	65.22	5	0.99	3	0.59	23	4.55
Totals by Auth. Type	351	69.37	120	23.72	35	6.92	506	

From this population, we randomly selected 50 cases. These cases reflect the mix of authorizer-types and decision-types in the population. We over sampled nonrenewals and revocations slightly to ensure that we had a sufficient number of these decisions in our sample to conduct analysis. Table 2 gives an overview of the 50 cases considered in this paper according to authorizer-type and decision-type:

Table 2. Summary of 41 Case Studies by Authorizer-Type and Decision-Type

Decision Type	Authorizer Type	Number of cases	Decision Type Total
Nonrenewal	Local School Board	6	8
	State Board of Education	1	
	University	1	
Renewal	Local School Board	24	34
	State Board of Education	6	
	University	4	
Revocation	Local School Board	4	8
	State Board of Education	4	
	University	4	

Data-gathering methods

For each case study, we identified three respondents: an authorizer, a school official, and a third party with knowledge of the decision. Interview protocols were created for each set of interviewees with some questions specific to each individual protocol and some sets of questions common to all three. Questions ranged from background information on the chartering institution to specific decision-making criteria used in the accountability process. Some interview questions required respondents to make selections from lists of allowable answers; others allowed more open-ended responses.

Both phone and in-person interviews were conducted with three interviewees for each case study. For cases where all three interviews could not be completed, the base criterion for a case study to move forward was the completion of an authorizer interview. Information gathered from each interview set was compiled into a database for statistical and qualitative analysis.

In addition to conducting interviews, researchers worked to obtain written documentation of each decision-making process from the authorizing body, as well as

any relevant media coverage of this process. The documents we looked for included original charter applications, renewal applications or other decision-making documents, authorizer-created policies on decision-making processes, formal findings on decisions and related newspaper articles.

Statistical Findings

The following tables and charts are based on data results from our 50 case studies. Each table is explained by a brief description of the questions at hand.

Setting Expectations

Table 1 represents responses to the question posed to authorizers and school officials on *how* they arrived at the expectations schools would have to meet in order to obtain renewal or avoid revocation.

Table 1. Process by Which School Goals Were Set

Process	% Authorizers saying process was used	% School Officials saying process was used
Goals proposed by school and accepted fully	69	78
Goals mandated by state law	22	6
Goals were proposed by school and accepted with modifications	21	13
Goals were proposed by school and negotiated after charter approval	9	9
Goals set by “other” process	13	6
Goals set by authorizer	6	7

Percentages add to more than 100% because respondents could indicate more than one response.

Answers to questions posed to both authorizers and school officials on the types of expectations set for schools are summarized in Table 12.

Table 2. Types of Goals Schools Needed to Meet to Obtain Renewal or Avoid Revocation

Types of goals for external accountability	% Authorizers saying goals were set	% School Officials saying goals were set
Goals specific to school’s mission	94	86
Other student learning goals	74	74
Goals for school-wide improved performance on standardized tests	68	68

Goals for absolute performance on standardized tests	67	56
Goals apart from student learning	67	88
Goals in common subjects	48	52
Goals that applied to all authorized schools	44	30
Goals for individual achievement gains on standardized tests	39	39
Goals for performance relative to other schools on standardized tests	25	24
Goals beyond core subjects	20	40

Percentages add to more than 100% because respondents could indicate more than one response.

We looked at the expectations set for students in a series of questions regarding the sources of standards for the schools' students. Responses are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of Standards Set for Students in Charter Schools

Standards	% Authorizers reported standard was used	% School Officials reported standard was used
State Standards	92	97
Unique School Standards	53	61
District Standards	35	32
Outside Organization Standards	20	17

Percentages add to more than 100% because respondents could indicate more than one response.

A Second Look at Expectations

The following tables illustrate categorical differences in Setting Expectations. These tables are summaries of data responses by the variables described below. We randomly selected possibilities from the above tables on setting expectations and summarize the responses in comparison tables.

Variable Descriptions:

Renewal Type: Renewal or Nonrenewal/ Revocation

Authorizer Type: Local School Board (LSB) or Universities/States

Authorizer Staff Capacity (at the time of decision): Small = authorizers with 0 charter school employees, Medium = authorizers with more than 0 and less than 3 employees, and Large = 3 or more employees.

Table 4. Comparison Data Regarding the Process of Setting Expectations, Judgments, and Agreement by Renewal vs. Nonrenewal/Revocation

Questions on Setting Expectations	% Renewals responding affirmatively	% Nonrenewals responding affirmatively
Process by which school goals were set		
Goals were proposed by school and accepted fully	70	65
Goals were proposed by school and accepted with modifications	18	39
Goals mandated by state law	24	8
Goals were proposed by school and negotiated after charter approval	9	8
Types of standards set for students in charter schools		
State Standards	94	85
Unique School Standards	58	27
Outside Organization Standards	21	15
Types of goals students needed to meet to attain renewal or avoid revocation		
Goals apart from student learning	70	50
Goals for absolute performance on standardized tests	67	69
Goals for individual achievement gains on standardized tests	37	70
Goals that applied to all authorized schools	42	54
Agreement rate between schools and authorizers on Setting Expectations questions		
Agreement on questions relating to types and process of how school goals were set	66	61
Agreement on question of types of standards set for students in charter schools	77	60
Judgments on Process of Setting Expectations		
Cases given a judgment of “clear expectations” by research team.	82	71

**Stats in this table have not been run to determine statistical significance*

Gathering Information

Debate surrounding the types of expectations and standards that are, or should be, required of charter schools is just one piece of the accountability puzzle. Our research is also concerned with how authorizers are collecting information on whether charter schools and their students are meeting these expectations, who is collecting this information, and the types of information and recommendations being used to make decisions on a charter’s status. Table 5 summarizes authorizer and school official

responses to questions about data-gathering methods and their use in the authorizer’s decision-making process.

Table 5. Methods of Information-Gathering Used in the Decision-Making Process

Steps/Methods of information gathering	% of Authorizers reporting being used	% of School officials reporting being used
Review of school’s written record	92	83
Evaluative site visit	64	67
Site visits made periodically	85	62
Interviews with school staff	49	49
Public hearing	40	38
School submitted renewal application	56	56
Interviews with parents	37	Not collected
Interviews with board members	39	Not collected
Surveys	25	36
Authorizer prepared written report on information-gathered	60	Not collected

Percentages add to more than 100% because respondents could indicate more than one response.

Table 6 illustrates the breakdown of assessments both schools and authorizers report being used in establishing expectations.

Table 6. Types of Assessments Used to Evaluate Charter Schools

Assessment	% Authorizers report being used	% School Officials report being used
State mandated criterion-referenced	76	61
State mandated norm-referenced	38	34
Performance-based selected by school	28	44
Norm-referenced selected by school	22	35
Unique assessment developed by school	20	35
District mandated norm-referenced	7	9
Other assessment	7	22
District mandated criterion-referenced	5	4
Criterion-referenced selected by school	3	9

Percentages add to more than 100% because respondents could indicate more than one response

Authorizers were asked about the kinds of comparison models used in comparing performance results. Table 7 shows authorizer responses to this question.

Table 7. Types of Schools Used in Making Performance Comparisons

Type of Comparison	% Authorizers Report being used
Schools with similar demographics	40
No comparisons made	22
All district Schools	15
All schools statewide	11
Combination of comparison models	9

Making Decisions

In this section we consider how authorizers made decisions about a charter school’s status based on a comparison of information gathered about a school’s performance in terms of the goals and expectations set for achievement. To look at the process of *how* authorizers make decisions, we examined the following variables: the time it took for authorizers to make decisions, when schools were made aware of the process, actions for change prior to a decision and how schools responded to these actions, the factors both schools and authorizers characterized as “very important” to the process, the extent and types of political influence on decisions, and judgments of both schools and authorizers on the process as a whole.

Table 8 shows the breakdown of school responses by renewal and nonrenewed/revoked cases concerning the timeframe schools were made aware of the decision-process.

Table 8. Timeframe Schools Made Aware of Decision Process

Timeframe	% of renewed schools saying “yes”	% of nonrenewed/revoked schools saying “yes”
1-3 months prior	27	20
Set in original contract	27	0
3-6 months prior	10	0
2 years prior	13	10
Created as process evolved	20	10
No framework	3	0
Not applicable	0	60

Table 9 indicates the frequency of authorizer-led interventions or warnings with struggling schools.

Table 9. Frequency of Authorizers’ Responses to Struggling Schools

Assistance-type	% Of authorizers responding “yes”
Issued warnings prior to decision	80
Intervened in the school to forestall failure	60
Offered assistance	73
Assistance or intervention required by law	52
Percentages add to more than 100% because respondents could indicate more than one response	

Schools were asked about the frequency and types of site visits or feedback they received from authorizers and if there were resulting changes made. Responses are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10. Extent to Which Schools Report Changes Based on Feedback from Authorizer

Change	% Report changes from renewed schools	% Report changes from nonrenewals and revocations
Reallocate resources	37	20.00
Make program or instructional changes	47	20.00

Both schools and authorizers were asked to rate the importance of a list of factors in terms of their importance to the decision. Answers given as “Very Important” are charted below in Charts 1 and 2.

Chart 1. Factors Considered “Very Important” to Authorizers and Schools of Renewal Cases.

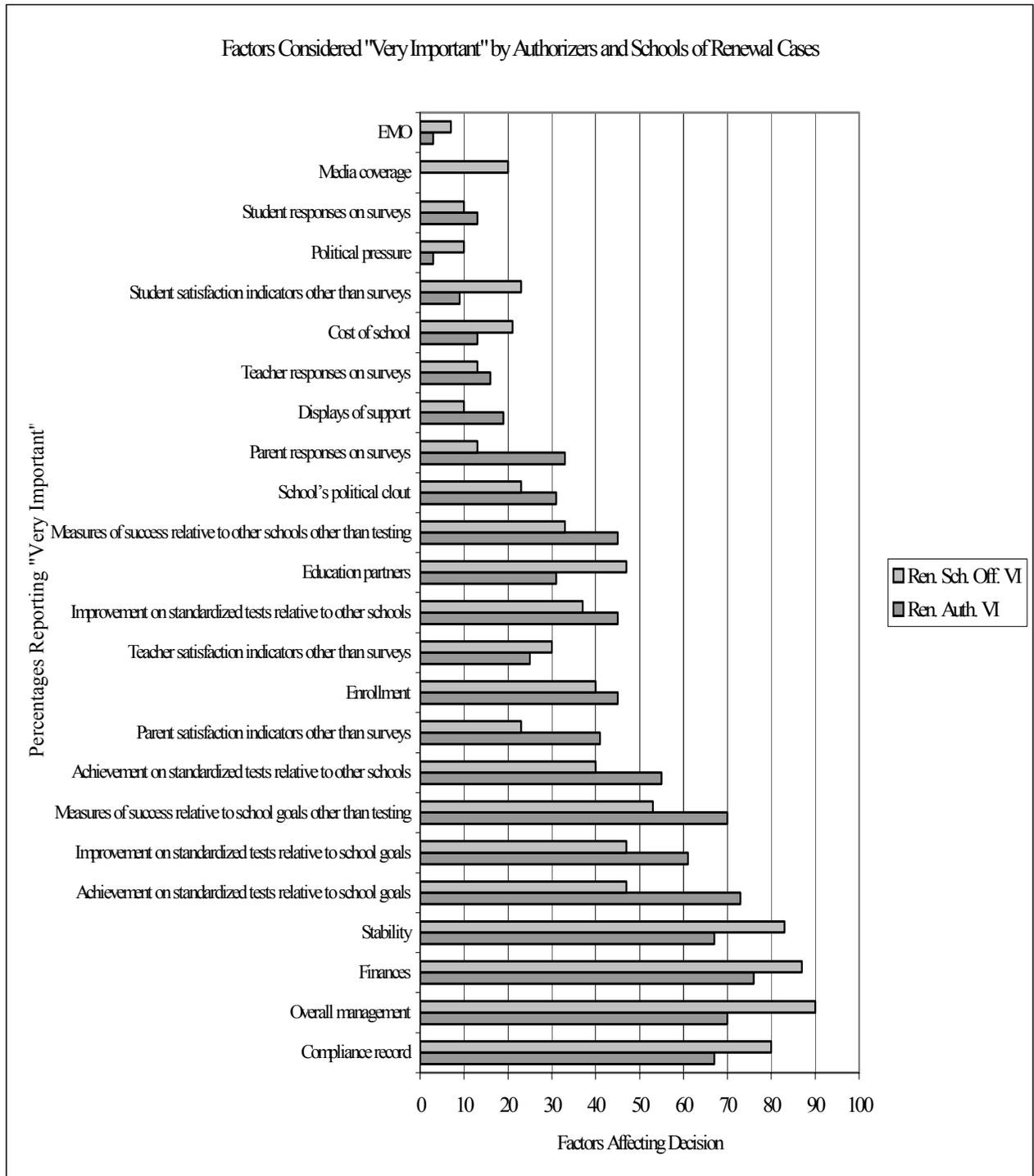
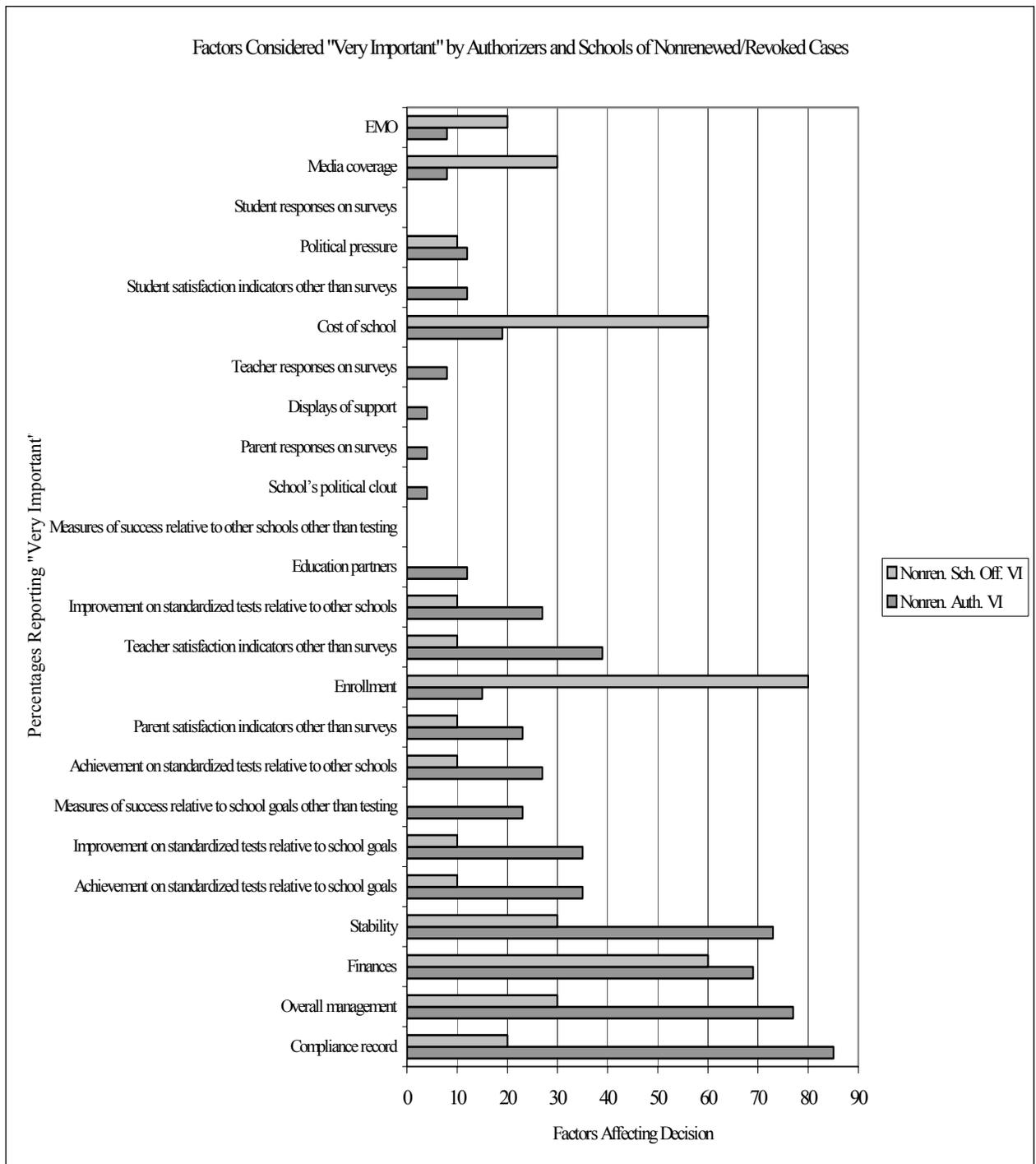


Chart 2. Factors Considered "Very Important" to Authorizers and Schools of Nonrenewal/Revocation Cases.



Judgments

As a research team, one of our goals was to make judgments on the processes authorizers used in each phase of the accountability scheme outlined above (setting expectations, gathering information, and making decisions.) The following rubrics guided our judgments in making determinations about the decision-making processes for each case.

Judgment Rubric

(A) Standards

- (1) – Clear and agreed upon standards in place
- (2) – Standards in place but auth and school unclear on how/which will be used
- (3) – Few or no standards in place

(B) Information Gathering

- (1) – Appropriate information gathered to make evidence-based decision about (A) above
- (2) – Gathered limited information about (A)
- (3) – Did not gather enough or the appropriate information about (A)

(C) Judgments on Decision-Making

- 1 = Good decision based on evidence of achieving expectations
- 2 = Good decision yet lacking evidence or transparency from (A) or (B)
- 2(A) = Early decision not based solely on comparison of (B) with (A)
- 2(B) = Political decision with some disregard of (A) or (B)
- 3 = Questionable decision based on lack of transparency or comparison of (B) with (A)
- 3(A) = Questionable decision: early decision not based solely on comparison of (B) with (A)
- 3(B) = Questionable decision: political decision with some disregard of (A) or (B)

Outlined below are the judgments we have made as a research team on the 50 decisions we researched intensively for this project.

Table X. Judgments made by Research Team on Process of Setting Expectations

Description of Judgment on Process of Setting Expectations	Number of Cases given judgment rating	Percentage of 50 total case studies
(1) Agreed upon expectations in place at time of decision	39	78%
(2) Unclear expectations at time of decision	7	14%
(3) Few or no expectations at time of decision	4	8%

Table X. Judgments Made by Research Team on Process of Gathering Information

Description of Judgment on Process of Gathering Information	Number of Cases given judgment rating	Percentage of 50 total case studies
(1) Appropriate information gathered to make decision	28	56%
(2) Limited information gathered	16	32%
(3) Insufficient information gathered	6	12%

Table X. Judgments Made by Research Team on the Final Decision-Making Process

Description of judgment on Decision-Making Process	Number of Cases given judgment rating	Percentage of 50 total case studies
1 = Good decision based on evidence of achieving expectations	27	54%
2 = Good decision yet lacking evidence or transparency from (A) or (B)	8	16%
2(A) = Early decision not based solely on comparison of (B) with (A)	4	8%
2(B) = Political decision with some disregard of (A) or (B)	1	2%
3 = Questionable decision based on lack of transparency or comparison of (B) with(A)	1	2%
3(A) = Questionable decision: early decision not based solely on comparison of (B) with (A)	1	2%
3(B) = Questionable decision: political decision with some disregard of (A) or (B)	8	16%

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