

The Hidden Power of Internal Accountability to Build Success That Endures: A Paradigm Shift!

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Introduction

In Thomas S. Kuhn's seminal text, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1996), he argues that a crisis generally precedes a new paradigm. Dr. Kuhn states, "...[C]risis loosens the rules of normal puzzle-solving in ways that ultimately permit a new paradigm to emerge (p. 80)." Kuhn (1996) assumes that crisis, "... [a]re a necessary precondition for the emergence of novel theories... (p. 77)."

While research has shown that the development of an instructional culture of achievement that leads to strong internal accountability and closes the achievement gap is a stronger indicator of a charter school's long-term success than external accountability, I would argue that many charter school leaders continue to rely on external accountability measures as the primary or strongest measure of their viability until a crisis such as the threat of non-renewal occurs (i.e., revocation or probation) (Polk, 2004; 2006). In depending so heavily on external accountability standards, I strongly maintain that charter school leaders place themselves in a continually defensive, rather than offensive, posture where they are perpetually responding to the standards that the authorizer set for them. These types of protective actions oftentimes devolve into combative, as opposed to collaborative, partnerships between the charter school leaders and their authorizer.

However, in high-performing charter schools that I have studied across the country, the school leaders view the external authorizer as an entity that confirms the high-quality teaching, learning, and leading evidenced at their schools. While they develop collaborative relationships, the charter authorizer does not set the school's internal standards for excellence. The charter school leaders identify measurable outcomes that are both vision and mission-driven which are aligned with local, state, and national standards. Consequently, in these high-achieving charter schools, the internal accountability is a living organism that thrives within an instructional culture of achievement, and it is much more rigorous than the external accountability measures (Polk, 2004; 2006).

In a high-achieving charter school that I studied in Chicago (Polk, 2004), the board president described the renewal process as a, "non-event" because the school's major focus is not on renewal but on quality instruction. Similar to many charter schools, this school overcame numerous challenges during its first three years (i.e., management

turnover) and, subsequently, developed an instructional culture that is focused on student achievement that led to its strong internal accountability. At the time of my study, the school had successfully renewed its charter for the second time, and the board president was in his sixth year of service. He explains,

"The charter renewal, I don't think it had anything to do with the board. I mean only indirectly... [I]n our particular case—the charter was kind of a non-event because we're delivering a ...product [student achievement] (p. 50)."

Effectual instructional leadership is imperative in creating instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability, close the achievement gap, and create sustainable student achievement that outlasts the tenure of the instructional leadership that created it (Polk, 2006). Collins (2001) describes this type of leadership as Level 5 – Executive Leadership, and this is a leader who, “[B]uilds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will (p. 20).” According to Collins (2001), a key trait of a level 5 Leader is:

... [a]mbition first and foremost for the company and concern for its success rather than for one's own riches and personal renown. Level 5 leaders want to see the company even more successful in the next generation, comfortable with the idea that most people won't even know that the roots of that success trace back to their efforts... (p. 25-26).

In the following sections, I discuss internal accountability, instructional (school) culture, and instructional (principal) leadership and the ways in which they work together to enable schools to create sustainable achievement.

Internal Accountability

Hill, Lake and Celio (2002) define internal accountability as establishing, “a belief that [a] school’s performance depends on all adults working in concert, leading to shared expectations about how the school will operate, what it will provide children, and who is responsible for what (p. 3-4).” According to Abelmann and Elmore (1999), internal and external accountability mechanisms exist in schools to hold people accountable for their actions. These authors describe accountability as, “the variety of formal and informal ways by which people in schools *give an account* of their actions inside or outside the school to someone in a position of formal authority (p. 4).” According to Abelmann and Elmore (1999), states are pursuing charter schools and school choice programs as a means to, “sharpen the focus on academic quality and student performance (p. 1).”

Minnesota was the first state to enact charter school legislation in 1991, and the first charter school opened in 1992. At this time, forty-two states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school legislation, and there are over 6,000 charter schools that serve more than two million students (Retrieved on January 23, 2014 from <http://www.publiccharters.org>).

Hill et. al. (2002) noted that a pattern of development of internal accountability became apparent in the newly created schools they visited. The authors state:

Charter schools that survive initial confusions about goals and roles usually develop into organizations very unlike conventional public schools: They are clearer, simpler, less conflict-ridden, more focused on instruction. Some schools do not survive those confusions (p. 28-29).

The authors further maintain (2002):

Board, staffs, and parents pass through periods of turbulence to develop shared expectations about goals and measures of overall performance. In the course of about three years, most schools regularize internal relationships and establish divisions of labor and the basis on which individuals hold one another accountable (p. 28).

The patterns that Hill et. al. (2002) describe were evident in Alain Locke Charter School's early history. By its third year of operation, Alain Locke Charter School in Chicago, IL had experienced severe challenges in principal leadership. As a result, the board hired four principals within the first three years. The principal I interviewed, who was responsible for creating an instructional culture of achievement that led to strong internal accountability and closed the achievement gap, was the fourth principal (Polk, 2006). Alain Locke Charter School was one of the charter schools I studied in my dissertation study (Polk, 2006).

One of the board members I interviewed described the changes in principalship from the board's perspective as follows, "I think that the board's challenge is just to hire a principal who can lead a school to the ends that the board set out in its charter and its expectations, its hopes for the community... (Polk, 2006, p. 63-64)." In hiring its fourth principal, the board believed that it now had a principal in place who could work collaboratively with trustees, teachers, and parents to meet the school's goals and objectives. Alain Locke is now an example of an internally accountable school in which collaborative relationships form the basis for, "shared expectations regarding how the

school will operate, what it will provide children, and who is responsible for what" (Hill et al. 2002, p. 3-4) which led to sustainable improvement in academic achievement (Polk, 2004; 2006).

In September 2007, the U.S. Department of Education recognized Alain Locke as one of seven schools in the nation that has been successful in closing the achievement gap in its publication, *K-8 Charter Schools Closing the Achievement Gap: Innovations in Education*. This 2007 report substantiated the findings in my 2006 study. Alain Locke posted the number one test score gains in Chicago's history, and 89% of their students meet or exceed state standards in reading and math (Retrieved on January 20, 2014 from <http://www.accelerateinstitute.org/programs/school/alain-locke-charter-school>).

The instructional leaders at Alain Locke created an instructional culture of achievement that led to strong internal accountability and closed the achievement gap through the development of high-performing, collaborative relationships within and among its key stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, and trustees) (Polk, 2006). Alain Locke continues to sustain its achievement years after the principal and assistant principal responsible for engineering the change retired.

Newman, King and Rigdon (1997) examined how accountability frameworks could influence school performance and discovered a possible association between strong internal accountability, a school's organizational capacity, and a school's ability to successfully organize themselves around the work. They write (1997):

In some schools...we found that essential components of accountability were generated largely within a school staff. Staff identified clear standards for student performance, collected information to inform themselves about their levels of success, and exerted strong peer pressure within the faculty to meet the goals (p. 18).

In my study at the Alain Locke Charter School, these prerequisite components were also evident. For example, one of the teachers whom I interviewed stated that a new teacher was hired who had difficulty adapting to the instructional culture; and, she stated that after she and other teachers worked to support her, they were now helping her to understand that Alain Locke might not be the right fit for her (Polk, 2006).

Newman et. al. (1997) found that in some schools strong internal accountability existed alongside similar external accountability systems; however, they also discovered that in some schools strong internal accountability existed without or in direct opposition to external accountability requirements.

They state (1997):

These internally generated accountability systems constituted a major source of cohesion within the school. Thus, internal accountability can be seen not only as a building block of organizational capacity, but also as a result or product of high organizational capacity. That is a school's commitment to monitor its progress and offer its own set of rewards and sanctions can lead to higher consensus and skills development (p. 48).

In the next section, I discuss instructional (school) culture and how it leads to strong internal accountability.

Instructional (School) Culture

Hill et. al. (2002) maintain that internal accountability is especially important for schools, "where people play specialized roles and the product—student learning—is not created by one person alone but by many people acting in combination (p. 25)." They found that school culture plays an important part in a charter school's success or failure in developing internal accountability. The findings from my previous research studies echo Hill et. al.'s (2002) study which showed that school culture constitutes an integral part in internal accountability, especially as it relates to the role that the principal plays in shaping the instructional culture (Polk, 2004; 2006).

While there are many different definitions of culture, for the purposes of this article, I use Schein's (1992) definition whereas he defines the culture of a group as follows:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 12).

The assistant principal at Alain Locke Charter School maintained that her role as one of the instructional leaders consisted of establishing a culture where it was an expectation that everyone works together to do the best job possible. She explains:

We're trying to establish in our culture here that we all work together. We have each other's backs. If there's a situation that needs to be taken care of, and there's nobody around to do it,

but you know it needs to be done, then we try to jump in and do it. And I'm always emphasizing that to the staff...Our bottom line here is we want to do the best job we can to get the job done by any means necessary (Polk, 2006, p. 33).

I would argue that creating an instructional culture of achievement plays a critical role in a charter school's success or failure in developing strong internal accountability, especially as it relates to the roles that teachers and instructional leaders play in shaping it.

According to Deal and Peterson (1999):

...[S]chool culture affects every part of the enterprise from what faculty talk about in the lunch room, to the type of instruction that is valued, to the way professional development is viewed, to the importance of learning for all students (p. 7).

These authors maintain that "strong, positive, collaborative cultures powerfully affect many features (i.e., effectiveness and productivity) and that there is evidence of leaders who shape strong cultures everywhere including administrators, teachers, parents, and even students (p. 7)." Schein (1985) maintains that:

... [I]f the group's survival is threatened because elements of its culture have become maladapted, it is ultimately the function of leadership to recognize and do something about the situation (p. 5).

According to Sergiovanni (1995), once strong cultures are established in schools, they act as a, "powerful socializer of thought and programmer of behavior (p. 95)." He maintains that cultures do not create themselves; they are shaped by the "negotiated product of shared sentiments of school participants (p. 95)." Sergiovanni further states that successful schools tend to have strong functional cultures that are aligned with a vision of excellence in education. While the instructional leader is essential in developing this culture, both leadership and staff are responsible for working collaboratively to maintain and support them.

In this regard, it is not surprising that the administrators and staff at Alain Locke Charter School believe that creating an infrastructure of support in which teachers feel supported by their colleagues and by instructional leaders is an essential part of their school's instructional culture of achievement and strong internal accountability. Adult members of the school community also understand the importance of mentoring

students, while both administrators and teachers realize that it is imperative for administrators to show teachers how much they appreciate them. Monthly activities that focus on reducing stress in which teachers and administrators socialize together were ways in which administrators showed teachers their appreciation (Polk, 2006, p. 106).

In the Alain Locke Charter School study (Polk, 2006), I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the teachers' perspectives regarding how the collaborative instructional culture of achievement led to strong internal accountability. To this end, I administered a forced-choice, open-ended survey. Question #12 on the survey asked teachers: To what extent do you believe that your school's internal accountability influences how you work with others? Teachers answered this question utilizing a Likert Scale from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. Ninety-percent (90%) of the teachers surveyed answered 3 or higher that they believe that their school's internal accountability influences how they work with others which is representative of the instructional culture of collaboration and relationship building at Alain Locke (Polk, 2006, p. 94).

One of my major findings from the Alain Locke study and studies at other high-performing charter schools is that collaborative working relationships is the foundation upon which instructional cultures of achievement and strong internal accountability are built (Polk, 2004; 2006). In the succeeding section, I discuss how effectual instructional leadership shapes instructional cultures that lead to strong internal accountability.

Instructional (Principal) Leadership

In exchange for increased freedom from the onerous rules and regulations associated with district public schools, charter schools are given the freedom to make choices regarding personnel, salary structure, curriculum, etc. While the charter authorizer (i.e., state board of education, university, etc.) ultimately holds each school accountable for meeting the terms of its charter application, research has proven that the role of the school's key stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, and trustees) in developing internal accountability is a stronger indicator of a school's long-term success (Hill et. al., 2002; Polk, 2004; 2006).

However, Rallis and Goldring (2000) maintain that "although an effective accountability process engages the whole community, the principal is crucial to its successful operation (p. 20)." My research studies also found that the instructional leader, more than anyone else, assists in creating instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability and close the achievement gap (Polk, 2004; 2006). Furthermore, the tasks of principals in traditional public schools and public charter schools continue to increase.

In traditional public schools, the multiple responsibilities of the principal are monumental. According to Chirichello (2003), these roles and responsibilities have become even more complex. Principals are expected to supervise staff, discipline students, meet with parents, manage facilities, lead the instructional program, work on special projects, ensure the safety of staff and students, manage budgets, take part in school-wide reform, build partnerships with social agencies, and understand the legal implications that impact their decisions. Fullan (2001) further maintains that principals are experiencing the “worst of both worlds” (p. 139). He explains:

With the move toward the self-management of schools, the principal appears to have the worst of both worlds. The old world is still around with expectations to run a smooth school, and to be responsive to all; simultaneously the new world rains down on schools with disconnected demands, expecting that at the end of the day the school should be constantly showing better test results, and ideally, becoming a learning organization (p. 139).

I believe that these numerous responsibilities and expectations for performance are compounded for charter school leaders who do not have the traditional support system of a school district (i.e., facilities, finance, personnel, employee benefits, etc.). In addition, new charter schools are technically start-up organizations and are subject to the same misfortunes as other new businesses. Finno, Jr., Manno and Vanourek (2002) explain:

In other entrepreneurial ventures, we expect start-up calamities and high failure rates. But we seldom view schools that way. Yet charter schools resemble small businesses as well as educational institutions (p. 101).

The authors further maintain that in addition to the prerequisite skills needed for traditional public school leaders to succeed, charter school leaders also need the following skills to thrive, “[F]inancial acumen, political shrewdness, Herculean stamina, and tolerance for trial and error, as well as educational vision (p. 101).” In addition to the above mandatory competencies, my research studies of high-achieving charter schools, especially Alain Locke Charter School, demonstrate that the instructional leader's ability to develop and sustain productive, collaborative working relationships is central to a school's long-term viability (Polk, 2004; 2006).

Fullan (2001) maintains that one of the primary roles of principals is to ensure that

productive relationships develop and people have a clear understanding of expectations. He states (2002):

[T]he job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result (p. 65).

While many relationships exist within a school (i.e., teacher-student, teacher-parent, teacher-teacher, teacher-principal), Barth (1990) argues that no other relationship affects the quality of life within the school more than the teacher-principal relationship. Written over 20 years ago, I would argue that this finding is still valid today. Barth (1990) states:

I have found no characteristic of a good school more pervasive than a healthy teacher-principal relationship—and no characteristic of a troubled school more common than a troubled, embattled administrator-teacher relationship (p. 19).

According to Barth (1990), the attitude of the teacher-principal relationship whether positive or negative goes beyond its scope and mirrors other relationships within the school. The author maintains that this relationship “models what all relationships will be (p. 19).” One of the findings from my dissertation study at the Alain Locke Charter School substantiates Barth’s finding (Polk, 2006). In interviewing teachers, many of them described the collaborative relationship between teachers and the principal and assistant principal. One of the second grade teachers, Ms. Rogers, described how she felt as though she was “part of leadership” through her involvement in meetings where she and her colleagues were asked to “challenge themselves” and to provide input on issues where she felt that their opinions were taken seriously by the school leaders. Ms. Rogers explains (Polk, 2006):

... [T]he administration meets with us all the time...at least once a week on Fridays when they’re teaching us. And, they really emphasize staff development. But, also in those meetings, they are looking to us so that we can devise a lot of the things that we are doing for our mission statement...We’re thinking about ways that we can challenge ourselves as a

staff as a cooperative group and that makes me feel as though I'm part of the leadership...I find that they really respect our opinion here...They say...what are your thoughts and we deliberate, and I like that (p. 95).

These collaborative relationships form the basis of the school's instructional culture of achievement that led to strong internal accountability that successfully closed the achievement gap with sustainable, long-term results. These results outlived the tenure of the administrators who engineered the changes that translated Alain Locke from one of the lowest-performing schools in the city of Chicago to a national model of student achievement.

Conclusion

According to Dr. Kuhn (1996), a crisis generally precedes a new paradigm. My reflective question to charter school leaders is: Should I wait for a crisis (i.e., probation or charter revocation) to create an instructional culture of achievement that leads to strong internal accountability and closes the achievement gap?

In describing the type of men who generally invent new paradigms, Dr. Kuhn states:

...Almost always the men who achieve these fundamental inventions of a new paradigm have been either very young or very new to the field whose paradigm they change. And perhaps that point need not have been made explicit, for obviously these are the men who, being little committed by prior practice to the traditional rules of normal science, are particularly likely to see that those rules no longer define a playable game and to conceive another set that can replace them (p. 90).

While Dr. Kuhn argues that most of the men who have been responsible for inventing a new paradigm in normal science have been men who are either "very young or very new to the field whose paradigm they change" or being little committed by prior practice to the traditional rules of normal science" they are therefore able to discern that the rules no longer "define a playable game and to conceive another set that can replace them (p. 90)," I would strongly maintain that both novice and veteran charter school leaders can invent a new paradigm in the area of creating instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability and close the achievement gap.

I would argue that many charter school leaders have already experienced the crises of low student achievement and disconcerting reports from their external authorizers;

therefore, they are ready for a paradigm shift that will help them to become authoritative, offensive players in this era of increased accountability.

About the Author

Dr. Sheila Polk is the Founder & President of TEACH the POSSIBILITY, an education consulting company located in Washington, DC. She earned her master's and doctorate degrees at Harvard University in the Graduate School of Education in the area of Administration, Planning and Social Policy with a concentration in the Urban Superintendents Program. Prior to founding TEACH the POSSIBILITY, Dr. Polk consulted as an Education Policy Specialist for Charter School Accountability utilizing her leadership, systemic planning, and charter school accountability research findings as the foundation for her work with charter schools. She has completed extensive research in the area of internal accountability and charter school success. She has over 20 years of experience as an educator in closing the achievement gap. She has worked as an elementary (K-8) and high school language arts, reading, and English teacher. She also has experience working in an administrative capacity at both the public school and district levels. She began her career in education teaching at the college level.

Dr. Polk earned her bachelor's degree from DePaul University where she majored in English and minored in business administration. She also graduated with Distinction with a master's degree in curriculum development from DePaul University. Dr. Polk is a member of Kappa Delta Pi, an International Honor Society in Education. She has devoted her research and practice to improving the quality of public education for poor children living in urban areas, specifically children of color. Dr. Polk grew up in a single parent, low-income household on the Southside of Chicago. Neither her mother nor her father was fortunate enough to graduate from high school. Her personal and professional experiences influence her educational philosophy that reality should not be synonymous with possibility when it comes to teaching children. We must teach the possibility!

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