KEEPING CHARTER SCHOOLS ON TRACK:
A Case Study with Policy Recommendations

AN ACTION REPORT SUBMITTED TO
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REUBIN O’D ASKEW SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY

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June 10, 2004

COAST Charter School Board
84 Shell Island Road
St. Marks, Florida 32355

Dear School Board Members:

As a parent and a faculty representative of COAST, I have a sincere appreciation and personal interest in this school. It has been my pleasure to be a part of this growing development, which is why I bring you *KEEPING CHARTER SCHOOLS ON TRACK: A Case Study with Policy Recommendations*. The information presented is the result of research that has been gathered over the past year.

This action report provides evidence that COAST has shifted away from its original mission and educational vision. In addition, this report provides information on the importance of the mission statement to the charter school contract and to its stakeholders. This report also provides policy recommendations on how COAST can strengthen its mission statement internally through strategic planning, evaluation, and the use of internal committees. Further remedies include a closer look at a now successful charter school that had similar problems to those suggested in this report.

These options have the potential to improve the overall focus of COAST. In addition, the community that COAST serves will have a clearer understanding of what COAST represents and also provide a strong sense for the future for everyone involved.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present this important information to you. Feel free to contact me if you should have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Melinda Christoph, MPA
Florida State University
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Charter schools introduce a line of thinking that is foreign to many in education. The basic premise is that, given an opportunity to choose a different school for their child, many parents will choose to leave the traditional public school in favor of a charter school that offers a unique philosophy, culture, curriculum, or organizational style better suited to meet the educational needs of their children. These choices allow parents and students to make their voices heard by selecting schools that offer a better match for what they are seeking for their children. But what if these charter school promises are not being met as they are stated in their mission statement?

Nearly two-thirds of all the newly created charter schools were started "to realize an alternative vision of schooling" (RPP International, 2000). The alternative vision for each school varies widely. Generally, charter schools are started by educators, parents, or organizations. Many educators see the charter school movement as an opportunity to act on their dreams for creating a unique kind of school that allows them to do things differently in order to achieve their vision. Parents who lead the startup of charter schools often do so because of dissatisfaction with the experiences they have had with their traditional public school system. The last group, organizations, comprises nonprofit and for-profit groups that see charter schools as a means of putting their best ideas about schooling children into practice (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998).

As Charter schools reach a decade in existence it is necessary to examine their worth to ensure that they are truly following their educational vision that has been promised by their creators through their mission statement. Often times, an idea is borne, and that idea
must be redeveloped as the needs of society change. What is lost in the transition is the original educational vision that inspired the creation of the charter school in the first place.

**KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS**

*Why Is the Mission Statement so Important to Charter Schools?*

“Experts agree that the single most important attribute of the successful charter school is a clear sense of purpose or mission shared by parents, students, staff, and the school's board of trustees. A common vision of what it means to be educated and how one becomes educated forms the basis of a coherent school design. It guides the school's decision-makers in every aspect of planning and operations. It gives potential employees, prospective students, and their parents clear indications of how they will be treated and what will be expected of them. It explains to chartering agencies and the community at large how this charter school is distinctive from other public schools. It provides a basis for decisions by foundations to support the school. It gives prospective lenders confidence that key personnel and constituencies have the level of commitment and purpose necessary to make the school financially viable.” (Millot & lake, 1996)

In addition, the integrity of the charter school's mission and educational vision needs to be emphasized in the laws that govern charter schools. As sponsoring agencies consider a charter school proposal, their criteria should be clear. Does the prospective charter school have a sound mission and educational vision? What is the rationale for the educational vision? What makes the charter school distinctive? Are there solid student recruitment plans in place? What provisions exist for hiring and recruiting qualified staff? How will the charter school, if a conversion school, deal with recalcitrant staff that is not "on board" with the school's educational vision? These criteria emphasize the crucial role that the mission statement plays in the development and existence of charter schools.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which charter schools are sustaining their educational vision or mission. Are they living up to what
they promised in the mission statement? To further the purpose, I offer three policy recommendations that will better identify charter schools as they have come to exist today. In hopes that future charter schools will consider more clearly what they want to accomplish in the future and not just use their educational vision or mission statements as a “selling point” to seek out higher achievers. Policy recommendations will focus on:

- **STRATEGIC PLAN:** Require Charter Schools to submit a written strategic plan to the state chartering board. This should be accomplished through an annual planning process with parent’s teachers, and board members which specifically identifies goals toward honoring each section of their mission statement.

- **INTERNAL REVIEW:** Conduct an internal review annually for mission cohesion and compliance.

- **ANNUAL SURVEYS:** Administering an annual survey of students or teachers about the mission and the school's adherence to it

- **OUTSIDE EVALUATION** contracting with an outside agency or consultant to assess the mission and the school in relation to the mission

Research for this action report was sparked by evidence of mission creep found in COAST Charter school of St. Marks, Florida. Information for this report was collected with the use of several methods. COAST Charter School’s internal documents, academic literature, historical minutes from board meetings and from the Wakulla County School District were reviewed and analyzed. Additionally, key school personnel were interviewed, and staff, parents, and community stakeholders were surveyed. These resources provided background information on the relevance of this report.
DEFINITION OF TERMS:

In order to assist the reader’s understanding of this action report, the following terms are defined.

Charter School: Nathan’s (1996) broad definition of charter schools: Charter schools are public schools, financed by the same per pupil funds that traditional schools receive. However, they are held accountable for achieving educational results. In return, they receive waivers that exempt them from many of the restrictions and bureaucratic rules that shape traditional public schools. Rogus’ (1996) definition adds that charter schools are free of governmental authority, but are held accountable for achieving a specified set of program outcomes.

Vision: Peter Senge et al. (1999) defines shared vision this way: This collective discipline establishes a focus on mutual purposes. People learn to nourish a sense of commitment in a groups or organization by developing shared images of the future they seek to create, and the principles and guiding practices by which they hope to get there.

For the purpose of this action report, the vision is the individual or collective dream ideal of what the organization is or can be and what it can accomplish, it is the foundation for establishing the beliefs, values and missions of an organization.

Mission Statement: The mission statement is aligned with the vision of the organization. It identifies the goals and objectives that support the institutions. The mission statement is based on a common point of view of the organizations constituents. For the purpose of this action report the terms mission and vision are used interchangeably.
**Mission Creep:** The tendency for a project or program to accumulate more and more required goals as development proceeds. Mission creep typically delays a program, runs it over budget, and may often produce a product that lacks direction and coherency.

A number of researchers over the past 10 years have found that large districts are increasingly "off task," in the language of education. A 1989 study from the magazine Education and Urban Society found, "As specialization in staff grows, program offerings expand, and administrative personnel increase, problems of coordination and control also increase. And in large systems, time and energy are more likely to be shifted away from core service activities" (Las Vegas Review-Journal, 2003).
PROBLEM STATEMENT:

Charter schools are semi-autonomous public schools, founded by educators, parents, community groups or private organizations that operate under a written contract with a state, district or other entity. This contract, or charter, details how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be taught and expected to achieve, and how success will be measured. These hopeful successes are specifically identified in the charters mission statement that is a part of the initial charter contract; further use of the mission statement is to express the charters intentions and goals to the community and stakeholders. Many charter schools enjoy freedom from rules and regulations affecting other public schools, as long as they continue to meet the terms of their charters. Charter schools can be closed for failing to satisfy these terms, which reveals the importance of the mission statement and further defines the importance of this action report.

Although Charter schools are phenomena still in infancy, evidence eludes that some charters have already shifted away from their original educational vision, and are redefining themselves to fit the specific needs of the community of which they exist. In most cases, charter schools are developed with the hopes to be higher performing schools then their traditional public school counterparts so that they will be the school of choice to the highest performing students. However, this fallacy has been identified to be one of the biggest disappointments to the charter school movement. One theory that will be identified through this action report is that charter schools are moving away from their original mission because of specialization of educators. Another theory may be that
students who are failing or who are on the verge of being expelled from their assigned schools are moving to these charter schools with the hopes of starting over on a fresh slate. While most charter schools develop with the hopes of attracting specific students (specifically higher achieving students), so that they can provide excellence in education to the “cream of the crop”; an alternative for the districts that they choose to develop in. These lower achieving students are not improving in the new charters; instead they are bringing state standard test scores down, leaving the charter to be identified as lower achieving schools. This leaves charter schools with a dilemma, with an influx of students who need remediation instead of advanced literature classes. This obviously creates a conflict with what is stated in their mission statement. These factors lead to the problem of mission creep.

Evidence provided by this paper suggests that some charter schools cannot sustain in the capacity that they set out to be; yet they are still using their original mission statement that does not truly identify with what they have become. It is crucial for charter school to evaluate their mission statement regularly to assure their stakeholders and their communities that they are honoring their promise to them. In other words, a charter school's mission must truly get at the core of the reason why the school exists. A Mission statement explains to the rest of the world the intended purpose and standards for the school. And since a charter school's purpose is likely to change, the process of re-writing a mission or vision statement may help the school regain clarity about where it is headed or help to build consensus among new members of the community. Regardless, (Berman, Premack and Diamond, 1994) warn, "Those lacking this guiding educational vision will fail to take full advantage of the charter legislation
and struggle unnecessarily with the challenges presented by the charter implementation process." Establishing a clear and compelling sense of purpose can be accomplished several ways. For some groups it emerges through the process of working together and discussing what is valued or important for the particular school. Other groups form around an existing mission, like the Montessori model or Coalition of Essential Schools' Common Principles. Some groups involve the entire school community in writing the mission statement, while others assign the task to a committee, site council, or board.

Therefore the purpose of this Action Report is to identify policy options that encourage charter schools to reform back to their originally intended educational vision, or re-write a new mission statement that more closely identifies their future intentions. The underlying importance however, is that charter schools stay true to their mission statement which in turn means that they are staying true to their stakeholders.
BACKGROUND:

In theory, charter schools are designed to generate innovation, instill competition, and most importantly provide for parental options. The extent to which these goals are met is still under close scrutiny and criticism. Charter proponents claim that the basic bargain of charter schools is accountability for autonomy. Charter schools are public schools that bargain for fewer regulations that encumber traditional public school bureaucracies. Charter proponents believe that in exchange for the greater autonomy granted by regulatory freedom, charter operators are held to a higher standard of accountability by their chartering agency than other public schools. The accountability is generally stated in student performance terms, but charter school developers are also accountable for the school’s goals and for upholding their end of the market-driven equation through the mission statement.

There has been an outcry for educational reform in the last two decades. Especially following the critical review of American public education as discussed in A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984). One of many policy reforms that emerged throughout the nation was that of school choice, giving parents the power and opportunity to choose the school for their child to attend. School choice covered a multitude of student assignment plans as well as non-traditional programs. By 2000, school choice reform movements were underway in many states around the nation as a response to the cry for radical reform. One of the most recent forms of school choice emerged in 1991 when Minnesota enacted legislation that
provided for the establishment of Charter Schools (Good & Braden, 2000). Charter schools were designed to be independent public schools of choice that were freed from rules and regulations but accountable for results (Finn, Manno & Vanourek, 2000). Charter schools appealed to educators and parents by providing an opportunity to stay within the public school system to create a program and educational environment free of bureaucratic restrictions (Lockwood, 1997). The National Charter School Directory 2003, Center for Education Reform reports that there are currently 2,695 charter schools nationwide and Florida is home to 258 charter schools (US Charter Schools website, 2004).

The charter school movement was characterized by four major concepts: the opportunity for families and their children to exert choice in public education; entrepreneurial opportunities for educators, parents, or other third-party organizers to start a school; the definitive responsibility for student performance and improved student achievement; and the market theory of competition to improve schools and encourage reform within school districts (Cheung, Murphy, & Nathan, 1998).

According to Nathan (1998), characteristics of typical charter school legislation includes:

- Allows the creation of new public schools, or the conversion of existing ones.
- Stipulates that the schools be nonsectarian and prohibits admissions tests.
- Requires that these schools be responsible for improved student achievement over a period of three to five years or be closed.
- Waives most state rules and regulations, along with local contract provisions; in exchange for explicit responsibility for results.
Permits several public bodies – such as state and local boards, universities and city governments, to authorize the creation of charter schools.

Permits educators and families to select these schools rather than being assigned to them

Requires that average per-pupil funding follow students to the school along with other appropriate funds such as Title I and special and compensatory education funds (p.500).

Charter schools were characterized as innovative public schools freed from many governmental rules and regulations; additionally accountability appeared to be a central theme of the schools (Kolderie, 1998) stated “charters are all about accountability, to parents through choices they make on behalf of their children, to chartering authorities, to policy makers, and to tax payers, and to the general public”. Charter accountability was thought of having a dual function: The responsibility of performance and outcomes to the customers or student and family that selected the school as well as the responsibility to the public authority or sponsor representing the public interest (Finn, 2000). “Charter sponsors are responsible for setting academic, fiscal, and other performance standards for their schools and them holding operators accountable for meeting those standards. This can be accomplished easily through sustaining their mission statement.
LITERATURE REVIEW:

Early Reports of the importance of Vision in Charter Schools

In 1996, the Hudson Institute published Charter Schools in Action: What have we learned? (Manno, Finn & Bierlein, 1996). This first year report focused on 35 charter schools in seven states. The authors listed five features that they especially liked about charter schools.

“In almost every instance, a charter school is a small, even intimate place where everyone knows everyone else’s name and recognizes their faces. It has a clear focused mission that it can articulate and has the freedom to pursue that mission without unacceptable constraints and distractions. It is populated by people -- teachers, students, parents-- who choose to be there and who believe in the schools mission. Even before summative test scores come in, we note that these are characteristics of most successful educational institutions.” (p.80)

The 1997 Colorado Charter schools evaluation study includes information on 24 charter schools that were in operation for at least two years at the end of the 1996-1997 school year. The first item on the section entitled “Lessons learned” spoke of the application process: “Adopt a distinct mission statement. Ensure the schools vision can be described in specific and concise terms, but with enough detail to accurately describe the intent” (p.6). In July 1998, the Massachusetts Department of Education (MDOE) published a report conducted by Rosenblum Brigham Associates (1998). The study examined innovative practices observed in 21 of the 24 Massachusetts charter schools. The first finding spoke to the point that these charter schools are “newly created organizations, and through the autonomy granted to them were able to carry out their own visions, with few bureaucratic constraints” (p. 7). This report goes on to state that each
of these schools has its own “unifying focus” and they are able to hire staff who “believe in their school focus and subscribe to their mission” (p.7).

The United Stated Department of Education funded two successive national reports on charter schools. The First Year Report 1997 (Berman & Nelson, 1997) was conducted by RRP International and the University of Minnesota. The results are based on telephone interviews with 225 of the 252 schools in operational in 1996. 42 field visits were made.

In response as to the question about why the schools were founded, the most frequent response was “Almost all newly created charter schools seek to realize an educational vision and or serve a special student population. Two out of three newly created charter schools founded the charter to “realize an educational vision.”

In July of 1998, A National Study of Charter Schools: Second Year Report (1998) (Berman & Nelson, 1998) was conducted for the United States Department of Education by RPP International in partnership with the Institute for Responsive Education. The report presents information for 428 charter schools during the 1996-1997 school year. When asked why charter schools were founded and what attracts parents to them, one of the most frequent responses was: “Newly created charter schools trend to be established to realize an alternative vision for education.” Over 55% of charter schools responded that the most important reason for founding a charter school was to realize this alternative vision for education (p. 5).

Abby Weiss (1997) conducted a study of five Massachusetts charter schools: Going it Alone. These findings indicated that “At a couple of schools we found a lack of clear vision. At one school a teacher commented that, “We’re still figuring out what we
are about. We’re trying to be about everything all of the time” and we are stretched to thin. We lack a clear vision.”

At another school parents could not tell us what the vision of the school was. Parents said “we’re not there yet”, and “we have many visions”. Weiss found that without a clear vision, schools have a more difficult time with the decision making process and policy setting. A clear vision allows schools to establish predictable policies, as well as expectations for their community members. All of which flows from this common understanding of what the school is all about.

Based on the results of these studies, parents, teachers and students choose charter schools because they are more clearly aligned with their own ideas about how schools should be designed. Because all three constituents choose to attend these schools, they seem to be philosophically aligned with the schools visions for education and experience greater satisfaction.

This study focused on the importance of clarifying and sustaining a shared vision in educational settings and creating mission and goals that are aligned with that vision. Parents who are concerned that their public schools are not responding to their concerns, beliefs and values, are looking for educational options. They want to be involved in the creation of schools that correspond to their common vision of education for their children. These parents and like-minded educators have supported charter school legislation and other school choice agendas in recent years. Gelberg (1997) states, “charter schools provide the possibility—clearly missing in our existing system—of one might call the “excitement factor”–teachers, parents and students, letting the creative
juices flow in the effort to design from the ground up an educational setting they believe in” (p. 233).

Educational Vision Reform

There have been many studies and reform legislation in recent years. In this section, there is a discussion of some of the research and educational policy initiatives which led to the vision of charter school laws in the United States. In the 1980’s there was great interest in educational reform. American society was changing at a rapid pace since the end of World War II and two reports amplified the need for school change. On August 26, 1981, Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in education to determine the quality of education in the United States. There was a growing public perception that our schools were ineffective. Its findings indicated that our nation was lagging behind other nations in a variety of academic and skill areas. It stated that the declining trend “stems more from weakness of purpose, confusion of vision, under use of talent, and lack of leadership, then from conditions beyond our control” (National Commissions on Excellence in Education 1983). The National Commission on Education reported emphatically that our nation was “at risk.” After the fifth anniversary of the 1983 report Secretary of Education, William Bennett reported pessimistically that the reform efforts had been slow and relatively unsuccessful (Paris, 1995). In 1989, a summit of governors assembled by President Bush established six national goals to be achieved by the year 2000, but funding was not adequate to support the implementation of these goals. In 1991, the new Secretary of Education in the Bush administration, Lamar Alexander, unveiled the America 2000 plan that included the
support of “choice plans” and the adoption of national standards in education. The Clinton Administration, in a bipartisan mode chose to support these national goals and further strengthen them. In a statement by President Clinton on the final passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of October 5, 1994, his intent on becoming the “education president” and his vision of education is clear.

“I am gratified by the broad bipartisan support in the Senate for final passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This Act is good news for students, teachers, families, and communities across our country. It represents a commitment to world-class standards of academic achievement for all students and to adequate preparation for every teacher. It brings added help to the schools that need it the most and offers new flexibility to states and local communities. It reinforces our national commitment to schools that are safe and drug free and that offer young people a disciplined environment for learning. It encourages parental involvement in the education of their children. And it puts the Federal Government squarely on the side of public school choice, innovative charter schools, and character education.” (Press release of the office of the Press Secretary, October 5, 1994)

In President Clinton’s Call to Action for American Education in the 21st Century, the president supports the concept of school choice, encourages charter school legislation in every state, and expands start up funding for charter schools. Clinton called for 3000 charter schools by 2000. It is evident that the Clinton Administration was committed to school choice, particularly in the form of charter schools.

According to the Department of Education, “the charter establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school’s mission, program goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success” (US Charter Schools, 2004). These requirements demonstrate that unlike private schools, charter schools are publicly accountable. In addition to meeting the requirements in their charters, in most cases, charter schools must also meet their state or district’s educational accountability
standards. Thus, accountability and a sustainable mission statement plays an inherently important role for charter schools and becomes increasingly significant when it comes to the discussion of whether or not charter schools are living up to their promises.

These issues and more further obscure an already complex system, because charter school accountability is much more than student test scores. Unlike traditional public schools, charter accountability starts with the application for a charter and has the possibility of ending with the revocation of a charter. For these reasons and more, it is important that all agencies involved in the granting, monitoring, and administration of charter schools have a clear understanding of to whom and for what the schools are accountable. As Hill et al. (2001) explains, although state charter school laws address these accountability issues to some degree, “ultimately they will be answered only in practice, by state and local education agencies, by charter school operators, and by teachers, parents, and students”.

As further evidence of the importance of the mission statement this brief look at the charter application was obtained from the Florida Charter School Resource Center USF. In the 2004 Florida Charter School Application, the first part of the assignment is to describe the core philosophy or underlying purpose of the proposed school.

What reviewers will look for: clear statements with reference to items in section 1002.33 (2)(a)(b)(c), Florida Statutes:

- (a) Guiding Principles
- (b) Purposes that must be fulfilled
- (c) Purposes which may be fulfilled

Clearly articulated vision for an innovative public school that will lead to improved
educational outcomes and greater community ownership of the local school, and clear indicators that the educational program will support the mission of the charter School.

CASE STUDY:

For the purpose of this report, it is necessary to provide two case studies, one in depth and one brief historical case study. The brief case study, Wright Middle School, of Madison, Wisconsin, identified their failure was due to a lack of commitment to their mission statement. The second, in depth case study, COAST Charter School, of St. Marks, Florida, has not yet identified that their unsuccessful attempts to prosper is due an unsustainable mission statement. However, evidence provided through this case study will help bring attention to the problems with their mission statement as it is currently stated.

CASE STUDY - WRIGHT MIDDLE SCHOOL:

Wright Middle School, Madison Wisconsin was identified as one charter school that originally failed because of their lack of commitment to their mission statement. They later reorganized and emphasized that their success was due to a strong structured mission statement. They are currently used as a model charter school in the Madison, Metropolitan School District, of Wisconsin. “The success of Wright Middle School's educational program in the areas of student academic achievement, artistic expression, character development, and leadership, suggests an educational model that other educators nationwide may wish to replicate in whole or in part. Our website will serve as a comprehensive online resource both for existing public/charter schools and for those seeking to establish new charter schools. The fundamental goal of the website will be to
describe Wright Middle School in sufficient detail that other educators will be able to understand”.

❖ *The school's educational mission/philosophy, and*

❖ *How that mission/philosophy has informed key elements of the school's design, such as curriculum, facilities, staff, etc.”*


The success of Wright Middle School is the result of a community coming together after realizing that their school was no longer fulfilling their educational vision as it was originally intended. Through the hiring of new leadership, and a consensual overhaul on their mission and vision they are now one of the few success stories of charter schools that were on the verge of failing, this school was saved in time. The hope that COAST will realize the needed changes within the school is the basic premise of this report. By using Wright’s model, along with policy recommendations to implement a strategic plan, evaluation procedures, and oversight committee, COAST Charter School has the potential to be one of the best Charter Schools in the Region.

Throughout this report the importance of the mission statement to charter schools has been documented and discussed. However, it is even more important to the future of the charter that the school sustains a constant devotion to their written mission statement as well as having one that is clear and concise that serves the requirements of the charter application. The following case study is an example

**CASE STUDY - COAST CHARTER SCHOOL:**
This cases study was conducted as an internal evaluation by faculty members. For research purposes, interviews and surveys by all stakeholders were conducted and internal documents were reviewed and analyzed.

COAST Charter School of the Arts, Science and Technology is a free parent choice school located in St. Marks, Florida. COAST opened its doors in 1999, and currently serves 103 students. 96% of these students are bused in from surrounding areas as far as 25 miles away, and 67% of the students receive free lunch. The school operated under a “D” letter grade for the 2003-2004 school year (Florida Department of Education, 2004).

The mission of the school is as follows:

"COAST will provide an educational choice to students, educators and parents with a close-knit learning community focused on high student performance and collective responsibility, characterized by:

- A Structured Environment Resulting From A Specific Code Of Conduct
- An Intensive Study Of The Arts And Sciences
- The Infusion Of Technology Into All Subject Areas
- Dynamic Integrated Core Curriculum
- Shared Responsibility Among Students, Parents And Teachers"

As a faculty member at COAST, I have the unique opportunity to see first hand, the everyday operations of this school. It has come to the attention of mine and many other faculty members that COAST has slowly been redefined and is no longer honoring their mission as it is stated. This is commonly known as mission creep. Evidence of this theory can be seen in many areas throughout the school. First, the “Art” department has been completely phased out this year, second there has never been a “Technology”
program or any technology “infused” into the classroom to date. Also, the “Sciences” have never been a major focus in the schools curriculum; in fact, they currently do not have a certified science teacher on staff. Other problems plague COAST that add to this growing problem of mission creep as well. For example, discipline problems have not been addressed adequately, and there is a high rate of staff turnover. For example, COAST just hired its third principal for the 2004-2005 school year, and the Math and Science classroom in the middle school had five teachers just this past school year. As further evidence, one incident of students drinking alcohol last year resulted in simply a one-page apology to the school. This was clearly the wrong message to send to students if the schools mission statement claims that COAST’s “collective responsibility, is characterized by: A Structured Environment Resulting From A Specific Code Of Conduct”

In addition, relations between the community and the school have begun to deteriorate. Parent involvement became non existent as further evidence of the school’s internal problems began to surface. Student enrollment has severely dropped for the upcoming school year. All of these factors contribute to this school’s critical danger of failing as the only free parent choice school in a 30-mile range.

Examining program alternatives that better define the future of COAST Charter School is an important part of this report. COAST has continuously attracted students who have not been successful in the traditional school setting. In reality, these students enroll at COAST several steps below grade level as evidence in past test scores. Having these low scoring students as the majority student body severely hinders the schools ability to portray a high achieving school as intended. However, this is not to say that
this could not become a high achieving school with a realistic focus and mission. The focus of this school should include remediation to raise student achievement, a strong commitment to higher academic standards, and a redefined mission that holds true to what is really happening in the school as it stands and also defines its future goals accurately.

COAST’s five–year Charter contract will expire at the end of the 2004-2005 school year. This means that if COAST does not improve in student achievement, and in the several areas that were mentioned above, the school could be in jeopardy of closing. As Nathan and Cheung (1998) point out, charter schools must be responsive to the same accountability measures used by public schools, such as the standardized tests that are used within a state and the commitment to a strong mission statement that is highlighted in the charter application. As public schools, it is unreasonable to expect charter schools not to adhere to the same measures as public schools.
SURVEY QUESTIONS:

To achieve the purpose of this report the following questions were asked to participants that have an interest in this school.

1. Does COAST Charter School articulate a clear educational vision or focus?

2. In what observable ways do the vision, mission, and goals manifest themselves in the daily operation of the school?

3. What does COAST Charter School do that is not reflected in their mission?

RESULTS:

A survey was constructed with the three research questions above to gain an understanding of where the mind set was with regard the mission of COAST Charter School. Teachers, Parents, Students and Board members were all asked the same questions. Although not reflective of the exact questions, these bullet points are highlights of some of the answers that derived from the questioning.

Surveys

- 75 Parents were surveyed, of these only 12 parents new that COAST Charter had a mission statement. None of the 12 new what that mission statement said.

- Only 2 of the 5 faculty members could state one of the core school visions without being prompted.

- Although all of the Board members had a clear vision of what the mission statement was, I asked each of them: In what ways is COAST Charter School honoring their current mission? Each board member separately confided in general “that more work had to be done to align the daily operations of the school with the current mission statement”. However, none mentioned definitive plans to do so.
When the School Board was asked: In what ways do you seek support from the District? The majority said that they don’t feel supported by the District, so they seek advice elsewhere.

Wakulla District School Board was surveyed. When asked “in what ways do you support Wakulla County’s only charter school? The Board overwhelmingly replied “when they have a problem they come to us”.

**Interview Number One**

**Outgoing Principal of COAST, Ms. S.**

For the protection of the participants, I will use initials to identify them. Ms. S. had no prior experience in leadership and holds a Bachelors Degree in Elementary Education. During an extensive interview with Ms. S, the out going principal, she mentioned many current problems that COAST had developed since she came on board two years ago. Ms. S. said that “the school has become a second chance school for many students that were on the verge of being kicked out of their regular school, and they brought their problems with them to COAST. The students didn’t change, in most cases they got worse”. She noted that this was because COAST couldn’t legally deny them admission to the school, especially if the schools funds come from the number of students they have enrolled – more students = more money. During the interview she also said that her focus as a principal changed as time went by because they had to eventually re-arrange there curriculum and schedule to accommodate for the many students that came to them with severe ADHD, behavior problems, and low test scores. Their focus eventually developed into remediation, they had to let go the Art teacher for funds to cover the remediation teacher. Ms. S. mentioned that she was leaving because she no longer felt that the school had promise, and that it was moving in the wrong direction.
Interview Number Two

Incoming COAST Principal, Dr. A.

Dr. A. comes to COAST with 30 years experience, and holds a Ph.D in Educational Leadership. At the time of the interview he had only two weeks on the job. Dr. A. was asked several questions regarding the focus of COAST, and where he thought it was heading. “the first thing I did was sit down and study the mission statement”. I wanted to be sure that I could make a difference here and that the board didn’t expect me to move mountains”. “I see many problems with the school, mostly within their current mission statement. As it stands the mission statement says one thing, yet we are operating another way, it doesn’t make sense. However, the board must be flexible to change their mission statement in order for any changes to take place at this school”, that is key. In addition, there should be a strategic plan in place. Currently we don’t even have an outline of where we expect to be a year from now.

Interview Number Three

COAST Parent, Ms. D.

Ms. D has been with COAST since the first year of its inception. Ms. D. has seen many changes that the school has undergone. “My child has two more years at COAST, and I am just about to give up. The only thing that is keeping us here this year is that new principal coming in. I am the most involved parent they have, every year they have about three parents that show up to everything and volunteer. Well the school policy handbook says right in it that it is mandatory for parents to volunteer. But the school doesn’t enforce it, that’s bad business if you ask me. I am a parent, I shouldn’t have to do everything”. When Ms. D. was asked if she ever saw the mission statement of the school,
she said that it was in the hand book, read it once and didn’t think much of it ever again. She said that she doesn’t hear any talk of it, or see it hanging in the school. She also noted that maybe she and other parents should take a closer look at it.

**WHAT IS AT STAKE HERE?**

This section identifies what this action report will contribute to, and to whom it will benefit. The intention of this action report was to keep charter schools on track with specific regards to their mission statements. As participants of this report were interviewed it was apparent that COAST Charter School was an important part of many people’s lives. The many interests that this paper could affect are: COAST school board, the Wakulla County district school board, faculty, students, parents, the St. Marks community, and the Wakulla County community. In addition, this case study will contribute to many purposes. First, COAST is Wakulla County’s only charter school. Meaning that if it fails, the only other option for parents and students is a private school (other than the public schools that are all quite full). COAST has students that travel from Tallahassee, 25 miles away, and Panacea, which is 35 miles away. This school choice is greatly needed in this area, and improvement to COAST’s focus and mission is crucial. Moreover, because of the charter contract consideration coming up, this evaluation should be considered an urgent matter.

The review of the literature in this report emphasizes that the success of charter schools seems to depend on the degree to which the stakeholders identify with the vision, mission and goals of these institutions. This qualitative case study attempts to examine the degree to which COAST Charter School and their constituents articulate a clear educational vision and mission. It identifies the degree to which this mission is
integrated into the daily operation of the school. It states when applicable, what modifications or revisions to the original mission are made by stakeholders since the founding of charter schools.

**WHY USE A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD?**

For the purpose of this report qualitative research seems to be the most appropriate method because the research sought to discover what the vision and mission of the charter school is and to what degree it is identified and implemented by the stakeholders in its setting. The approach to this research is more qualitative than quantitative. Patton (1990) tells us that “qualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail” (p.13). He makes a distinction between qualitative and quantitative data by stating that quantitative analysis measures the reaction of a large number of people to a set of questions, “thus facilitating comparison and statistical aggregation of data. This gives a broad, generalizable set of findings presented succinctly and parsimoniously” (p. 14). Qualitative methods, on the other hand, produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This increases understanding of the cases and situations studied, but reduces generalizability” (p.14).

Borg and Gall (1989) refer to Erickson, Florio, and Buschman (1980) when they state that:

Qualitative methods are best at seeking the answers to the following questions:

1. What’s happening in this setting?
2. What do the happenings mean to the people involved in them?
3. What do people have to know in order to be able to do what they do in the setting?
4. How does what is happening relate to what is happening in the wider social context of this setting?

5. How does the organization of what is happening here differ from that found in other places and times? (p. 407)

One of the difficulties of qualitative research is its breadth, and therefore how to focus the study is an issue. Patton (1990) mentions that Guba (1978) calls this the “boundary problem.” He also noted “The problem here is to determine the extent to which it is desirable to study one or few questions in great depth or to study many questions but in less depth” (p. 162). The researcher decided to focus on two schools rather than many schools, one in depth and one short historical case, in order to provide a comprehensive description of how and why each school was founded and how the initial vision permeates the culture of the schools.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND EVALUATION CRITERIA:

Methodology:

Information for this report was completed by the use of the following instruments:

- Interviews and Surveys of parents, faculty members, community members, board members, both district and school, and students
- Review of literature through academic journals using Florida State University Web Luis, and the Worldwide Web
- Review of internal documents of COAST Charter School
- Direct observation of school operations
- Review of state and federal documents, legislative bills and existing policies.
- Florida Department of Education, Florida's Charter School Application

Personal interviews and surveys provided the institutional knowledge and history of COAST Charter School needed to make assumptions of current operations and future policy recommendations. The review of documents provided contractual information and policy guidelines. In addition, the documents reviewed provided insight into the historical background and current status of COAST. The personal interviews specifically provided a better understanding of the expected changes of COAST and the history of communication problems of stakeholders. Direct observation allowed the researcher to see in what ways the mission statement of the school was imbedded into the daily operations of the school. The Florida Department of Education, Florida's Charter School Application allowed the researcher to reflect back to the application in analyzing the policies in place in order to receive a charter contract.
Evaluative Criteria:

Four criteria were selected to evaluate the proposed policy options: economic feasibility, potential effectiveness, administrative feasibility, and public support/political acceptability. Each criterion will be measured on a decision matrix with rankings of low to high, with low being least favorable and high being most favorable. Scores for each option will be summed based on the analyst’s assessment of the extent of which the options meet the criteria.

- **Economic Feasibility**: This is an essential element to consider when designing and implementing a clear and concise mission statement that essentially promises to stakeholders what the school intends to deliver. The criterion rates the financial cost to the school to implement each policy alternative.

- **Potential Effectiveness**: This criterion will be used to identify whether or not the policy options identified will be effective in sustaining mission statements that charter schools are required to have.

- **Administrative Feasibility**: This criterion will be used in consideration of available staffing that will be needed to implement the suggested policy options.

- **Public Support/Political Acceptability**: Are the stakeholders on board? It is essential that charter school board members identify and agree with the importance of the mission statement. It is equally important that community stakeholders understand and support the importance of the mission statement in order for the mission statement to be adhered to.
POLICY OPTIONS:

This section reviews the findings and discusses the proposed policy recommendations for evaluating charter school mission statements. The recommendations include:

- **STRATEGIC PLAN**
- **INTERNAL REVIEW**
- **ANNUAL SURVEYS**
- **OUTSIDE EVALUATION**

**Recommendation One: STRATEGIC PLAN:** The first recommendation is to require charter schools to submit a written strategic plan to the state chartering board. This should be accomplished through an annual planning process with the help of parents, teachers, and board members, which specifically identifies goals adhering to each section of their mission statement. This strategic plan should be included in the application to start or renew a charter school. Currently there is no on-going review process or standards that charter schools are evaluated against. The use of the strategic plan can remedy this, allowing charter schools to stay on track of their original intentions.

**Criterion One-Economic Feasibility:** In addressing the policy recommendation to implement a strategic plan; are there costs involved? I would have to say no. In charter schools, costs are embedded into the schools budget already. By this, faculty receives regular planning time during their work day and on certain days during the year; school is closed but teachers are required to be present for planning purposes. Teachers can have an allowance of time devoted to strategic planning. To avoid additional costs, i.e., paper, time, and other resources, charter schools should enforce volunteer hours of parents, and
simply implement time spent on strategic planning and adherence of mission statements during regularly scheduled board meetings. Paper goods and administrative time can be donated by community stakeholders and by parent support groups.

**Criterion Two-Potential Effectiveness:** Implementing a strategic plan has many effective benefits. The strategic planning process allows for all parties to come together and discuss innovative and creative ways to make the charter school a better learning environment. In addition, it allows for all ideas to be formally written out, explained, and also places a time frame for new programs, and future growth developments to be discussed. This also gives community stakeholders, parents, teachers, and students the opportunity to stay informed of the needed changes and developments of the school. Having a strategic plan is simply an effective tool in and of itself. In addition, it tells the stakeholders that the charter has a plan for five or ten years down the road, and that it is not just a here today gone tomorrow operation. Therefore, having a strategic plan is extremely effective.

**Criterion Three-Administrative Feasibility:** Implementing a strategic plan would not require an external consultant to be hired. All of the planning can be conducted through the use of existing faculty members, board members, and volunteers. Most charter schools require parents to volunteer a certain numbers of hours per month; it is simply a matter of enforcing this issue within the school policy. In addition, board members most likely, come to the charter school with a wealth of experience in which they can utilize to create and administer an effective strategic plan.
Criterion Four—Public Support/Political Acceptability: The strategic planning process can be easily implemented if all of the stakeholders held the same educational vision for the charter school in the first place. However, because charter schools are not favorites among districts they may find some resistance with regards to political accountability. It is extremely important for charter schools to employ communication and build community relations for support. Often times, strategic plans create conflicts among varying interest groups. So, this could be a negative point for strategic planning.

To sum the criteria evaluation for policy recommendation one, implementing a strategic planning process, seems very feasible for a charter schools. However, the last criterion sparked a negative point to consider with implementing this policy, but not enough to engage in further research. This policy option receives high marks in consideration of the ranking scale.

Recommendation Two—INTERNAL REVIEW: This policy recommendation requires the use of an internal committee to conduct an internal review annually for mission cohesion and compliance.

Criterion One—Economic Feasibility: There may be hidden costs when considering the use of an internal committee for review purposes. First, there must be a qualified group of staff members available to devote a considerable amount of time to the committee. The staff members may require training, which could result in high costs. This time in training would mean that their positions must be filled in by substitutes, which also adds to the costs. However, there may be some good points to using an internal review that could be evaluated under the umbrella of economic feasibility. Parent volunteers can be utilized in this capacity as well, because of their historical
knowledge of the school. The school would not have to employ an expensive evaluator that does not have the needed internal knowledge that is critical for this type of school.

**Criterion Two-Potential Effectiveness:** Using an internal review committee, allows for institutional knowledge to be utilized. The staff has intimate knowledge of the daily operations of the school and could benefit the school in many ways. This may allow for staff members to take on additional roles expanding on their skills and abilities. It may provide a source of networking for the staff as well. Using an internal review committee to review mission statement cohesion and compliance allows for the staff to remind themselves of their own practices and teachings.

**Criterion Three-Administrative Feasibility:** Although it does appear to be an effective measure, because charter schools are generally small in size and staff, it does not seem feasible to use staff for this task. In educational settings staff members are increasingly overloaded and generally work long hours to complete the jobs they were assigned. If an internal review committee was implemented it would have to be something that is strictly volunteer.

**Criterion Four-Public Support/Political Acceptability:** This does not seem to be a feasible policy alternative with regards to public support/political acceptability either. Parents want their child’s teacher to devote all of their time educating their children. Taking time away from the students for something that seems to be in order for a board to decide would drive a wedge between the already sensitive relations between parents and teachers.

To sum the evaluation criteria for policy recommendation two, implementing an internal review, it doesn’t seem to stand up to the criterion that is offered. The overall
ranking for this option is low. This does not appear to be the best alternative for charter schools thus far.

Recommendation Three **ANNUAL SURVEYS**: Administering an annual survey of students or teachers about the mission and the school's adherence to it.

**Criterion One—Economic Feasibility**: Measuring against this criterion it could be argued that there are minimal costs involved in conducting surveys. You have to consider the time spent conducting the survey. In addition, you need a qualified person to conduct an analysis on the data collected. There may be other costs involved such as, paper, phone bills, envelopes, travel, stamps, and other hidden costs. On the other hand, an annual survey may prevent a charter school from developing larger costs down the road. For instance, not adhering to their mission statement may cause them to have to implement new classes and hire new teachers, which could prove to be extremely expensive.

**Criterion Two—Potential Effectiveness**: When considering an annual survey to be a preventative measure it is a very wise policy option. It could prevent the need for a committee and lesson the burden of a strategic plan. The effectiveness of the annual survey would be hard to document until it was implemented and tested. Unfortunately, under the five-year charter contract, charter schools don’t have the time to conduct annual surveys. However, the use of the survey could bring to the table issues that need to be identified and dealt with. A survey can provide a source of information that can better school programs and overall performance.

**Criterion Three—Administrative Feasibility**: Conducting an annual survey does not seem plausible when using this criterion since staff members are limited in charter
schools, and funds for such tests would not be easily granted. Parents could possibly conduct the surveys, but would they commit the time in doing it correctly?

Criterion Four-Public Support/Political Acceptability: Public support for surveys would be almost nonexistent for the same reasons as above; parents are interested in how their children will be educated, not in participating in surveys.

To sum the evaluation criteria for policy recommendation three, the use of annual surveys, it does not meet all of the criteria on positive remarks which leave room for uncertainty. Therefore, the ranking for this policy option is low as well.

Recommendation Four - OUTSIDE EVALUATION: contracting with an outside agency or consultant to assess the mission and the school in relation to the mission.

Criterion One-Economic Feasibility: Among all of the policy recommendations of this action report, outside evaluation appears to be the least plausible for the specific reasons of economic feasibility. Outside evaluations are extremely expensive, and time consuming. Charter schools are generally low in funds; something of this nature could costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. “Charter schools continue to be under funded. Almost all states deny charter schools capital funding, and many deny equal operating funds” (Philanthropy Roundtable, website: http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org.)

Criterion Two-Potential Effectiveness: Using an outside evaluation team does have some benefits that should be noted. The professionalism and quality of service assures when using a specialist is very beneficial. In addition, there is no inside biased to take place, and they tend to have needed resources to conduct the evaluation. However, “Insufficient clarity in some of the relationships created to date between schools and educational service providers has diminished or limited their success. In some cases,
hiring a school evaluator has led ineffective or poorly functioning charter school boards to neglect their responsibilities for school oversight” (Lin and Hassel, 2001).

Criterion Three-Administrative Feasibility: There are no administrative concerns here because the use of an outside evaluation would bring in their own staff. However, this evaluation team may require assistance in collecting information; answering questions, and provided work space, along with other internal resources. “Partnering effectively with a management company requires ongoing communication, troubleshooting, and redefining the terms of the relationship as circumstances evolve” (Lin and Hassel, 2001). With this in mind, it takes away from the usefulness of using an outside evaluator.

Criterion Four-Public Support/Political Acceptability: Measuring against this criterion, can be two fold as well. The public may embrace the use of an outside evaluator because it shows that the charter school is determined to achieve a high standard, and that they are willing to take action. This may not serve well with the district heads though, because they see charter schools as a money sponge. In addition, the external evaluator does not have the institutional knowledge that may be needed for a charter school. “Political backlash against charter schools has grown along with the movement. Controversial from the outset because of the threat they pose to established interests, charter schools have come under increasing attack as opponents seek to limit the number of charter schools, restrict their autonomy and funding, and place them under the authority of school districts and collective bargaining agreements” (Philanthropy Roundtable, website: http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org.)
To sum the evaluation criteria for policy recommendation four, the use of an outside evaluation, I don’t see that it rated any higher than internal review, or the use of surveys, therefore the rating score here is low as well.
RECOMMENDATION & CONCLUSION:

Reflections of this case study highlight that COAST Charter School adopted a mission statement that was too broad and lacked specificity. The school faced problems later when they attempted to translate their missions into specific curricular or assessment practices, or to provide staff members with direction about teaching and learning. The school provided evidence that they didn’t have a strategic plan in place, keeping it from a true commitment to its mission statement and educational vision (see interview number two).

Therefore, the policy recommendation to help charter schools stay on track is to require these schools to utilize a strategic planning process. This would allow charter schools to stay in tune with their intended goals and future growth possibilities. A strategic plan could provide for documentation of plans and set timelines and goals for future planning, and provide guidelines for growth that is set within the guiding principals of their mission statement. The strategic planning process should include members of the board, faculty members, parents, and other community stakeholders. There should be an annual review and a stated long-term plan of the schools strategic plan.

This action report argues that the integrity of the charter school’s mission and educational vision needs to be emphasized in the laws that govern charter schools. As sponsoring agencies consider a charter school proposal, their criteria should be clear. With this policy recommendation, coupled with Wright’s Middle School Model that are suggested in this action report, charter schools will likely sustain their educational vision and focus on providing choice and innovation to their communities.
rather than struggling to remain an open charter that is failing their community. The ability of charter schools to get their programs up and running, and to sustain these programs has varied from school to school. The charter schools’ impact on student achievement presumably varies as well, but is unclear due to insufficient or inadequate evaluations. Still, charter schools have been in existence long enough to look for lessons from their experiences.

The school mission is the foundation from which everything else in a school is derived. When the mission is clear and specific, a school is better able to translate its mission into practice. In the charter schools studied, the mission grew out of strong, passionate feelings about schools and education, and as the schools evolved, the mission helped to sustain the interest, participation and commitment of teachers, parents and students.
REFERENCES


COAST Charter School, St. Marks, Florida [online] www.coastschool.org


