



# Rethinking Accountability

*Dennie Palmer Wolf*  
**Accountability: Everyone's Concern,  
Everyone's Job**

*Michelle Fine, Janice Bloom, and Lori Chajet*  
**Betrayal: Accountability from the Bottom**

*Leslie Santee Siskin*  
**Colleagues and "Yutzes":  
Accountability inside Schools**

*Fernando Abeyta*  
**Who Will Be Accountable to the  
Community for Public Education?**

*Audrey M. Hutchinson*  
**The View from City Hall**

*Joan L. Herman*  
**State Test Lessons: The Effects on  
School Reform**

*Elizabeth DeBray*  
**The Federal Role in School Accountability:  
Assessing Recent History and the New Law**

*Voices in Urban Education*  
Number 1, Spring 2003

*Publisher*

Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
at Brown University  
Warren Simmons, Executive Director

*Editor*

Robert Rothman

*Managing Editor*

Susan Fisher

*Copy Editor*

Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

*Production & Distribution*

Mary Arkins

*Design*

Gilbert Design Associates, Inc.

*Illustration*

Carolina Arentsen

*Voices in Urban Education* is published quarterly at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Articles may be reproduced with appropriate credit to the Annenberg Institute. Single copies are \$8 each, including postage and handling. A discount is available on bulk orders. Call 401 863-2018 for further information.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform was established in 1993 at Brown University. Its mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools serving disadvantaged children. For program information, contact:

Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
Brown University, Box 1985  
Providence, Rhode Island 02912  
Tel: 401 863-7990  
Fax: 401 863-1290  
Web: [www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)

©2003 Annenberg Institute for School Reform



## Rethinking Accountability

- 2 **From the Executive Director**  
*Warren Simmons*
- 4 **Accountability: Everyone's Concern, Everyone's Job**  
*Dennie Palmer Wolf*  
Despite bold ambitions, current efforts at accountability do not ensure a high-quality education for all students. What is needed is a new conception of accountability, one that makes all stakeholders responsible for achieving this goal.
- 12 **Betrayal: Accountability from the Bottom**  
*Michelle Fine, Janice Bloom, and Lori Chajet*  
Drawing on the voices of youth in New York and California, the authors find that the promises for improvement in current education policy represent a cruel hoax. Young people want a better education, but they are denied even the most basic conditions for learning.
- 24 **Colleagues and "Yutzes": Accountability inside Schools**  
*Leslie Santee Siskin*  
Accountability mandates can only be effective if the external expectations for school improvement match internal accountability – the norms and expectations teachers have for one another.
- 32 **Who Will Be Accountable to the Community for Public Education?**  
*Fernando Abeyta*  
While accountability has risen to the top of the policy agenda, the discussions have often skirted the question of accountability to the community. Yet communities, parents, educators, and policy-makers all have a role in improving public education.
- 36 **The View from City Hall**  
*Audrey M. Hutchinson*  
Recognizing that their constituents hold them accountable for the success of schools in their cities, mayors are taking leadership roles in education. The author shows how the efforts of leaders in a number of cities are redefining educational accountability as a shared municipal responsibility.
- 46 **State Test Lessons: The Effects on School Reform**  
*Joan L. Herman*  
State tests can help improve instruction and learning, but real reform takes more than "minor tinkering and lots of test preparation." Reviewing the evidence about the effects of tests on classrooms, the author suggests ways to minimize inappropriate effects and use tests toward genuine improvement.
- 56 **The Federal Role in School Accountability: Assessing Recent History and the New Law**  
*Elizabeth DeBray*  
In the last two major pieces of federal education legislation, accountability has moved front and center. The author analyzes these two statutes and suggests principles for the federal government's role in accountability.

## From the Executive Director

Warren Simmons

---

One of the hallmarks of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform is our “convening” work. Educators, community organizations, and funders frequently seek us out to bring together people with a wide range of viewpoints to air differences and seek common ground. These discussions often lead to more productive work.

This publication, the first in a series of occasional papers, offers a new format for our convening. Rather than hold a conference, we have asked researchers, community organizers, educators, and public officials to write about their ideas for a broader audience. We hope to enable voices that may not always agree, as well as voices that may not always be heard in discussions around urban education, to present their perspectives honestly. We are fortunate to have as our editor Robert Rothman, who brings to this series his extensive experience in writing and editing in many areas of school reform at *Education Week*, the National Research Council, the National Center on Education and the Economy, and Achieve, Inc.

As the name of this publication indicates, we focus on urban education, in keeping with the Institute’s commitment to children in urban communities, who have for too long suffered inequitable educational opportunities. Fortunately, a number of initiatives are under way – notably those sponsored by the Annenberg Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Funds – to take on this chal-

*Warren Simmons is the executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.*

lence. We hope this series serves as a meeting place for these and other similar initiatives.

The title of this publication speaks of “education,” rather than schools. Improving student achievement is, of course, the job of schools, but they are not the only ones responsible for it. Ensuring that all children grow and develop into fulfilled, productive adults requires the resources of entire communities. One of our goals for this publication is to encourage community organizations and leaders in municipal government to join educators and policy-makers in discussing collective responsibility for educational improvement.

The first issue of this series looks at accountability – “Topic A” in education in 2003. The federal No Child Left Behind Act has captured the nation’s attention like no other federal education law in decades and has moved accountability to the top of the agenda. But it is also there because educators, public officials, and community members believe accountability is vitally important.

The Institute has been working with districts and states to help redesign accountability systems to improve education. We call our initiative in this area “Opportunity and Accountability,” because we believe the two go hand in hand. The director of this initiative, Dennie Palmer Wolf, writes in an introductory article in this issue that we need a new vision for accountability that supports educational improvement and that recognizes the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved. The other authors echo this charge, presenting views of accountability from the perspective of students, teachers, community organizations, municipal and state leaders, and Congress.

We envision this publication and the series as a whole to be a catalyst for conversations. We encourage you to join in. Our Web site ([www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)) includes a message board, on which you can post responses to these articles. We look forward to the dialogue and to the work ahead: building an education system that works for all children.



# Accountability: Everyone's Concern, Everyone's Job

Dennie Palmer Wolf

---

*Despite bold ambitions, current efforts at accountability do not ensure a high-quality education for all students. What is needed is a new conception of accountability, one that makes all stakeholders responsible for achieving this goal.*

I have gotten to know the near-twelve-year-old daughter of a colleague: she's curious, self-aware, and energetic. The day she helped me move books, she was distracted, but not by the candy machine in the basement or the glossy screen of the television. Instead, it was the Langston Hughes anthology that snagged and held her attention.

In talking with her, I learned she doesn't attend public school. Realizing her will and energy, her family sought out a scholarship to a private day school. So when I see her carrying *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* or laying out the budget for a nine-girl cheerleading squad, it is impossible not to think how much poorer her neighborhood school is without her and her family. She's not there to ask questions and to buck every stereotype of young adolescents, girls, and children of color. Her family isn't there in parent meetings with their high expectations of children, themselves, and schooling. I find myself thinking, "What would it take to draw them back?"

As parents, this young woman's mother and father are justifiably cautious about public education: they were urban students in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*. They know schools where the promise of court-ordered equality – racially balanced classrooms,

buildings in repair, and enough textbooks to go around – was an empty fable. They know that the high schools they attended still remain as "separate but equal" as they ever were (only now there are more Hispanic and Asian students in pre-algebra and computer repair). For them, accountability is critical. But accountability can't be the state legislature's cheapest way to "do something about public education." It cannot be the token social justice measure in a superintendent's platform. For them and their daughter, an accountability system has to be a social contract that public schools will create young adults who can not only survive, but also thrive and contribute, regardless of their race, zip code, or country of origin.

In 2003, nearly half a century after the *Brown* case, a teacher, a principal, or a superintendent might argue: "Now times are different. We're committed to the fact that 'all children can learn.'" If the family wanted concrete evidence, their daughter's potential teachers could point to the state's or district's curriculum standards describing what all children must know and be able to do. A principal could testify to having bought "standards-based" software to support math tutorials. The superintendent might point to the new standardized district test that measures

*Dennie Palmer Wolf is the director of the Opportunity and Accountability initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.*

student progress toward standards. She could also refer to state-issued report cards or ratings based on measures of performance that her school receives. She could point out that in the past, she was charged with ensuring equality (i.e., the same dollars, books, and locker rooms for every student); but now she is responsible for academic equity and fiscal adequacy (i.e., the distribution of resources to ensure that all students receive what they need in order to meet a high common standard).

Finally, any of these educators could outline the newly explicit and demanding regulations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which require schools to show “adequate yearly progress” for all groups of children. They could spell out the tough regulations meant to ensure this rate of progress: annual testing of all students in grades 3 through 8 in mathematics and literacy, publication of results, disaggregation of data to reveal the performance of historically underserved populations, and publication of lists of schools that fail to meet the mark. They could also point to the new law’s guarantees to families, such as supplemental services and the right to transfer their child to a higher-performing school.

### ***New Perspectives on Accountability***

The vision of accountability in the name of equity inscribed in No Child Left Behind is bold. Its public commitments may outstrip the *Brown* case or the equity and education legislation of the Johnson era. But the authors in this issue of *Voices in Urban Education* also recognize the difference between declaring intent and getting results. If asked, they would caution a family about taking current visions of educational accountability as a guarantee for

---

The vision of accountability in the name of equity inscribed in No Child Left Behind is bold. But the authors in this issue also recognize the difference between declaring intent and getting results.

---



their daughter's learning. From different vantage points, each of the authors asks whether regulation can create equity if public education is not founded on that principle.

Michelle Fine, along with her student interviewees, and Fernando Abeyta argue that in the poor communities where the need for quality public education is the highest, the basis for accountability simply doesn't exist. There is neither respect for students and families nor a basic commitment to the provision of an adequate education. Buildings crumble, substitutes don't appear, and students who want to learn pass their school day playing cards. In these schools, the standards don't even exist, much less operate as a job description for teachers and counselors or as a students' bill of rights. Students who fail to meet established benchmarks are subject to immediate and life-defining consequences: shame, disappointment, grade retention, and, ultimately, no high school diploma. Yet the adults who create or tolerate these conditions are never judged responsible for this horrific waste of human potential.

Leslie Siskin points out that this potential waste extends to teachers. Under "the new accountability," the dominant theory of change is that increasing amounts of *external* pressure



– mandated schedules for testing, legislated rates of improvement, and tough sanctions – will leverage improvements in the level of educators' efforts and, consequently, raise student performance. However, looking intently at what occurs on the ground in schools, Siskin questions this theory. She argues that no external accountability system translates directly into a focus on the quality of teaching and learning. The key mediating factor is whether or not there is an equally strong *internal* system of accountability within schools. Without a shared system of values and norms aligned to the elevated expectations of the external system, no lasting or substantive change occurs. Without that alignment, teachers cannot see the relevance of the standards or the point in teaching to them.

Other authors raise questions at the municipal, state, and national levels. Taking a municipal perspective, Audrey Hutchinson finds that our current conceptions of educational accountability are too narrow to be effective. Other organizations in addition to schools have to assume responsibility for developing thoughtful young people. Particularly

---

No external accountability system translates directly into a focus on the quality of teaching and learning.

---

now, as we suffer a harsh financial crisis and face the probable depletion of federal coffers by war, we need a municipal, or civic, conception of accountability for public education. Mayors, county commissioners, and community foundations have to take substantive responsibility. But these are responsibilities that cannot be discharged easily with dollars for bricks and mortar. Building more “rec” centers and labeling them “youth development facilities” does not count. Hutchinson insists that civic responsibility for students’ performance entails the much more difficult work of candid evaluation, rather than self-congratulation; shared resources; and jointly run, rather than uniquely owned and branded, programs.

Joan Herman highlights the shortcomings in state tests. Often, legislators, blaming high costs, coupled with technical and legal difficulties, have stripped away what were originally robust multiple indicator systems for measuring student achievement. What remains are single, on-demand, standardized state tests. These tests provide a common yardstick for student learning and thus a way to compare performance across different settings. Such tests also offer a model for technical responsibility, setting standards for validity, reliability, equity, and feasibility. Nevertheless, every code of ethics for assessment stresses that, for high-stakes decisions, no single measure is adequate. Moreover, exactly what makes such tests reliable and feasible (i.e., highly constrained formats, low per pupil cost, external scoring, etc.) narrows the kinds of understanding they can assess well.

The results are predictable, and unfortunate: curricula and teaching typically narrow to focus on what is tested. Highly packaged approaches to teaching and learning – test prep and scripted text series – strip learning from professional development. Results come back after students have moved on and never come with scored student work. Hence, teachers learn very little about what makes a difference or how to improve. The pressure to “get the scores up” produces quick fixes, particularly in those schools that need long-term improvements the most: schools where problems of health, safety, and stability of staff make learning a challenge.

Elizabeth DeBray writes from a national perspective. She points out that if the federal government is going to intervene in local control of schools in the name of educational equity, then the new federal system must be coherent,

---

If the federal government is going to intervene in local control of schools in the name of educational equity, then the new federal system must be coherent, valid, and *feasible*.

---

ent, valid, and *feasible*. No Child Left Behind does not look promising on that score. If it is enforced, the law will result in huge numbers of schools defined as “failing” – the majority of schools in urban areas and surprising proportions even in more comfortable suburbs.

Yes, it is past time for public truth about the condition of teaching and learning, especially in urban and poor settings. But the question is, what happens after these “get-tough” designations? Given the shrinking budgets for public education, there is no likelihood



that states or districts will intervene in all of these “failing” schools. Will they select the worst offenders? Pick out a few signal cases? Concentrate on different districts in different years? Such choices will breed cynicism or worse: states and districts may end up concluding that there’s no point in intervening. We see signs of this already. Policy-makers point to examples of schools that have “beaten the odds” as if to say that if one school can do it, all schools can.

There are other possible outcomes that are no less distressing. One, which states are now contemplating, is to redefine what it means to be “proficient.” Another is to practice a ruthless form of triage – to concentrate resources and available human capacity on those children who are just below the cutoff point. (When you see them with a tutor out in the hall, they will tell you they are the “soon to be’s.”) But given 2014 as the target date for 100 percent of students being proficient, some of the neediest children could be ten years away from a seat in one of those desks in the hall.

### ***A New Blueprint for Accountability***

The authors in this issue do not reject the need for educational accountability, but they want it reimagined. Their critiques do not draw an “X” through the concept of expectations and consequences; they imply a wholly different blueprint. Abeyta and Fine insist that we cannot build accountability systems without a basic foundation of educational justice. Districts have to guarantee that certain basic (but far from minimal) conditions are in place (e.g., that school facilities are safe, that students spend nearly all of their school days with a qualified teacher, that the

necessary courses are offered, etc.) before students, rather than educators, can be held responsible.

Taken a step further, this principle could mean that districts ought to revive the too hastily buried concept of *opportunity to learn*: the extent to which a classroom, a school, or a district supports continued academic development. Taking that responsibility seriously is shared accountability. If students are responsible for meeting academic goals, then schools and districts must be responsible for establishing the conditions that make that achievement possible, such as challenging assignments and after-school supports for doing serious homework well. Possibly, this form of

the standards. By implication, every level of public education must be involved in developing fair, aligned, and coherent measures of student learning – reliable teacher grades, certified samples of student work in the core areas, end-of-course performance assessments – to complement the information in standardized tests.

The implication of Hutchinson's analysis of partnerships in support of student learning is that communities must "step up to the accountability plate." For example, rather than letting for-profit vendors walk away with all the available funds for supplementary education programs, mayors' offices, county commissioners, and local

---

If students are responsible for meeting academic goals, then schools and districts must be responsible for establishing the conditions that make that achievement possible, such as challenging assignments and after-school supports for doing serious homework well.

---

accountability would refocus attention on the quality of teaching and learning rather than race and poverty as the variables that affect performance.

Siskin makes a similar argument when she urges states and districts to help educators develop shared norms and values regarding high expectations for a full range of learners. This implies funding for shared planning time; it also implies support for teachers to develop common definitions of excellent work and to develop a common understanding about grades as comments on the quality of work (not as rewards for obedience or staying out of trouble). Herman makes the point that there can be no fair or informative system of accountability in which a single state test is the sole arbiter of meeting

education funds have to help local, community-based organizations offer academically enriching programs designed to build the cultural and economic capital of neighborhoods by employing older teens, seniors, and parents as teachers. Similarly, employers have an obligation to offer young people entry-level positions that are more than routine and mindless. A walk around the mall to see how competitors display merchandise can be field research – if you regard a young employee as a mind, not as a tool.

DeBray urges communities to think very carefully about how the consequences of the new federal legislation are handled. Parents need more than a list of low-performing schools; at the least, they need neighborhood centers

that will help families organize to secure what they have been promised. And schools need more than the shame of being placed on such a list to improve their practice. DeBray is hopeful that the next time the law comes up for a rewrite, Congress will recognize the flaws and make midcourse corrections that maintain the intent of No Child Left Behind but provide more appropriate tools.

Above all, the authors in this issue argue that we do not need techniques for making the familiar forms of accountability systems work better. Rather, we need a new vision of the purposes and outcomes of accountability. In the traditional, input-based system, the implicit assumptions were that education was a public service that children in the United States were lucky to have; that to offer K–12 public education was inherently good; and that if its doors were open, such a system would *ipso facto* produce the outcomes for which it was intended. Regulation was all that was needed: schools and school systems should be accountable to government agencies (and, ultimately, taxpayers), classes should be held, money should be spent for children, and there should be a public record of student performance. Looking back, we see that the guidelines of open enrollment and administrative regulation allowed gross inequities of opportunity and embarrassingly meager visions of what students deserved to know and to do.

The accountability systems that states and districts are now implementing are an attempt to correct for those flaws. For instance, the standards and the tests increasingly reflect more than minimal expectations. There is close scrutiny of the data in terms of achievement gaps between rich and poor children and between Hispanic, black, white, Asian, and “other” children. There are increasing consequences for schools that fail to meet performance benchmarks.

But the most fundamental features of these accountability systems remain unchanged. Exactly like conventional accountability systems, they are designed to track and report infractions (e.g., low student performance). But they are clumsy tools for inquiring into the cause of those infractions. The information collected is too thin and distant to make this possible. Typical accountability systems still rely too heavily on

---

Typical accountability systems still rely too heavily on inappropriate and solo measures of performance because this makes regulation “objective” and defensible.

---

inappropriate and solo measures of performance because this makes regulation “objective” and defensible (unlike work samples or portfolios that depend on human judgment). They operate unjustly, distributing consequences to the most vulnerable parties – students – yet failing to hold public officials and outside partners accountable for establishing the conditions that would enable schools to succeed with all students.



---

If an adequate public education is a right, then the purpose of accountability is to ensure that all those responsible play their part in securing that right for all children.

---

A new frame would start by defining an adequate<sup>1</sup> public education as a right, like freedom of speech or religion, rather than as a public service.<sup>2</sup> If an adequate public education is a right, then the purpose of accountability is to ensure that all those responsible play their part in securing that right for all children. This is not accomplished through regulation, nor is it achieved simply by making broad promises and declarations. The Emancipation Proclamation did not secure equal rights for African Americans. It has taken, and continues to take, entire communities of stakeholders (families, educators,

lawyers, faith leaders, judges, and activists), actively working over long periods, to detect inequities and shortcomings and change both large institutions and daily habits.

The same kind of broadly based and long-term efforts are needed to secure the right to a high-quality public education. The promise of educational accountability is to guarantee the right of all a community's children to be well educated by their schools. No family should wonder if the public schools available to their children will serve them well.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Adequate* here does not mean “minimal” but conveys the sense of fully outfitting a young person for meeting the high standards necessary for success in later life.

<sup>2</sup> This conception of public education is currently being developed by Wendy Puriefoy, director of the Public Education Fund.

# *Betrayal: Accountability from the Bottom*

Michelle Fine, Janice Bloom  
and Lori Chajet

---

*Drawing on the voices of youth in New York and California, the authors find that the promises for improvement in current education policy represent a cruel hoax. Young people want a better education, but they are denied even the most basic conditions for learning.*

Three days after taking office in January 2001, as the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush announced No Child Left Behind (NCLB), his framework for bipartisan education reform that he described as “the cornerstone of my administration.” President Bush emphasized his deep belief in our public schools, but an even greater concern that “too many of our neediest children are being left behind. . . . The NCLB Act. . . incorporates principles and strategies includ[ing] increased accountability for states, school districts and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools; more flexibility. . . .” (U.S. Department of Education 2002, p. 1)

**A**re the President and the nation in a position to reach the stated goals of No Child Left Behind? This essay addresses this question through an accountability exercise. The authors join those who challenge the high-stakes standardized-testing implications of NCLB (Elmore 2002; Meier 2002), but in this essay we focus our concern on the NCLB promise of “choice” and “flexibility” to “our neediest children.”

Drawing on data from poor and working-class youth of color from California and New York City, we analyze accountability from the “bottom.” As you will read, these students yearn for a high-quality education. They believe deeply that they are entitled to a slice of the American dream. Yet they have been startled awake by their investigations into the quality of their education, as they recognize how public edu-

cation in the United States has been redlined, with race, ethnicity, and class determining young people’s access to high-quality schooling.

With the youth in these two contexts, we find the stated intent of NCLB – to support parents and students in low-performing schools – to be stunning and timely. Two of the Act’s provisions, however, high-stakes testing and choice (specifically, the opportunity for students in low-performing schools to transfer to better-performing schools), reveal the cruel betrayal of NCLB for poor and working-class youth. For these students and their families, the language of “choice” rings brutally hollow. Systematic policies of inequitable urban school financing, maldistribution of quality teachers, and lack of access to rigorous curriculum ensure that the privileged remain privileged, while poor and working class students lag behind, all too predictably “failing” tests that seal their fates, with no choices in sight. “Choice” in this context sounds like an ideological diversion – a crumb held out to desperate students and parents whose real problem is underfunded schools (Kozol 1991).

Economist Albert Hirschman (1990) theorizes that members of declining social organizations may engage in any of three psychological relations with

*Michelle Fine is a professor at the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). Janice Bloom and Lori Chajet are students at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Lori Chajet is a teacher at the East Side Community High School, New York City.*

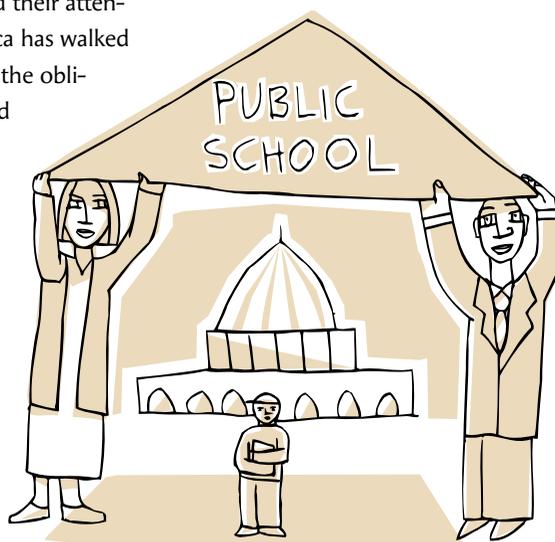
their organizations: exit, voice, or loyalty. In school systems plagued by structural inequities, most poor and working-class youth sadly, if understandably, *exit* prior to graduation (see Fine 1991). This was true before the introduction of high-stakes testing, and drop-out rates have dramatically spiked, especially in low-income communities of color (Fine & Powell 2001), since the tests have been put in place. Exit reigns in these schools, and those exiting have migrated into prisons, where 70 percent to 80 percent of young inmates have neither General Educational Development (GED) certificates nor high school diplomas (Fine et al. 2001). Some teens we've spoken with capture this trend as they see it: "There are two tracks now in high school – the college track and the prison track."

But the voices you will encounter in this essay are not voices of despair spoken by dropouts (another critical voice of accountability). Instead you will hear from students who have remained in underfunded schools, narrating a blend of yearning and betrayal, outrage and loyalty, the desire to believe and the pain of persistent inequities. Remaining loyal, in Hirschman's terms, these youth did *not* walk from their schools. It has not escaped their attention, however, that America has walked away from them, refusing the obligation to provide poor and working-class youth of color quality public education (Anyon 1997;

Darling-Hammond 2001; Fine & Powell 2001; Kozol 1991; Mizell 2002; U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey 2000; U.S. Department of Labor 2001).

In such an America, any discussion of accountability requires a view from the bottom, told through the eyes of poor and working-class youth of color who want simply to be educated. We provide this view by bringing together college faculty, graduate students, teachers, and high school students, who work collectively to chronicle the uncomfortable truths of the accountability question (see Wells & Serna 1996 for parallel sets of issues concerning accountability and school integration).

You will hear, in this short essay, from high school students in two distinct settings. Across both settings, these young women and men are eloquent about the absence of *distributive justice*, that is, the unfair distribution of educational resources throughout America; and about the absence of *procedural justice*, that is, being refused a fair hearing from educators and the courts (Deutsch 2002). They ask: Will adults stand with them for educational justice? Theirs are necessary voices in the accountability debates.



## ***The Hollowing of the Public Sphere: A Violation of Distributive and Procedural Justice***

In the early 1990s, one of us (Michelle) wrote *Framing Dropouts* (Fine 1991), which analyzed the ways that public urban high schools systematically exile youths of poverty and color, scarring souls and minds in the process. This essay may sound redundant – an echo produced a decade later or an echo of W.E.B. DuBois’s (1935) question “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” almost seventy years later. But we believe, with concern, that the stakes for undereducated youth and for dropouts are far more severe today than they were in

---

The stakes for undereducated youth are far more severe today than they were in the past.

---

the past. For students of color and poor students, resources are woefully inadequate, access to higher education is increasingly low, and stakes for exclusion are rising. The economy remains hostile to young people without high school degrees (Poe-Yamagata & Jones 2000). Young women and men of color, even with high school degrees or some college, fare far worse than their white peers; those without a high school degree have little chance of entering the legitimate economy (Hochschild 1995, forthcoming).

We situate this work in California and New York because these states pervasively represent “cutting edge” states in which historic commitments to affirmative action (in California) and remediation (in New York) in higher education have been retrenched, wrenching generations of African Americans

and Latinos out of even dreams of college and university (Hurtado, Haney & Garcia 1998). The public sphere of K–12 education has been hollowed; the academy has been bleached; the prison populations have swelled. California and New York, then, offer us an opportunity to ask how youth of color and poverty, now denied equal opportunity, assess the policies and practices of public education. These are perfect – if distressing – sites for reconceptualizing accountability from the bottom.

### **Denial and Alienation**

**Place:** California

**Context:** Interviews with randomly selected youth who attend (or have graduated from) schools suffering from structural decay, high levels of unqualified educators, and/or absence of textbooks and instructional materials

**Time:** February 2002

“Every day, every hour, talented students are being sacrificed.... They’re [the schools are] destroying lives.”

—Maritza, college student, speaking about her urban high school

In *Williams v. State of California*, a class-action lawsuit has been waged on behalf of poor and working-class students attending structurally and instructionally underresourced schools in California in 2002. As the plaintiff’s first amended complaint states:

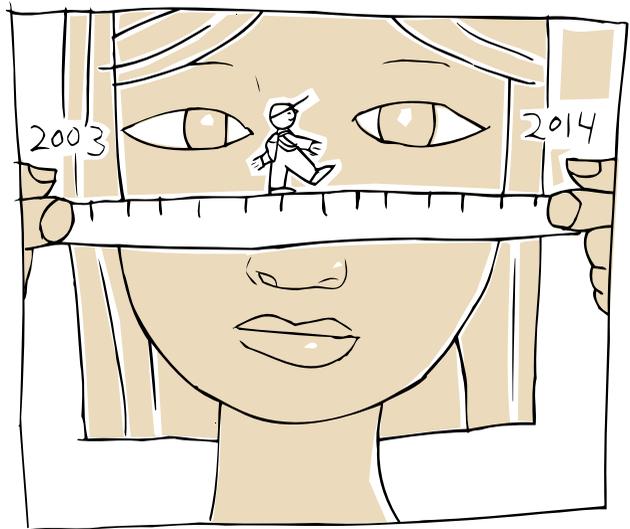
Tens of thousands of children attending public schools located throughout the state of California are being deprived of basic educational opportunities available to more privileged children attending the majority of the state’s public schools. State law requires students to attend school. Yet all too many California school children must go to schools that shock the conscience. Those schools lack the bare essentials required of a free and common school education that the majority of students throughout the state

enjoy: trained teachers, necessary educational supplies, classrooms, even seats in classrooms and facilities that meet basic health and safety standards. Students must therefore attempt to learn without books and sometimes without any teachers, and in schools that lack functioning heating or air-conditioning systems, that lack sufficient numbers of functioning toilets, and that are infested with vermin, including rats, mice, and cockroaches. These appalling conditions in California public schools represent extreme departures from accepted educational standards and yet they have persisted for years and have worsened over time. (*Williams v. State of California* 2000)

As an expert witness in this case, one of us (Michelle) had the opportunity to organize extensive focus groups and conduct surveys in order to hear from over a hundred youths who attend schools in the plaintiff class about the impact of these conditions on their psychological, social, and academic well-being (see Fine, Burns, Payne & Torre 2002 for methodological design and findings).

Our qualitative and quantitative findings can be summarized simply: Children who attend structurally, fiscally, and educationally inadequate schools are not only miseducated, but they read conditions of resource-starved schools as evidence that the state and the nation view them as disposable and, simply, worthless (Fallis & Opatow 2002). Like children who learn to love in homes scarred by violence, they are forced to learn in contexts of humiliation, betrayal, and disrespect.

The youth in the California focus groups consistently told us that they want to be educated and intellectually challenged. They believe they deserve no less. They articulate, critically, two standards of accountability by which the state has failed them. First, they are



distressed about the lack of *material accountability* (fiscal, educational, and structural resources). And, second, they are outraged at the denial of *procedural accountability* (when they have complained to public authorities about their educational circumstances and needs, no one has responded).

**Boy:** “Because, before, we had a teacher for, like, the first three weeks of our multicultural class and then the teacher didn’t have all her credentials so she couldn’t continue to teach. And since then we’ve had, like, ten different substitutes. And none of them have taught us anything. We just basically do what we wanted in class. We wrote letters, all the class wrote letters to people and they never responded. We still don’t have a teacher.”

**Girl (different focus group):** “The teachers, they are there and then they are not there. One minute they’re there, they’re there for a whole week, and then they gone next week. And you try to find out where the teacher, and they say, ‘We don’t have a teacher.’ We outside the whole day, you just sit outside because there ain’t nobody going to come through. We ask the security guards to bring us the principal over there. They tell us to wait and they leave. And don’t come back. They forget about us. We ain’t getting no education by sitting outside.”

---

“They forget about us. We ain’t getting no education by sitting outside.”

---

Students in another high school focus group became agitated as they contrasted how their schools ignored their requests for quality education but responded (if superficially) when the state investigated school policies and practices. As one student said:

We all walked out, 'cause of the conditions, but they didn’t care. They didn’t even come out. They sent the police. The police made a line and pushed us back in. Don’t you think the principal should have come out to hear what we were upset over? But when the state is coming in, they paint, they fix up the building. They don’t care about us, the students, just the state or the city.

Scores of interviewed youth from California expressed this double experience of disappointment and betrayal. Disappointed by the relative absence of quality faculty and materials, they feel helpless to master rigorous academic material and powerless to solicit effective help. As if that were not enough, when these youth do complain, grieve, or challenge the educational inequities they endure, they confront a wall of silence, an institutional refusal to engage. Only 34 percent agreed or strongly agreed that “People like me have the ability to change government if we don’t like what is happening.”

On two fronts of accountability, the youth find the state lacking. These young people report high levels of perceived betrayal, resistance, and withdrawal by persons in positions of authority and public institutions (Fine, Freudenberg, Payne, Perkins, Smith & Wanzer 2002). These schools not only deny youth academic skills. These schools produce alienation from the public sphere.

## Aspiring to More

**Place:** New York City

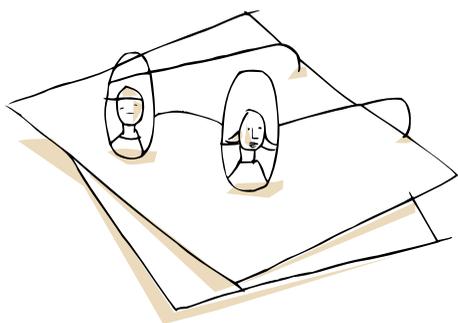
**Context:** Class discussion among seniors at small public high school in New York City – students are doing research on the issue of school funding in New York State

**Time:** September 2002

“If you’re offering different things to different students in the city and suburbs, aren’t you just segregating again?”

—Seekumarie, high school senior

New York State is embroiled in a lawsuit, initiated in 1995 by a group of parents from New York City public schools who are represented by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE). CFE asserts that the state has failed to provide New York City’s public school students with the “sound basic education” the state constitution promises all of its residents. This, it contends, is the result of antiquated funding formulas that grossly favor the suburban districts over the needier, urban ones. While some districts spend close to \$13,000 per student, New York City – which educates 70 percent of the state’s economically disadvantaged



---

Young people report high levels of perceived betrayal, resistance, and withdrawal by persons in positions of authority. These schools produce alienation from the public sphere.

---

students, over 80 percent of its limited-English-proficient students, and 51 percent of its students with severe disabilities (Campaign for Fiscal Equity 2000; Education Priorities Panel 1999; *CFE v. State of New York* 2001) – spends only \$9,623 per student (Regents and State Education Department 2001).

While the state’s highest court considered an appeal of a lower court’s decision on *CFE v. State of New York*, a group of seniors from one small public high school in New York City decided that they would study the origins, consequences, and persistence of financial inequities in New York State.

As youth researchers on the Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Opportunity Gap Research Project,<sup>1</sup> these students undertook a systematic analysis of fiscal equity policy documents; interviews with key informants (educators and policy-makers on both sides of the debate); and a series of participant observations in elite suburban and poor urban schools. From within the city, the effects of inequitable funding were clear to the students. They regularly witnessed upwards of 50 percent of New York

---

<sup>1</sup> This research is part of a project, funded by the Rockefeller, Spencer, Edwin Gould, and Leslie Glass foundations, on Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Educational Opportunity: Youth Research the “Achievement Gap.” Our youth researcher colleagues include: Candice DeJesus, Emily Genao, Jasmine Castillo, Seekumarie Kellman, Monica Jones, Lisa Sheare, Noman Rahman, Amanda Osorio, Jeremy Taylor, and Nikaury Acosta.

City high school students failing to graduate in four years and 30 percent never receiving a diploma at all (Campaign for Fiscal Equity 2000). At the start of the research, however, they had little sense of what “good” schools might look (and feel) like.

In this work, they ask two related questions: To what standards should they and their peers be held accountable? What must their government and the adults around them provide in order for them to reach those standards?

The researchers (two of us – Janice and Lori – and the youth researchers) began by reviewing key legislative and judicial documents. We read Justice Leland DeGrasse’s 2001 decision:

The court holds that the education provided New York City students is so deficient that it falls below the constitutional floor set by the Education Article of the New York State Constitution. The court also finds that the State’s actions are a substantial cause of this constitutional violation.

With respect to the plaintiff’s claim under Title VI’s implementing regulations, the court finds that the State school-funding system has an adverse and disparate impact on minority public school children and that this disparate impact is not adequately justified by any reason related to education. (*CFE v. State of New York* 2001)

Just seventeen months later, based on an appeal filed by Governor George Pataki, the Appellate Division overturned the DeGrasse decision. This court sided with the state’s argument that a “sound basic education” – defined as an education whereby students learn to “function productively” and participate in civic duties such as serving on a jury

and voting – is the equivalent of an eighth-grade education. We read, with dismay, Justice Alfred Lerner’s decision:

A “sound basic education” should consist of the skills necessary to obtain employment, and to competently discharge one’s civil responsibility. The state submitted evidence that jury charges are generally at a grade level of 8.3, and newspaper articles on campaign and ballot issues range from grade level 6.5 to 11.7.... The evidence at the trial established that the skills required to enable a person to obtain employment, vote, and serve on a jury, are imparted between grades 8 and 9. (*CFE v. State of New York* 2002)

The court concluded, “That is not to say that the state should not strive for higher goals [than an eighth-grade education]; indeed...the new Regents standards...exceed any notions of a basic education” (*CFE v. State of New York* 2002).

Students were instantly struck by Judge Lerner’s findings and by how disconnected they seem from the new requirement that all students must pass high-stakes five-test Regents for graduation, a mandate they have been hearing about, endlessly it seems, over the past several years. “If all schools have to



---

“If all schools have to give is an eighth- or ninth-grade education, why are they making us take the Regents?” one student asked.

---

give is an eighth- or ninth-grade education, why are they making us take the Regents?” one student asked, as the rest murmured their assent. These students recognize that they live at the heart of a policy paradox: a raising of standards required for a high school diploma, along with a declaration that the state has no responsibility to educate students to the levels required for a high school diploma. While this paradox may escape both politicians and policy-makers, it is felt deeply by the students upon whose heads it comes to rest.

Outraged at Lerner’s suggestion that students need only an eighth- or ninth-grade education to succeed in today’s economy, the students began a dialogue. One pointed out: “It cannot be said that a person who is engaged in a ‘low-level service job’ is not a valuable, productive member of society.”

“That’s true that they’re valuable,” others agreed, “but what kind of job can you get? Working at McDonald’s?”

The question of the pay at a minimum-wage job came up – what exactly does one earn in a forty-hour week at \$5.15 an hour? One student

pulled out her calculator: \$206. The numbers spoke for themselves. The students sat in silence, stunned by the future that a New York State Appellate Division judge is willing to consign them to.

The significance of resources in reaching “standards” (see also Orfield et al. 1997/2001) was clear to the students. Although they feel privileged to attend a small school with what they consider to be high academic standards, they are far from immune to the shortages that plague city schools. “If you have to take gym, then they have to give you a good gym. And you need books and computers if you’re going to get ready for the Regents, or for a job, or anything.” These most basic resources are not something that they take for granted; their school gym is a cause of much consternation at the school, barely large enough for one full-court basketball game. Though there is no shortage of books at their own school, one student recounted his experience in summer school, where his English class was unable to read a class book because there were not enough copies for all the students.

---

“You need books and computers if you’re going to get ready for the Regents, or for a job, or anything.”

---

---

“By not giving enough school-books or computers, some schools say, ‘You’re never going to amount to anything’...a child hears that and they say, ‘Oh well. They say that’s what I’m gonna do, that’s what I’m gonna do.’”

---

Asked to construct a list of what constitutes a “sound basic education,” they are expansive and recognize again the significance of material and intellectual resources. They include not only “the basics – math, English, science, history,” but different languages, the arts, and a sophisticated political awareness. “You have to be able to form your own opinions about things: you need to know history in order to decide about current events,” a young man explained. “How else can I decide if I think we should go to war with Iraq?”

Like the young people from California, they are aware that *someone* is supposed to be accountable for providing these resources equitably. As the race for governor of New York headed into its final stretch in the fall of 2002, they watched politicians keenly. One student pointed out, “I saw an ad last night on TV, where Governor Pataki says he has improved education in New York State. But how can he say that and appeal the decision?”

“What about the other candidate for governor?” someone else asked. “What is he going to do about education?”

“How do you know if the politicians are going to do what they say they will?” a third wondered.

In order to answer these and other questions, students went beyond legal documents to visit a series of suburban high schools – partner schools in the Opportunity Gap study – to investigate the material conditions of teaching and learning when most of the students are white and middle-class. Sitting on green grass waiting for their train back to the city, students expressed amazement at the differences between their own school and the large suburban complex they had spent the day visiting. “Did you see the auditorium? Okay, our auditorium

looks like...[crap] compared to that one. ...”

“Because they have money, they could actually have a darkroom that they can do photography in,” another exclaimed. Others focused on the library: “They have a lot of books!”

“It’s like a regular library.”

“The computers!”

One student highlighted the difference in access to technology within the classroom and its effect on student learning: “I went to [a science class where] a girl gave a presentation about abortion. She had slides to show everyone [on a slide projector and a computer]...when we had that in our school we just did a poster.” Several, having also visited science classes, followed up with remarks on the “real” science laboratories: the lab equipment, the sinks in the rooms, the materials for experiments. It was clear, in their minds, that the students at this suburban school enjoy an academic advantage because of the resources they largely take for granted.

In noting structural inequities between suburbs and cities, these students nevertheless refuse to shrink from holding themselves and their peers to standards of accountability. Berating peers whom they see as not holding up their part of the bargain, they believe strongly in an ethic of individual responsibility. But they cannot ignore the many places where the state fails to provide the necessary resources: “By not giving enough schoolbooks or computers, some schools say, ‘You’re never going to amount to anything’... a child hears that and they say, ‘Oh well. They say that’s what I’m gonna do, that’s what I’m gonna do.’” This young woman spoke, unknowingly, in an echo of the betrayal voiced by her peers in California.

From this work we begin to see not only a profound distress at the lack of public accountability, but the virus of mistrust spreading toward politicians, the state, and government in general. This generation has grown up without memory of a state that stood for the people, a social safety net, or a collective common sense of “we.” They are a generation born into privatization of the public sphere and privatization of the soul. They are held accountable, but the state and the school system are off the hook.

The youth research on public education suggests a persuasive strategy for democratizing public accountability. In this work, the state and schools became the “subjects” of analysis, while youth developed the skills of researchers. In the process, however, poor and working-class youth collected much data to confirm (unfortunately) their suspicion that the “public” sphere is no longer designed for them, but on their backs. As poor and working-class students they may have felt betrayed; as researchers for public accountability of public education, they were outraged.

### ***Demanding a Public Sphere***

In the early part of the twenty-first century, social policies of financial inequity transform engaged and enthused students into young women and men who believe that the nation, adults, and the public sphere have abandoned and betrayed them, in the denial of quality education, democracy, and the promise of equality. They know that race, class, and ethnicity determine who receives, and who is denied, a rich public education. And they resent the silence they confront when they challenge these inequities.

In California, the interviewed youth attend schools where low expectations

and severe miseducation prevail. In New York, the youth researchers attend a school of vibrant educational possibility and high standards, despite severe financial inequities. In both cases, however, federal offers of “choice” and “flexibility” ring hollow and sound insincere. What are their choices? What flexibility can they exercise? In states and cities scarred by severe financial inequity and/or inadequacy, a discourse of choice thinly masks public betrayal. Such federal policy leaves most poor and working-class children behind.

Poor and working-class youth of color carry a keen and astute consciousness for accountability. They condemn financial inequity and educational redlining, and reject standardized testing as a valid assessment of their knowledge. They witness juvenile detention facilities being constructed in their neighborhoods, as public schools crumble and/or shut their doors. Most, as Hirschman would predict, exit high school prior to graduation. But those who stay are generous enough to offer us a powerful blend of possibility and outrage. Demanding accountability from the bottom, they ask only for a public sphere that represents the interests of all. They

ask not for the choice to leave; nor for the opportunity to take a test that misrepresents memorization as learning. They want simply to be well educated, in their own communities, in their own well-funded and intellectually thrilling schools.

---

#### References

- Anyon, J. 1997. *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Campaign for Fiscal Equity. 2000. “Reforming New York State’s Flawed School Finance System,” In Evidence: Policy Reports from the CFE Trial, vol. 2. Available at <[www.cfequity.org](http://www.cfequity.org)>.
- CFE v. State of New York. 2002. Decision, Justice Alfred Lerner, Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of the State of New York. Link available at <[www.cfequity.org](http://www.cfequity.org)> under Our Litigation/CFE v. State Legal Documents.
- CFE v. State of New York. 2001. Decision, Justice Leland DeGrasse, Supreme Court of the State of New York, 719 N.Y.S.2d 475. Available at <[www.cfequity.org/decision.html](http://www.cfequity.org/decision.html)>.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. 2001. “Apartheid in American Education: How Opportunity Is Rationed to Children of Color in the United States.” In *Racial Profiling and Punishing in U.S. Public Schools*, edited by Tammy Johnson, Jennifer Emiko Boyden, and William J. Pittz, pp. 39–44. Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center.
- Deutsch, M. 2002. “Oppression.” Unpublished manuscript. New York: Teachers College, International Center for Conflict Resolution.
- DuBois, W. E. B. 1935. “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” *Journal of Negro Education* 4, 328–335.
- Educational Priorities Panel. 1999. “Trial of the Next Century: City Students Finally Get Their Day in Court.” *State Funding Equity reports* 4:2. Link available at <[www.edpriorities.org/Info/info\\_StateFun.html](http://www.edpriorities.org/Info/info_StateFun.html)>
- Elmore, Richard. 2002. “Testing Trap: The Single Largest – and Possibly Most Destructive – Federal Intrusion into America’s Public Schools,” *Harvard Magazine*. Available at <[www.harvard-magazine.com/on-line/0902140.html](http://www.harvard-magazine.com/on-line/0902140.html)>.
- Fallis, R., and S. Opatow. 2002. “Are Students Failing School or Are Schools Failing Students? Class Cutting in High School,” *Journal of Social Issues* (special issue on Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice, edited by C. Daiute and M. Fine).
- Fine, Michelle. 1991. *Framing Dropouts*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Fine, M., A. Burns, Y. Payne, and M. E. Torre. 2002. "Civic Lessons: The Color and Class of Betrayal." Unpublished manuscript. New York: The Graduate School, CUNY.
- Fine, M., N. Freudenberg, Y. Payne, T. Perkins, K. Smith, and K. Wanzer. 2002. "Anything Can Happen with Police Around": Urban Youth Evaluate Strategies of Surveillance in Public Places," *Journal of Social Issues* (special issue on Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice, edited by C. Daiute and M. Fine).
- Fine, Michelle, and Linda Powell. 2001. "Small Schools: An Anti-Racist Intervention in Urban America." In *Racial Profiling and Punishment in U.S. Public Schools*, edited by Tammy Johnson, Jennifer Emiko Boyden, and William J. Pittz, pp. 45–50. Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center.
- Fine, Michelle, Maria Elena Torre, Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Donna Hylton, Migdalia Martinez, Missy, Rosemary A. Roberts, Pamela Smart, and Debora Upegui. 2001. "Changing Minds: The Impact of College in Prison." The Graduate Center, CUNY. Available at <[www.changingminds.ws](http://www.changingminds.ws)>.
- Hirschman, Albert. 1990. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: A Response to Declines in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. 1995. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. Forthcoming. "Can Public Schools Promote the American Dream for Poor Children?" *Journal of Social Issues*.
- Hurtado, Aída, Craig Haney, and Eugene Garcia. 1998. "Becoming the Mainstream: Merit, Changing Demographics, and Higher Education in California," *La Raza Law Journal* 10:2 (symposium issue on Latinos at the School Door: California's Challenge to Affirmative Action), 645–690.
- Kozol, Jonathan. 1991. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown Publishing.
- Meier, Deborah. 2002. *In Schools We Trust*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mizell, Linda. 2002. "Horace Had It Right: The Stakes Are Still High for Students of Color." In *Racial Profiling and Punishing in U.S. Public Schools*, edited by Tammy Johnson, Jennifer Emiko Boyden, and William J. Pittz, pp. 27–33. Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center.
- Orfield, Gary (with Jennifer Arenson, Tara Jackson, Christine Bohrer, Dawn Gavin, and Emily Kalejs). 1997/2001. "City-Suburban Desegregation: Parent and Student Perspectives in Metropolitan Boston." Available at the Civil Rights Project Web site, Harvard University: <[www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights/publications/metbody.html](http://www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights/publications/metbody.html)>.
- Poe-Yamagata, E., and S. Jones. 2000. *And Justice for Some*. Building Blocks for Youth Report. Washington, DC: Youth Law Center.
- Regents and State Education Department. 2001. *New York: The State of Learning*. Report to the Governor and the Legislature. Albany: New York State Department of Education.
- U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey. 2000. "Income in 1999 by Educational Attainment for People Eighteen Years Old and Over, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin (Table 8)." Available at <[www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/p20-536/tab08.pdf](http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/p20-536/tab08.pdf)>.
- U.S. Department of Labor. 2001. "Union Members Summary." Publication no. USDL 01–21. Bureau of Labor Statistics Online News. Available at <<http://stats.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nro.htm>>.
- U.S. Department of Education. 2002. "The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Executive Summary." Available at <[www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea/exec-sum.html](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea/exec-sum.html)>.
- Wells, Amy S., and I. Serna. 1996. "The Politics of Culture: Understanding Local Political Resistance to Detracking in Racially Mixed Schools," *Harvard Educational Review* 66:1 (Spring), 93–118.
- Williams v. State of California*. 2000. Plaintiff's first amended complaint, Superior Court of the State of California, No. 312236. Link available at <[www.decentsschools.com/court\\_papers.php](http://www.decentsschools.com/court_papers.php)>.

# Colleagues and “Yutzes”: Accountability inside Schools

Leslie Santee Siskin

---

*Accountability mandates can only be effective if the external expectations for school improvement match internal accountability – the norms and expectations teachers have for one another.*

**S**tandards. Accountability. Testing. Higher standards. Increased accountability. More testing. Following the federal report that the U.S. was “a nation at risk” from the “rising tide of mediocrity” in its schools, politicians and policy-makers, in state after state, have been swept up in the new tidal wave of educational reform: external standards-based accountability systems.

The standards-based accountability movement provided a powerful logic, pairing equity and excellence in irresistible calls for high standards for all students. It has been persistent, drawing initial momentum from a slumping economy, accelerating through the soaring economy of the 1990s, and reaching its zenith in the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (what some critics have called the “no child left untested act”). And it has been remarkably pervasive. By 2001, forty-nine states had shifted their focus to the “bottom line” of student performance, building systems of what Susan Fuhrman (1999) has termed “the new accountability”: states develop content and performance standards, devise assessment instruments, and attach public reporting and material consequences for schools (and in some cases, for staff and students). Across party lines and administrative turnovers, government officials and can-

didates have kept educational reform high on the public agenda, and accountability the dominant strategy of reform.

Despite the clear and consistent direction of the reform effort, however, schools are responding – or not responding – in markedly varied ways. Some schools find sharpened focus and assemble new strategies for instructional improvement (or at least test preparation).<sup>1</sup>

Because of our focus on the [state] test, because of our focus on instruction, and because of the change in attitude that we had to undergo among the teachers, we increased in one year. Just by focusing, just by making the accountability system important to teachers and students and to the parents. And in one year, we went in reading from 62 to 78; in mathematics, from 38 to 62; in writing, from 75 to 86. In one year. We just focused. (Yonder High School)

Other schools see themselves falling farther behind, feel considerable frustration, and have a hard time finding any useful connection between the

*Leslie Santee Siskin is a visiting fellow at the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy at Columbia University.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Data for this article are drawn from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education’s study of accountability and high schools, conducted over four years and across four states by a team of researchers from Harvard and Stanford universities (see DeBray, Parson & Avila, forthcoming). All school and district names are pseudonyms.

new external policies and their own internal practices:

We look at [the standards]. We get them at meetings, and most people either put them in their closet or throw them out and never look at them again. I throw them out. (Robinson High School)

To account for such variation, this article turns to the *internal* accountability systems that schools developed long before these new external systems appeared. The fate of today's reform effort is tightly tied to how these two systems – internal and external accountability – interact.

While internal accountability systems are not always systematic, and not often organized around academic achievement, they are nonetheless powerful constellations of beliefs, norms, and structures that affect the differing ways different schools respond to the same policy. They give shape and definition to “the way we do things here” and mark the boundaries of what is unacceptable, of “what we do not do.” In one teacher's memorable phrasing, they define whether one is included as a colleague or excluded as a “yutz.” Internal accountability systems might be called organizational culture with consequences.

Our four-year Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) study of accountability and high schools investigated the internal systems of high schools and their responses to external systems in four states: Kentucky, New York, Texas, and Vermont. The sample included schools we selected as the intended targets of the reforms (low-performing schools), schools that were somewhat better-positioned in terms of capacity and prior test scores, and those we saw as “orthogonal” (schools with a distinctive mission).

Our initial hypothesis, drawn from an earlier phase of the research project, was that some schools would have internal accountability systems, comprised of three critical components: formal mechanisms, individual responsibility, and collective expectations<sup>2</sup> (Abelmann & Elmore 1999; DeBray, Parson & Avila, forthcoming). During the course of the second phase of the research, however, we discovered that, in fact, *all* schools have internal accountability systems, but they are not always systematic and not necessarily organized around teaching and learning. We found that the strength of the internal system, and therefore its capacity to respond to the new demands of external accountability, depends on the alignment of these three components (DeBray, Parson & Avila, forthcoming). Yet while schools may be *capable* of responding to external demands, we found that a school's *willingness* to respond depends on the fit between the internal and external systems. Thus there can be schools with strong internal systems that, nonetheless, do not match up strongly with the external demands. They hold themselves accountable to a different standard.



<sup>2</sup> These correspond to Richard Scott's (1998) typology of three kinds of organizational incentives: material, purposive, and community.

## **Formal Mechanisms**

Schools have always had formal mechanisms – grounded in explicit rules and regulations, contracts, and evaluation criteria – governing what must and must not be done. However, what teachers are held accountable for has varied considerably: from appropriate dress and marital status to coal buckets and time clocks. There have been systematic efforts to hold teachers to standardized instruction, as in the example of a superintendent at the turn of the last century who “could sit in his office and know on what page in each book work was being done at that time in every school in the city” (Tyack 1974, p. 48). Earlier generations of accountability also included student performance – a Vermont teacher recalled how, in 1885, her career depended on students’ giving the right answers in public recitations: “though if I had made a slip and asked the question out of order, the results might have been disastrous. They might have said that Vermont is the largest state in the Union, or that George Washington had sailed the ocean blue in 1492” (Hoffman 1981, p. 35).

In the contemporary high schools in our study, where formal mechanisms are strong and coherent, teachers know what they are accountable for, and how they will be assessed. As one states:

The first week that I taught in the school, the principal had already made an appointment, scheduled an appointment to sit in on one of my classes, just to be sure that I am following the standards of [the school], which is tremendous. I felt that that showed that even the principal was actively involved in every single one of his staff’s performance and how they’re carrying through their objectives.

In schools such as this one, the mechanisms are not only clear; they are directly connected to teaching, they



involve “even the principal,” and they are experienced as supportive of instructional improvement.

In other schools, however, teachers are less sure of just what they are formally accountable for, and less confident that it is for things that should count. When asked how he is evaluated, another teacher talked of “hope” and “probability,” but with little assurance that the formal mechanisms were connected to instruction or to what he considered “important”:

So [my] attendance would probably be very important. I would hope that rapport with the kids would be of importance. . . . But I don't know that it is, because sometimes the things that – ideally – you would think would be important in an evaluation are not. I mean you probably know in any workplace that they seem to pick out the least important things and make the most of them. For the most part.

Whatever doubts they held about what they *were* accountable for, most teachers were quite sure – and quite forthcoming – about what they *were not* formally accountable for:

If they look at my class list and see that 99 percent of my students fail, is anything going to happen to me? No.

What I'm not accountable for, I think sometimes – facetiously I say it – if every kid failed math in this school, I would still have a job.

If the students have gone by being promoted through social promotion in [this district], I am not accountable for that. If the policy has been social promotion, which it has been, then I cannot be faulted for that.

### **Individual Responsibility**

While the school's formal mechanisms may not be able to “fault” teachers for students' performance, teachers may find a different code of accountability in their own sense of individual responsibility. Personal conscience is often represented in heroic images of teachers going “up the down staircase” or in romanticized visions of teachers like Mr. Chips. In the large, egg-crate structures of many schools (at least high schools), a sense of personal ethics and obligation does, in fact, play a central role in internal accountability. Teachers asked about accountability most often spoke of their own sense of responsibility, or their projected sense of student needs: “I'm accountable to my students.”

A math teacher in our target school in Vermont provided what might be the quintessential response of such an “atomized” organization, where individual responsibility drives instructional practice:

As far as a set procedure, or grade [policy] throughout the school, whatever, we really don't have one. It's pretty much individual assessment here, with individual guidelines graded by the teachers.

He tried to hold himself to state standards: “I'm not doing the open response questions near as often as I should be.” In the absence of formal mechanisms or common planning time, he could only imagine that “if I could get time to talk with [another math teacher, she] could probably give me some assistance.”

---

In some schools, teachers are less sure of just what they are formally accountable for, and less confident that it is for things that should count.

---

Other teachers similarly reported attending to standards rather than putting them in closets or throwing them away. However, even if they did try to “work on it” they did so alone, particularly in the target schools. Everyone was just “too busy” to work on it together and there were few formal mechanisms for communication:

Certain teachers are doing certain things. I don't know what they're doing in their class. I know they are working on it. Sometimes we're able to share some things that work, as far as [the state test] prep. But other times it's just, you know, too busy.

In New York, where English teachers score the exam essays that determine whether students will graduate, I asked why, if teachers wanted students to graduate, wanted their school to look good, and wanted to get the scoring task over with, would they not give a lot of passing scores and be done with it? The department head assured us that this would not happen. Even if the formal mechanisms of the scoring would allow it, individual responsibility would not. Or at least she hoped not:

You won't do that, hopefully. I don't know how else to say it except it keeps coming back to the idea that even though teachers have tenure, a lot of this job really depends on your personal integrity and your ethics. And if you don't have that, you can't survive.

---

Even in seemingly isolated workspaces social relationships count, and colleagues are held accountable for conforming to accepted norms.

---

In fact, the grade sheets revealed that she was right. But while individual responsibility may support the survival of individual teachers in isolated classrooms, it has little leverage to effect school- or even departmentwide change or to meet the new demands of external accountability systems.

### ***Collective Expectations***

Much has been made over the years of the loose coupling of schools, of isolation and egg-crate structures and closed classroom doors. But even in seemingly isolated workspaces, social relationships count and colleagues are held accountable for conforming to accepted norms – sometimes to norms of privacy (Little 1990). These may not be readily visible from the outside, especially in the brief encounters of research surveys and site visits. Nor are they necessarily positive. Collective expectations may push and support teachers to prepare their students to meet the standards or they may establish excuses for why it can't be done (Lee & Smith 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert 1993). Often informal, and rarely articulated unless they are violated, these social norms may well be the most influential component of internal accountability systems: “I don't know that we've ever discussed it as consensus. All of us know what needs to be done to meet the expectations of not only each other, but the school.”

These expectations work to police behavior, to “dictate who will and will not be a member” of a given professional community (Van Maanen & Barley 1984, p. 309). If, for example, a teacher's individual responsibility would allow inflating exam grades, explained one English chair, the collective expectations of the department would not, “because there is a check-up for that. We're all grading the papers in the same

---

Being cast as a “yutz” or someone so mistrusted that one’s work needs to be rechecked by colleagues provides a more immediate and powerful incentive than most external accountability systems have imagined.

---

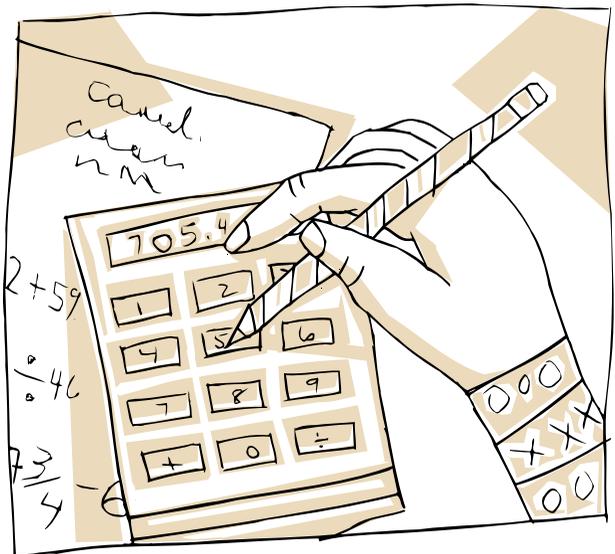
room, all right? Some teachers would say ‘Gee, you gave a really high score, let me read that.’”

Another chair offered slightly more vivid terms:

We don’t do that. I mean, this English department certainly doesn’t do that. Never did and won’t now.... So even if you are a “yutz,” and you’ve given everybody a 5, [someone else] is going to be sitting there saying, “What in the world did she do?” and they’re going to give it a 2.

Being cast as a “yutz” or someone so mistrusted that one’s work needs to be rechecked by colleagues provides a more immediate and powerful incentive than most external accountability systems have imagined.

Teachers provided several examples of the power of collective expectations to enforce behaviors that extend far beyond classroom performance or grading criteria. Inappropriate relationships with students, noisy classrooms, or too many sick days can all lead to social sanctions. So, too, can challenging the status quo or raising questions about the effectiveness of existing instructional practices (Little 1990; Gallego, Hollingsworth & Whitenack 2001). As expectations establish cultural norms, “the way we do things here” becomes an assertive or even a didactic statement. These collective expectations set the boundaries for what teachers can expect of each other and for what they will not tolerate.



### ***Strength and Fit***

Schools that have strong internal accountability systems are organizations where these three components – formal mechanisms, individual responsibility, and collective expectations – align and reinforce each other. Formal mechanisms provide structures enabling individuals to develop their own practice and hold them accountable for things they consider important. Individual responsibility is congruent with collective expectations, so teachers feel part of a common enterprise, challenged and supported by like-minded colleagues whom they trust personally and professionally (see Bryk & Schneider 2002; Meier 1995). When *all three* components are in alignment, standards – for teachers and for students – are explicit and ambitious; expectations are high but potentially achievable. There is a coherence, and a focus, around which work is organized.

That focus, however, may or may not fit the demands of the new external accountability systems, for schools are held, and hold themselves, accountable for a number of outcomes besides achievement-test scores. Some schools, for example, have organized in interdisciplinary teams as

a great way to keep a kind of accountability factor and figure out exactly what the kid's doing or why this kid is crying in my class because perhaps the kid got caught cheating two classes before. And in a school like this, where we have so many kids at risk, that is the most important thing.

With such programs, these schools have achieved considerable success in what might be called pastoral care – they can point to decreasing disturbances, to increased attendance, to students who stay in school longer, and to an increasing climate of order and

safety. But they cannot point to rising test scores.

One school characterized in our study as orthogonal, or with a distinct mission, presented the example of a school with a strong, coherent internal accountability system but poor fit with the external system. Administrators and teachers at Ring High School argued – forcefully and publicly – that their school could best meet high standards with their own interdisciplinary program and rigorous system of performance-based assessment. The principal and many faculty saw the new accountability assessments as a direct threat to their school's essential purpose. One teacher told us:

I think [the state policy-makers] have lost sight of why alternative schools have existed in the beginning, because these students did not thrive in a regular school system; that's why we started alternative schools. They have special needs one way or another. ... So that's why portfolios were developed in the beginning, and I think people who really don't understand what a successful portfolio is, or what a successful alternative means of learning is, they just don't have a clue.

The school fought to demonstrate that their alternative curriculum did, in fact, conform to state standards. “Now that we have state standards, we're trying to tailor what we cover a little bit more to that,” explained one teacher. “We've been meeting on an ongoing basis, trying to figure out how to do what the state is asking us to do within the framework of our school.” Teachers at Ring could talk about the content standards in specific terms, and across the board they could point to how the standards aligned with what they were teaching. But there was no real mechanism to resolve the misfit between the two accountability systems.

---

## Improvement depends, ultimately and fundamentally, on what occurs inside schools – on the internal accountability systems.

---

As the dominant strategy of reform, external accountability has relied heavily on mandates and incentives of shame and blame. The question of fit has yet to be seriously engaged. Our study suggests that although avoiding the label of failure may be a strong motivator (Siskin & Chabran 2001), such strategies are limited in what they can actually do to effect improvements in instruction or learning. Such improvement depends, ultimately and fundamentally, on what occurs inside schools – on the internal accountability systems, the capacities and commitments of the schools themselves. A strong and coherent internal system does not guarantee a receptive environment for the demands of external accountability. But without strong and coherent internal accountability systems, schools have great difficulty marshaling resources to meet these demands.

---

### References

- Abelmann, Charles, and Richard Elmore. 1999. *When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?* CPRE Research Report Series RR-42. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- Bryk, Anthony S., and Barbara Schneider. 2002. *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- DeBray, Elizabeth, G. Parson, and S. Avila. Forthcoming. "Internal Alignment and External Pressure: High School Responses in Four State Contexts." In *High Schools and the New Accountability: A Schools-Eye View of Standards-Based Reforms*, edited by Martin Carnoy, Richard F. Elmore, and Leslie S. Siskin. New York: Routledge Press.
- Fuhrman, Susan H. 1999. *The New Accountability*. CPRE Policy Brief RB-27. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- Gallego, M. A., S. Hollingsworth, and D.A. White-nack. 2001. "Relational Knowing in the Reform of Educational Cultures," *Teachers College Record* 103:2, 240–266.
- Hoffman, N. 1981. *Woman's "True" Profession*. New York: The Feminist Press, McGraw-Hill.
- Lee, Valerie, and Julia Smith. 1996. "Collective Responsibility for Learning and Its Effects on Gains in Achievement for Early Secondary School Students," *American Journal of Education* 104, 103–147.
- Little, Judith W. 1990. "The Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers' Professional Relations," *Teachers College Record* 91:4, 509–536.
- McLaughlin, Milbrey W., and Joan E. Talbert. 1993. *Contexts That Matter for Teaching and Learning*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University School of Education, Center for Research on the Context of Teaching.
- Meier, Deborah. 1995. *The Power of Their Ideas*. New York: Basic Books.
- Scott, W. R. 1998. *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Siskin, Leslie S. Forthcoming. "The Challenge of the High Schools." In *Redesigning Accountability Systems*, edited by Susan H. Fuhrman and Richard Elmore. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Siskin, Leslie, with Melissa Chabran. 2001. "Listening to Talk from and about Students on Accountability." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle.
- Tyack, David B. 1974. *The One Best System*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Van Maanen, J., and S. Barley. 1984. "Occupational Communities: Culture and Control in Organizations," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 6, 287–365.

# Who Will Be Accountable to the Community for Public Education?

Fernando Abeyta

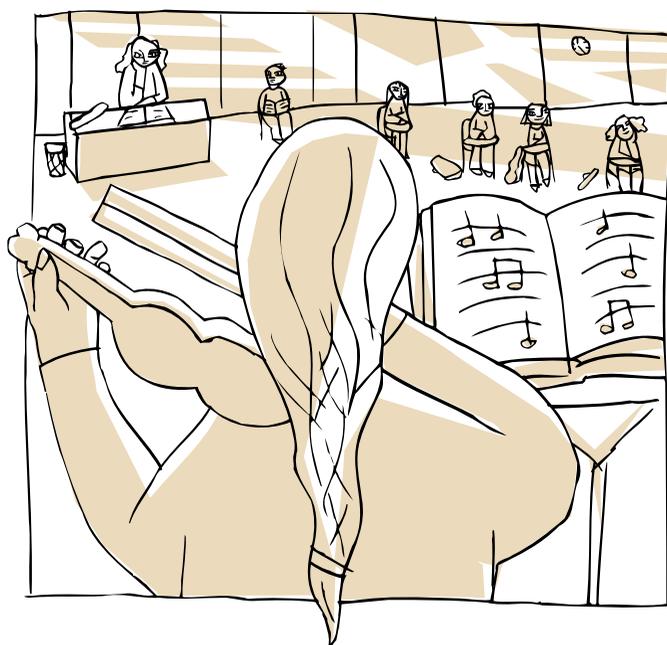
*While accountability has risen to the top of the policy agenda, the discussions have often skirted the question of accountability to the community. Yet communities, parents, educators, and policy-makers all have a role in improving public education.*

**A**s a twenty-two-year-old community organizer, I bring a perspective to the issue of school accountability that is not often heard. My organization, the South West Organizing Project (SWOP) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has as its mission to empower our communities to realize racial and gender equality and social and economic justice. Our work is based on holding institutions and public officials accountable.

The biggest problem that we encounter when trying to organize for school improvement is that many school officials have a warped idea of what

accountability is or should be. When a school does not meet the national average on a standardized test, the administration points a finger at teachers and students, therefore taking responsibility away from the system and laying it on the shoulders of those with limited power. But the *system* should be responsible for those outcomes, and everyone – students, parents, teachers, community members – should be part of the solution. Instead, young people of color and underpaid teachers bear the accountability burden but are left out of the improvement process. The com-

*Fernando Abeyta is a community organizer for the South West Organizing Project (SWOP) in Albuquerque, New Mexico.*



munity has no input when discussing the allocation of district funds and issues of school safety. Yes, there are sometimes meetings that are open to the public, but they are rarely advertised; nor is there any kind of outreach done in the low-income neighborhoods. It is even difficult for public interest groups or community organizations to find out about such meetings.

It seems that our administrators don't want community involvement. Are we as a community being made to assume that because of our color or yearly family income we have no voice? Are we expected to accept the role of lost lambs looking to those with power to show us the way? It seems that any time our communities make an effort to participate in the decision-making process, we are either pushed to the side altogether or a small number of token community representatives are used to represent the majority.

Maybe this is because school officials find it easier to blame community members for problems than to work with them toward solutions. The officials seem to assume that parents in lower-income areas have no interest in being involved in the classrooms or in decisions affecting the education of their children.

The truth is that parents feel intimidated and unwelcome. I have spoken with hundreds of Albuquerque public school parents as part of my community organizing efforts, and all parents wish to feel welcome and respected in the schools. No one has told me that they were uninterested in the education of their children. If given a chance, they could help find appropriate solutions. But we have found that they have to struggle constantly for a chance for their voice to be heard.

### ***Direct Action***

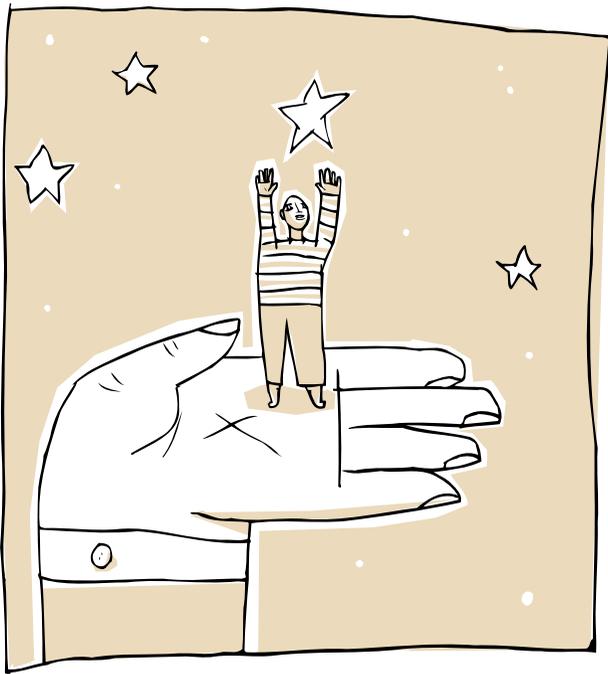
Let me give you an example. A few years ago the Albuquerque school board considered a policy to allow school security officers to carry shotguns and stun guns. Many community members strongly objected to this proposal. They felt it would create a military atmosphere on campuses and intimidate students, not protect them. They also objected to the cost – \$127,000. We simply could not afford to spend money to purchase deadly weapons at a time when textbooks and pencils were hard to come by.

Our organization, on behalf of community members, made it clear that this decision could not and would not be made behind closed doors without community input. SWOP asked for meetings with board members and school administrators a number of times, to no avail. We then began a series of direct actions. Young people collected petitions, organized protests, and held marches and sit-ins. Finally the school board agreed to seek community input. But they did not call us; they called the district's citizens' advisory council,

---

Young people of color and underpaid teachers bear the accountability burden but are left out of the improvement process. The community has no input when discussing the allocation of district funds.

---



which is composed mainly of white, upper-class parents from the wealthiest sections in the district. There is not one youth representative in the entire group. We were being forced to stand aside and let a group of people who don't represent young people of color make a decision that was going to directly affect them.

We would not stand for this and continued our direct action. One of the biggest actions took place the night the vote on the proposal was scheduled, when we held a large protest outside the school board meeting. In the end, our efforts were successful. The board voted six to one against the arming of school security guards. While we were gratified by this vote, we were also dismayed that it took a year-long campaign to accomplish. We shouldn't have to struggle so long and hard to change negative policies in a public education system.

### ***Let's Work Together***

The conditions of our schools show that we have a lot of work to do. Our communities and schools are suffering from a lack of resources, a shortage of adequately trained and paid teachers who actually care about the future of young children, and punitive means of discipline. Young people of color are not leaving high school educated, they are leaving high school institutionalized.

This will only change when our leaders are accountable to the community and to the students. Now, though, young people are held accountable for every single one of their actions, but our institutional power structures don't like to be held accountable for theirs. They need to see that young people are not statistics but constituents. Our school system will never improve unless we begin to work together to ensure

a better future for our young people. We have the right to demand a high-quality education in a friendly environment free from racism, classism, criminalization, and abuse. Our young people deserve to be critical, creative thinkers.

Webster's defines *accountability* as "liable to be called to account; answerable." Accountability should not be a word that is used only to blame somebody or something for failure. We are all stakeholders, which means we should all be held accountable at some level for the futures of our young people. In trying to create the most just and fair educational system in a process controlled by very few, we will first have to recognize everyone's responsibilities and hold each other accountable for our actions. We must all be ready with honest answers when called to account, and we must all feel that we have not only the right, but the responsibility to call our institutions and leaders to account. Teachers, administrators, community members, and especially the students themselves have something to give in order to improve *our* public education system.

---

We must all be ready with honest answers when called to account, and we must all feel that we have not only the right, but the responsibility to call our institutions and leaders to account.

---

# The View From City Hall

Audrey M. Hutchinson

*Recognizing that their constituents hold them accountable for the success of schools in their cities, mayors are taking leadership roles in education. The author shows how the efforts of leaders in a number of cities are redefining educational accountability as a shared municipal responsibility.*

**T**he challenges to public schools across the nation are well known, and so is the fact that meeting them is the responsibility of all partners – parents, teachers, administrators, and community-based, faith-based, business, and civic leaders, including local elected officials who must dedicate community resources and assets to support student success.

Mayors and other local elected officials, as civic and opinion leaders, are in a unique position to use their leadership capacity and access to city resources to support school districts. Even when they have no formal authority over school districts, municipal leaders have a stake in their success for a number of reasons:

- Schools are important centers of community life in cities.
- The quality of life in cities and their potential for economic growth and development are directly linked to the ability of schools to produce skilled, competent graduates.
- Without good schools, cities are unable to attract businesses because employees want to be assured that their children will have access to high-quality schools.
- Young people who are highly educated are likely to become fully engaged in the civic life of their communities.

At the same time, when schools fail to adequately prepare students and they drop out, cities bear the burden of providing needed financial, health, and social services support. Data show that high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, to receive public assistance, and to have less earning potential than those who complete high school or a college degree (U.S. Department of Education 2001).

In addition to seeking ways to enhance their communities, municipal leaders are also taking on their part of the responsibility for improving public education because the public already holds them accountable for doing so. A Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll released in 2001 revealed that, while there is an emerging emphasis on education as the number-one priority at the federal and state levels, local governments also have a role to play. Forty-five percent of poll respondents believed that closing the achievement gap is a government responsibility, with all levels of government splitting the responsibility evenly: 34 percent believed that the federal government is responsible, compared with 35 percent for state government and 29 percent for local government (Rose & Gallup 2001). In addition, the Public Education Net-

*Audrey M. Hutchinson is the program director for education and after-school initiatives at the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families.*

work's polling data show that the public has faith in the power of engaged leaders at all levels to improve the quality of education (Public Education Network 2001, 2002).

### ***An Accountability Framework for Mayors***

Mayors are among those becoming directly involved in educational improvement because their constituents judge them, at least in part, on the success of the city's schools. As they enter this arena, though, mayors are helping to redefine educational accountability.

First, mayors are promoting a sense of shared accountability for the education of the city's children, one that seeks to ensure that all key stakeholders – including school officials, business and community leaders, and mayors themselves – do their part to improve the quality of public schools. Second, mayors are accepting and embracing their responsibilities, as chief executives of municipal governments, to ensure that city policies and resources support local school-improvement efforts in every possible way.

With its emphasis on raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps, and its provisions for holding schools and school districts strictly accountable for doing so, the new federal education law – the No Child Left Behind Act – provides a framework and a context for municipal officials to act on this new definition of accountability.



By involving themselves directly both in supporting schools and in mobilizing community resources to support children and youth, mayors and city leaders can see to it that the law achieves its ambitious aims.

As the public recognizes, mayors are in a unique position to take the lead in school improvement. As visible, respected leaders in the community, mayors can set the public agenda and articulate the city's vision for public education, bring community partners together to assess progress regarding school improvement against established benchmarks, and reach consensus around specific goals for school improvement. Unlike superintendents (whose terms average two and a half years) or school board members, municipal leaders can establish structure to provide continuity for implementing communitywide goals.

---

Mayors and other local elected officials, as civic and opinion leaders, are in a unique position to use their leadership capacity and access to city resources to support school districts. Municipal leaders have a stake in their success.

---

Achieving a shared community vision for schools is no easy task; it requires the input and consensus of diverse partners. But mayors can exercise their political leadership by bringing together disparate groups to agree on key goals for school improvement. They can serve as catalysts to establish new coalitions to promote school improvement. Their standing and visibility can allow them to apply pressure on school and community stakeholders by drawing public attention to gains, as well as shortfalls and setbacks. Municipal officials know each stakeholder's assets and can insist on clear division of labor among each group. For example, foundations might be well positioned to offer financial resources; faith-based and neighborhood leaders may offer people to tutor/mentor students; cultural institutions may open their doors to ensure that kids have access to resources during nonschool hours; and city agencies can organize social, health, and nutrition services to support students and their families.

And, although elected school boards govern the great majority of school districts, increasingly mayors are taking direct control of the school systems in their cities. Usually, such efforts take place where there is “academic bankruptcy” coupled with a strong desire to turn around these low-performing schools. Mayoral control of school districts in cities such as Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Harrisburg, Oakland, and Washington, D.C., have shown mixed results in their ability to improve student performance (Wong and Shen 2001). Yet mayoral takeover can be a strategy to promote academic accountability, improve quality teaching and learning, strengthen management, and enhance public confidence.

The most critical factor of mayoral involvement in schools is that municipal governments, with or without formal authority over school districts, can marshal political capacity and community resources to address the enormous problems facing urban, rural, and suburban school districts in communities across the nation. The need for new and broader partnerships linking cities and schools is reinforced by Michael Usdan of the Institute for Educational Leadership and Larry Cuban of Stanford University, who forcefully articulated that “schools must be major players in collaborative initiatives to provide more flexible, comprehensive, and coordinated services to needy children and families, and school board leadership will be vital to any efforts to develop alternative governance structures and/or closer intersector collaborations” (Usdan & Cuban 2002).



## ***Mayors as Leaders in Accountability***

Mayors across the nation have begun to take bold actions in holding school districts and themselves accountable for student achievement. They recognize that they can promote communitywide accountability by exercising leadership to close the achievement gap, encourage the use of data to drive change, address teacher shortages, ensure that children enter school ready to learn, encourage choice in public education, promote college attendance, and help prepare students for the workforce.

### **Columbus: A Comprehensive Approach**

In some cases, even without direct authority over schools, mayors have led comprehensive efforts to improve education in their cities. In Columbus, Ohio, for example, when Mayor Michael Coleman assumed office in 1999, he made education a top priority for his administration. He established the Mayor's Office of Education, with cabinet-level status. His first act was to seek to establish high-quality after-school programs that met approved standards, convening key stakeholders in the community, including faith-based leaders, to provide academic and cultural enrichment for children and youth during the nonschool hours.

The mayor then turned his attention to the persistent achievement gaps that exist among students from different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds in the city of Columbus and throughout Franklin County. The mayor broke down jurisdictional barriers by spearheading a Community Leadership Summit, in partnership with Columbus Public Schools and the Educational Council, an organization representing the sixteen school district superintendents in Franklin County.

---

Mayors can exercise their political leadership by bringing together disparate groups to agree on key goals for school improvement.

---

The daylong summit brought together approximately 200 school, business, community, and faith-based leaders from fifteen of the sixteen school districts in the city and county, as well as local and national experts, to bring a communitywide focus to achievement gaps and to educate the public about the roles it can play in supporting students and closing these gaps. Each school district brought teams of school and community leaders to begin to find common strategies. Local and national experts highlighted the challenges and helped the districts understand how communities nationally are addressing these challenges.

Data is an important tool to assess progress and to determine where the gaps are in student performance. In preparation for the leadership summit, the Mayor's Office enlisted the help of Battelle for Kids, an Ohio-based group that works to analyze, share, and use disaggregated data to improve teaching and learning. Highlighting the use of local data, school by school, building by building, this strategy helped the community understand where gaps exist,

how to use the data to begin to develop strategies, and how to align resources to help close those gaps. In addition, the use of data can also reveal information about student and teacher performance that can help generate ongoing community dialogue around the progress schools are making and highlight challenges that they must continue to address.

### **Lansing: Focus on Adolescents**

Mayor David Hollister of Lansing, Michigan, has also led comprehensive education efforts, with particular attention to the needs of young adolescents. He convened several blue-ribbon commissions on Education and Early Learning to develop strategies for improving public schools and to ensure that children enter school ready to learn. He also worked with a new superintendent and school board president to develop strategies to improve education for middle school students. The leaders convened community partners to develop plans addressing reading, professional development, outreach to parents, truancy programs, and initiatives to connect the community to the schools. The goals included improving parental involvement, academic achievement, attendance, and in-school behavior of middle school students.

Recently, the mayor invited national experts to Lansing for a two-day meeting with community and

school leaders to talk about the unique social and academic needs of young adolescents and enlisted the support of the community in addressing the needs of middle school students. In addition, the mayor kicked off the first in a series of professional development activities with national experts to help elementary, middle, and high school teachers to understand the special role they play in ensuring the success of these students. The mayor also launched a communitywide reading initiative, One Book, One Community, as part of his effort to increase the literacy levels of students and their parents. The broad goal is to get the community excited about reading and to encourage parents to read to their children by holding a series of community conversations around the importance of reading.

### **Tackling Key Issues**

In addition to these large-scale initiatives, mayors have also addressed – and held themselves and their partners accountable for – some specific issues.

#### **Teacher Shortages**

The severe shortage of teachers is a major concern for many school districts. It is estimated that approximately two million teachers are needed to meet classroom needs. Mayors can help address this shortage by providing financial and other incentives to attract and retain teachers. For example, the mayor of San



Jose, California, initiated the Teacher Homebuyer Program, which provides teachers with a \$40,000 no-interest loan to help them purchase their first home. This incentive recognizes that many teachers cannot afford home ownership on their modest salaries. Since 1999, the city has helped over two hundred teachers buy homes. The city of Baltimore, meanwhile, in partnership with the school district, provides \$5,000 in recruitment incentives to cover closing costs on the purchase of a home in the city and an additional \$1,200 for moving expenses.

### **School Readiness**

Many children entering kindergarten are faced with unmet social service and health needs and are ill equipped to fully take advantage of early learning opportunities. Children who enter school with fewer cognitive and social skills have a difficult time keeping pace in class. Research shows that what happens from birth to five years can be a strong determinant in the academic success of a child. Mayors and council members can promote successful early childhood and improve school readiness by supporting high-quality early care and education programs, and by ensuring that families who most need them have access to these critical services.

In New Haven, Connecticut, Mayor John DeStefano, Jr., and the school superintendent established the Mayor's Task Force on Universal Access to Early Care and Education to develop a plan to ensure that all New Haven children arrive at kindergarten with the skills, knowledge, and support they need to be successful. To accomplish this, the task force has recommended policies to provide high-quality training of staff, expand access to services for children, build new facilities, and improve standards by providing more licensed care.

### **Innovation and Choice in Public Education**

Recognizing that charter schools can bring innovation and creativity into the public school system, Mayor Bart Peterson of Indianapolis became a strong proponent of charter schools and testified before the Indiana state legislature. In his advocacy for charter school legislation, the mayor secured the support of Indianapolis's eleven local superintendents and other community leaders. The mayor's advocacy for charter school legislation led the Indiana state legislature to allow the mayor of Indianapolis to be the first mayor in the nation to have the authority to charter schools. The first schools granted charter by the mayor opened in the fall of 2002, with operating dollars from the state.

### **College Access**

It has been established that earning potential increases when one attains a college degree. Research shows that over the past twenty years, the earnings of young adults who had completed at least a bachelor's degree increased faster than those of youths who had completed no more than a high school degree (U.S. Department of Education 2001).

Recognizing the importance of a college degree in today's economy, the city of San Antonio established the San Antonio Education Partnership (SAEP) with the goal of increasing high school graduation rates and college enrollment through scholarships and other supports. The partnership – which includes businesses, school districts, colleges and universities, and community organizations – provides scholarships to students who attain a B average and a 95 percent attendance rate and graduate from a local high school. To date, \$5 million in scholarships have been awarded to approximately 6,000 students. Students are awarded up to \$4,000 to attend a

---

## Mayors and council members also are working in many ways in partnership with districts and other city agencies to spur school improvement.

---

local community college or a public/private university. In addition, SAEP provides services to help students prepare for college, such as mentoring and after-school tutoring.

### **Workforce Preparation**

Rapid advances in technology have created strong demand for highly skilled workers who can take advantage of available jobs. Many schools have established school-to-career initiatives to give students the high academic skills and practical hands-on experience they need in the workplace. Mayors are playing a key role in establishing such partnerships. For example, in New Orleans, the city and surrounding parishes are part of a regional MetroVision School-to-Career Initiative, which brings local governments, schools, private businesses, and other segments of the community together to improve the connection between education and the job market for area students. The initiative's work has been a catalyst for new high school academies, internships, career exploration options, and curriculum development options.

Another example of such efforts is in the city of Rochester, which offers two Public Safety Youth Apprenticeship Programs for students in the Rochester City School District. These programs offer a unique opportunity for students to receive the training they need for a career either as a firefighter or as a police officer. Firefighter trainees participate in paid training during their junior and senior years of high school, including full-time summer employment. Training takes place both in the classroom and on duty with professional Rochester firefighters. Upon successful completion of the program and graduation from high school, trainees become recruits in the Fire Academy. Upon completing the academy requirements, recruits become Rochester firefighters. The police cadet program has been developed to provide students with vocational training and education in the field of criminal justice, with the ultimate goal of becoming professional police officers. The cadet program is year-round, with cadets required to serve an internship with the Rochester Police Department in the summer.

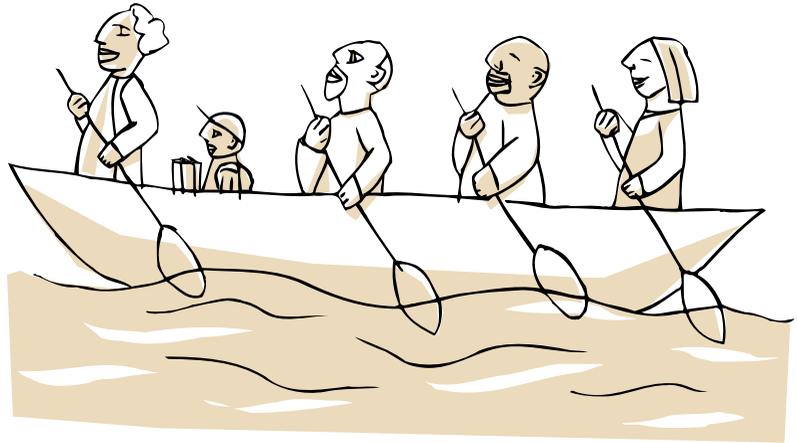
### ***Municipal Leaders as Community Partners***

Mayors and council members also are working in many ways in partnership with districts and other city agencies to spur school improvement.<sup>1</sup> Mayors are:

- *Building coalitions for change* by their use of public forums and the media to focus the public's attention on the challenges facing public schools. They can enlist the support of the business community to chair a task force, cosponsor public forums, or lead a campaign in support of a school levy

---

<sup>1</sup> National League of Cities 2002 contains a more detailed list of these contributions.



or bond issue. In Charleston, South Carolina, for example, Mayor Joseph Riley appointed a prominent business leader to spearhead a citywide effort involving multiple sectors to plan and implement a strategy to reconnect the community to the public schools.

- *Promoting adequate school funding*, for instance, in Medina, Ohio, where the city and school district organized a series of informal coffee klatches in the local community as part of a successful two-year effort to build support for an \$88-million school-bond issue. The passage of the bond financed the construction of a new elementary school and an expansion of the local high school, which also houses a city-run recreation center.
- *Sharing information and resources* by establishing ongoing communication between school board members and superintendents to build trusting relationships and lay the groundwork for collaboration. Holding regular meetings can help the mayor and city council understand how city agency policies affect schools or school poli-

cies affect cities, and work toward joint problem solving. In Long Beach, California, the city and school district have established Collaborative Conversations that bring together the mayor, city council members, and school board members on a quarterly basis to discuss school improvement and youth-related issues.

- *Supporting children's learning*<sup>2</sup> by promoting and expanding after-school programs for children and youth. By encouraging libraries, museums, and city parks and recreation departments to take a more active role in children's learning, city and school officials can work together to keep facilities open and provide environments where children and their families together are engaged in learning. For example, the city of Fort Myers, Florida, is using its Success Through Academic Recreation Support (STARS) program to provide after-school learning and cultural enrichment opportunities in neighborhoods where children

<sup>2</sup> National League of Cities 2001 contains a more detailed list of these contributions.

have the greatest needs. The STARS program offers academic tutoring, as well as creative and performing arts classes.

All of these efforts are different, reflecting the character and political environment of each city. Yet they share one important common element: in every case, mayors and other municipal leaders are playing a central role in educational improvement and, in doing so, they hold themselves and the partners they enlist and work with accountable for their parts in educational success. Perhaps most significantly, the municipal leaders are accountable for building the civic capacity to sustain educational improvement over time. The judgment of their constituents will determine whether they are successful or not.

---

## Initial results are promising: municipal officials are increasingly assuming greater responsibility for the success of students and schools.

---

To be sure, mayoral leadership in school improvement cannot be a quick managerial fix. As Clarence Stone and his colleagues (2001) point out, mayors can only be effective when they are part of a broad civic coalition. Yet, as they also note, the “office of the mayor can be a critical force to focus attention on school performance and to rally forces for improvement.” And ultimately, “significant educational improvements may not materialize unless the political life of schools creates and sustains authority for it” (Bryk et al. 1998).

The new No Child Left Behind Act requires, as a matter of federal policy, that all children reach high standards. If communities are to succeed in attain-

ing that lofty goal, leaders at all levels must be willing to work together to tackle the tough problems, celebrate successes, and share credit. To help municipal leaders in this effort, the National League of Cities and its Institute for Youth, Education, and Families have established the Municipal Leadership in Education and the Municipal Leadership for Expanded Learning Opportunities projects, working with fourteen cities nationwide – Charleston, South Carolina; Columbus; New Haven; Fort Lauderdale; Lansing; Portland, Oregon; Charlotte; Fort Worth; Fresno; Grand Rapids; Indianapolis; Lincoln, Nebraska; Spokane; and Washington, D.C. The goal is to assist municipal leaders who are interested in improving the quality of K–12 education and after-school programming. As some of the vignettes in this paper indicate, the initial results are promising: municipal officials are increasingly assuming greater responsibility for the success of students and schools. As polls indicate, the public is aware that accountability is an essential ingredient in educational success. These efforts could help the nation redefine what accountability means and how it can help improve opportunities for young people in cities.

---

### References

- Bryk, Anthony, Penny Sebring, David Kerbrow, Sharon Rollow, and John Easton. 1998. *Charting Chicago School Reform: Democratic Localism as a Lever for Change*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. 2002. *Improving Public Schools: Action Kit for Municipal Leaders*. Washington, DC: National League of Cities.
- National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. 2001. *Expanding After-School Opportunities: Action Kit for Municipal Leaders*. Washington, DC: National League of Cities.
- Public Education Network and Education Week. 2002. *Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates*. Available at <[www.publiceducation.org/nationalpolls.asp](http://www.publiceducation.org/nationalpolls.asp)>.

Public Education Network and Education Week.  
2001. *Action for All: The Public's Responsibility  
for Public Education*. Available at  
<[www.publiceducation.org/nationalpolls.asp](http://www.publiceducation.org/nationalpolls.asp)>.

Rose, Lowell, and Alec Gallup. 2001. "Thirty-third  
Annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll of the  
Public's Attitude towards the Public Schools," *Phi  
Delta Kappan* 53 (September), pp. 41–58.

Stone, Clarence, Jeffrey Henig, Bryan Jones, and  
Carol Pierannunzi. 2001. *Building Civic Capacity:  
The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*. Lawrence,  
KS: University Press of Kansas.

U.S. Department of Education. 2002. *What to  
Know and Where to Go: A Parents' Guide to No  
Child Left Behind*. Washington, DC: U.S. GPO.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center  
for Education Statistics. 2001. *The Condition of  
Education 2001*. Washington, DC: U.S. GPO.

Usdan, Michael, and Larry Cuban. 2002. "Power-  
ful Reforms with Shallow Roots: Educational  
Change in Six Cities," *Education Week* (February 27),  
pp. 37, 40.

Wong, Kenneth, and Francis Shen. 2001. *Does  
School District Takeover Ever Work?* Paper presented  
at the annual meeting of the American Political  
Science Association, San Francisco.



# State Test Lessons: The Effects on School Reform

Joan L. Herman

---

*State tests can help improve instruction and learning, but real reform takes more than “minor tinkering and lots of test preparation.” Reviewing the evidence about the effects of tests on classrooms, the author suggests ways to minimize inappropriate effects and use tests toward genuine improvement.*

**T**he No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law largely equates accountability with the application and consequences of state assessment systems. The statute insists that all children can and will achieve high standards and requires that schools show regular progress toward this goal on state-defined tests. Every child is to be tested in reading and mathematics relative to state standards at grades 3 through 8 and at the high school level, and all schools and districts must show adequate yearly progress so that all their students achieve proficiency in the standards by the year 2014. For most districts and schools, meeting goals for annual yearly progress will mean extraordinary improvement in student learning over a long period of time and will put unprecedented pressure on test performance.

While the pressure may be unusual, the basic tenets of standards-based reform that underlie the legislation are not. Standards-based assessment has been a prevalent part of school reform efforts for more than a decade, and the effect of testing on schools has been a recurring topic in research since the 1970s. This research base provides a number of insights about the strengths and weaknesses of using assessment and accountability as reform strategies,

and these lessons can and should inform current efforts. In this article, I will summarize the basic vision of assessment-based reform, then review the available evidence on the effects of testing on schools and teaching and discuss the implications for current policy and practice.

## ***The Vision of Standards-Based Reform***

In standards-based reform, assessment functions both as the lever and as a measure of the reform process, serving both motivational and information purposes. As a report from the National Governors Association states: “Assessments based on standards help us understand what our students are learning, what our schools are teaching, and what we can do to support student progress toward important educational goals” (National Governors Association 2001).

Having come to consensus about what is important for all students to know and be able to do to be successful – setting standards – states are then, by the terms of NCLB, to establish assessment systems at grades 3 through 8 and at the high school level that reflect these standards. The idea is that, by being clear about what standards of performance are expected and by regu-

*Joan L. Herman is the codirector of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at the University of California, Los Angeles.*

larly monitoring performance, a community can hold all its stakeholders accountable and focus all their efforts on attaining goals.

The assessments themselves are part and parcel of being clear on what is expected. They make explicit the kinds and levels of learning expected by the standards and thus become a primary vehicle for communicating what the standards really mean. Since standards are often stated in general terms – to cite a typical example: “Students demonstrate an understanding of plane and solid geometric objects and use this knowledge to show relationships and solve problems.” (California Department of Education 1997) – the assessments provide concrete illustrations of what students need to do to demonstrate mastery of the standards. Using this example, the assessments would indicate the concepts of plane and solid geometry students should understand and the types of problems they should be able to solve that would demonstrate such an understanding. Thus, the assessments provide a strong signal to teachers and schools about what they should be teaching and what students should be learning.

In addition to the communicative value of the test items themselves, test results also communicate important information. By measuring the status and progress of student learning, results from the assessments communicate to schools and the public whether established goals for progress are being met. These results are also intended to support important insights on the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of student progress relative to the standards. This information, in turn, combined with rewards for high performance and sanctions for poor performance, is intended to motivate educators to use the test

---

## The research base provides a number of insights about the strengths and weaknesses of using assessment and accountability as reform strategies.

---

data to reflect on and take action to improve performance in a cycle of continuous improvement.

Together with the intrinsic motivation to do well for children that educators already possess, these external carrots and sticks are aimed at helping drive schools toward higher and higher levels of performance. It is important to note that the idea is not really to just teach to the test, but rather to motivate all in the system to focus on standards and make progress toward their attainment, meeting specified annual goals (see Figure 1). Reaching the goal requires all levels of the system – state, district,

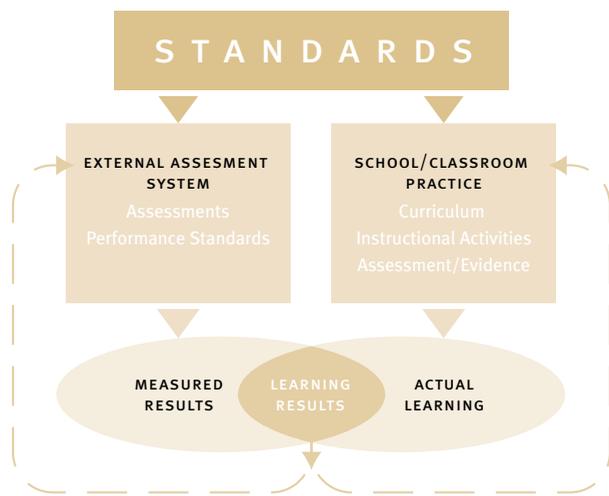


Figure 1.  
The vision: Standards-based reform

local school – to focus and align all system components – resources, curriculum, professional development, evaluation, etc. – on what is necessary to help children attain the standards.

Particularly important is the alignment of the standards and assessment with quality teaching and learning in the classroom. After all, it is only when the content and process of teaching and learning correspond to the standards that we can expect students to learn what they need to be successful. Without such a correspondence, the logic of the standards-based system falls apart. For example, if the assessments and the standards are not aligned, the results can provide little information about whether students are attaining specified standards or whether instruction is helping them to make the grade. Worse yet, rather than being mutually reinforcing, the standards and the assessments may push teachers and schools in different directions. With incentives attached to assessment results, there is little doubt about which direction teachers and schools are most likely to heed.



Yet even with tight alignment, state tests are too unsure a foundation on which to base an entire education system. Even under the best of circumstances, a test measures only a part of what students are learning – that which can be measured in a finite and limited period of time and by the types of formats that are included in the test. All measures also are fallible and include error; they thus provide only an imperfect measure of student performance. These imperfections mean, among other things, that changes in scores from year to year – the measures on which the law’s requirement that schools demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” are based – may not be sufficiently reliable for such a purpose, as we shall later see.

Further, state assessments are not the only assessments of importance in the system. A continuous-improvement model means that educators keep their eyes on student learning; assess continuously (or at least periodically) how students are doing relative to the standards; use the information to understand what students need; and take appropriate, meaningful action based on results. Ultimately, it is this cycle that really matters in improving student learning.

### ***What We Know About Test-Based Reform***

Interestingly, the current vision of standards-based assessment reform is rooted in research conducted during the late 1970s and 1980s showing the unfortunate effects of traditional, standardized tests. This research suggested that teachers and administrators, under pressure to help students do well on such tests, tended to focus their efforts on test content, to mimic the tests’ multiple-choice formats in classroom curriculum, and to devote more and more time to preparing students to

do well on the tests (Corbett & Wilson 1991; Dorr-Bremme & Herman 1986; Kellaghan & Madaus 1991). The net effect was a narrowing of the curriculum to the basic skills assessed and a neglect of complex thinking skills and other subject areas such as science, social studies, and the arts, which often were not the subject of testing. Darling-Hammond and Wise (1988), Shepard (1991), and Herman and Golan (1993), among others, noted that such narrowing was likely to be greatest in schools serving at-risk and disadvantaged students. To the extent that these schools were low-performing, they were likely to be under great pressure to improve their scores.

However, research also found that these effects were not universal, and that some assessments could in fact be beneficial to student learning. In particular, assessments that were performance-oriented, rather than those that relied solely on multiple-choice formats, improved instruction and learning. One popular form of performance assessment was direct writing assessment – asking students to compose an essay rather than simply to answer multiple-choice questions about the quality or grammar of a given piece. Studies of the effects of California’s eighth-grade writing assessment, for example, indicated that the program encouraged teachers both to require more writing assignments of students and to give students experience in producing a wider variety of genres. Moreover, studies showed that students’ writing performance tended to improve over time with the institution of the new assessment programs (Chapman 1991; Quellmalz & Burry 1983).

Armed with this research, educational reformers aimed to use the power of assessment intentionally to achieve

---

## Even under the best of circumstances, a test measures only a part of what students are learning.

---

their goals by making “tests worth teaching to” (Resnick 1996) – first, in promoting the use of performance assessment in large-scale assessments during the 1990s and, more recently, with the move to standards-based assessment systems at the state and local levels. The effects of these assessment reforms, in turn, have been the subject of numerous studies.<sup>1</sup> Results across studies have been quite consistent:<sup>2</sup>

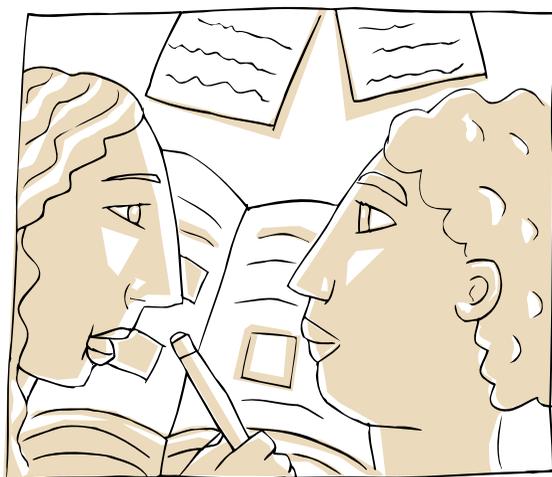
- *Assessment serves to focus instruction.* Teachers and principals indeed pay attention to what is tested and adapt their curriculum and teaching accordingly. Principals, with or without their staff, develop school plans to concentrate on areas where test results show a need for improvement and assure attention to test preparation. Teachers consistently report that state tests have a substantial effect on their subject area instruction and assessment.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, at the state level, there have been studies of the effects of such systems in Arizona (Smith & Rottenberg 1991), California (McDonnell & Choisser 1997; Herman & Klein 1996), Kentucky (Koretz et al. 1996; Stecher et al. 1998; Borko & Elliott 1998; Wolf & McIver 1999), Maine (Firestone, Mayrowetz & Fairman 1998), Maryland (Lane et al. 2000; Firestone, Mayrowetz & Fairman 1998; Goldberg & Rosewell 2000), New Jersey (Firestone et al. 2000), North Carolina (McDonnell & Choisser 1997), Vermont (Koretz et al. 1993), and Washington (Stecher et al. 2000; Borko & Stecher 2001).

<sup>2</sup> An expanded version of these findings can be found in Herman, forthcoming.

- *Teachers model what is assessed.* Moreover, teachers tend to model the pedagogical approach represented by the test. Thus, when a state assessment is composed of multiple-choice tests, teachers tend to use multiple-choice worksheets in their practice; but when the assessments use open-ended items and/or extended writing and rubrics to judge the quality of student work, teachers incorporate these same types of activities in their classroom work in order to prepare their students for the test. Such modeling of test content and pedagogical approach provides an opportunity to stimulate important changes in teachers' practice.
- *Schools give more attention to the test than to the standards.* At least initially, teachers and administrators give their primary attention to what is tested



rather than to what is in the standards. Teachers in Washington State, for example, reported that their instruction tended to be more like the state assessment than the state's standards (Stecher & Borko 2002), while teachers in Washington State and Kentucky clearly seemed to give relative priority to particular subject

matters and topics depending on whether the subject was assessed at their grade level (Stecher & Barron 1999; Stecher et al. 2000).

- *What is not tested gets little attention.* Focusing on the test rather than the standards also means that what does not get tested gets less attention. This seems true both within and across subjects. For example, within a subject, if extended math problems are not included on the test, instructional time may go to computation or other problem types that *are* on the test. Similarly, as more time goes to the tested subjects, such time must come from other areas of the curriculum. In short, both the broader domain of the tested discipline and important subjects that are not tested may get short shrift.
- *Changes in instruction are initially superficial.* Teachers' initial attempts to change instruction are likely to mimic the superficial features of the intended changes rather than represent quality implementation. While teachers try to be responsive, they may not have sufficient knowledge and understanding to change the complexity of their content and pedagogy in meaningful ways. As decades of research on implementation and change well demonstrates, meaningful changes in practice take time and capability to implement well.
- *Questions arise about meaningfulness of test-score increases.* Given that initial changes in content and process may be relatively shallow, is it possible to achieve dramatic increases in learning, such as those anticipated by No Child Left Behind? Surely test scores in the first years of a test reform are likely to show substantial increases, particularly if there are

high stakes involved. However, parallel improvements are not generally observed in students' performance on less visible tests. For example, Dan Koretz and his associates (1996) found great disparity in the trends in Kentucky's test-score performance based on results from the state test and those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and from the ACT, the widely used college-admissions test. The former showed dramatic upward trends, while the latter two showed modest or nearly level performance. Such contrasts raise questions about whether the state test results reflect real learning or just test preparation or teaching to the test. If instruction becomes overly focused on just what is on the test and on the formats evident on the test, the test results may cease to represent some larger capability than simply being able to respond to the items on a particular test.

That increases in performance tend to level out after the first few years is telling as well. For example, the first year of California's strong accountability system, which dispensed significant rewards for improved performance, resulted in impressive improvement in test scores, with the majority of elementary schools meeting their goal targets. Years two and three of the program, however, saw diminishing returns; substantially fewer schools reached their goals. Some believe that these patterns represent the limits of what can be achieved primarily through test preparation and that continuing improvement over the long term will require meaningful changes in the teaching and learning process.

- *The reliability of school-score changes from year to year is suspect. All test*

scores are fallible. Individual test scores reflect actual student capability as well as errors introduced by how the students feel on the day of the test; how attentive they are on a moment-by-moment basis to the cues and questions in the tests; how much they studied or were prepared on the specifics of what was actually tested, as opposed to other content and items that might have been on the test; and many other factors. Test scores at the school level similarly are an amalgam of students' actual

---

At least initially, teachers and administrators give their primary attention to what is tested rather than to what is in the standards.

---

knowledge and skills and error, including error or fluctuations caused by the selection of students who actually are tested. The reality is that there is substantial volatility in scores from year to year, which can make changes in test scores such as those required by NCLB very unreliable, particularly for smaller schools and schools with high rates of student mobility. For example, Linn and Haug (2002) find that fewer than five percent of Colorado's schools showed consistent growth of at least one percentage point per year on the Colorado Student Assessment Program from 1997 to 2000, even though schools on average showed nearly a five-percent increase over the three-year period in the number of students deemed proficient. Combining schools' scores over a two-year period, as allowed by NCLB, reduces the volatility but does not eliminate the problem.

## ***A Revised Model of Assessment-Based Reform and Implications for Improvement***

This brief summary of what we know about the effects of testing on schools suggests that implementing No Child Left Behind in ways that benefit schools and children poses major challenges. First, research suggests that the theory underlying the role of assessment in reform needs to be modified (see Figure 2). It seems clear that, despite the rhetoric of reformers, it is not generally the case that teachers teach to the standards and that the tests serve only to clarify what the standards mean. Rather, the tests often become the prime definition of the standards and the lens through which the standards are interpreted. Standards in subjects not tested and standards that are not included in subject-matter tests seem to get, at most, weak treatment in classroom teaching and learning. As the stakes associated with test performance rise under No Child Left Behind, and in the absence of policies and procedures to dissuade it, these relationships are likely to get more distorted.

As Figure 2 makes clear, the focus on tests rather than standards has serious consequences for students. Rather

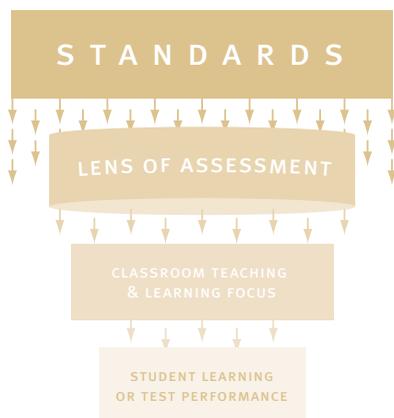


Figure 2. *The reality: Test-based reform*

than learn the full breadth of knowledge and skills that society has, through its standards, determined are important for future success, students in such an environment have the opportunity to learn only a relatively narrow curriculum. Moreover, because of the potential for inflated gains in such a system, the mismatch between tests and standards could lead educators and policy-makers to misinterpret test results and fail to address genuine needs. Such a system could take us in the wrong direction.

### **The Importance of Alignment between Standards and Tests**

This bleak prospect, however, does not have to be the case. First, if we acknowledge that the tests are the lens through which standards are interpreted, we must ensure that the lens is appropriate to the task. It must capture an accurate representation of its target, the standards. To do so, it must be sufficiently wide-angle to provide a comprehensive view of student accomplishment and yet have sufficient depth of field that we can be sure that students' learning is deep and their understandings robust.

To accomplish this, we must get serious about the alignment between standards and assessments and insist on strong evidence for alignment – in terms of the content and topics that are addressed as well as the depth to which they are assessed. Current alignment practices, in which a test may be considered “aligned” just because most of its items are judged to be related to some standard, are insufficient. There needs to be evidence that tests represent a balance of coverage and that they are comprehensive (see, for example, Herman, Webb & Zuniga 2002; Rothman, forthcoming) and sufficient to support inferences from test results about how well students attained standards. To the extent that state assess-

ments give short shrift to the meaning of standards, teaching and learning of children is likely to do the same.

### **The Need for Multiple and Close-up Measures**

Designing an assessment system aligned with the breadth and depth of standards is easier said than done; a single test is unlikely to meet this requirement. Although No Child Left Behind bases rewards and sanctions on state tests alone, schools need multiple perspectives on what and how students are learning. Multiple measures of performance, including examples of student work, are particularly necessary to provide safeguards against schools' overly fixating on teaching to the test and neglecting other worthwhile knowledge and skills that are evident in the standards.

Additional measures of performance would also give teachers and schools the close-up and detailed picture of student understanding and skill they need to customize instruction. To carry the photographic metaphor a little further, while one might want a wide-angle lens to make a judgment about overall achievement and progress relative to standards, one needs a telephoto lens to focus close up on areas needing particular attention. Similarly, teachers will need close-up views throughout the school year to know whether their children are making progress and to adjust their instruction accordingly. It is such assessments, more than the high-visibility state assessments, that can make a real difference in the everyday teaching and learning of children.

Multiple measures of performance could also provide a more accurate picture of school performance. By basing judgments on a plethora of evidence, states and districts can counteract possible faulty decisions about schools made



on the basis of volatile year-to-year measures of adequate yearly progress.

The need for multiple measures of performance might seem like wishful thinking, given the emphasis in the new law on state tests (and the misgivings about teacher judgment this emphasis implies). But for assessments to provide the information educators and the public need, the top-down state tests need to be supplemented by bottom-up assessment processes that can be used to establish goals, monitor progress, and make day-to-day and minute-by-minute teaching decisions that can result in genuine improvements in teaching and learning. While the research literature shows the danger of high-stakes assessments narrowing the curriculum, it also provides potent examples of schools seizing the accountability requirements to realize real reform.

These stories are not about focusing instruction on the test, but rather about using state test results as a point of departure for important conversations about how students are doing relative to the standards, the strengths and weaknesses of the school curriculum, and alternative instructional

strategies and programs for accomplishing goals for students' learning relative to the standards. Coupled with other available assessments and perspectives, including teachers' knowledge of the details of student learning and research-based strategies, teachers and administrators decide on action plans, meet regularly to see how those plans are going and what progress students are making, and develop and put in place new instructional strategies. While this kind of activity may be the vision of standards-based reform, it clearly takes more than a state assessment to accomplish it.

### **The Challenge of Real Reform**

Indeed, transforming education is not an assessment or technical problem, it is a leadership and capacity-building problem. In the final analysis, an accountability system is largely symbolic and political. It sets up an incentive system and provides some information. Local schools determine whether the vision of high standards can really come to fruition. Minor tinkering and lots of test preparation is not going to bring us to the ambitious goals of NCLB. We need major change to make a real difference for kids.

How can we seize the challenge? The answer lies in what happens in local schools; and that, in turn, depends on local leaders and the will and capacity of local educators. NCLB may provide a bit of the will, but what of capacity and long-term ownership and commitment? Hilda Borko's research (2002), for example, provides telling examples of principals and teachers working together to make a difference for student learning. What is most startling is the "can-do" attitude of the leaders and their ability to inspire their staffs. They actively support their schools as learning communities and do every-

thing they can to support capacity to teach to standards, including bringing their staffs together to understand what the standards mean, how students are doing relative to them, and what the implications are for action – i.e., what will we do differently in teaching and learning?

Clearly there are enormous challenges here. Let's try to meet them directly. In the rush to meet the accountability requirements, let's not lose track of the real goal – meaningful improvement for student learning – and what it will really take to get there.

---

### *References*

- Borko, H. 2002. "The Relationship between Teaching and Assessment." Symposium presented at the annual CRESST conference, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Borko, H., and R. Elliott. 1998. *Tensions between Competing Pedagogical and Accountability Commitments for Exemplary Teachers of Mathematics in Kentucky*. CSE Technical Report No. 495. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Borko, H., and B. M. Stecher. 2001. "Looking at Reform through Different Methodological Lenses: Survey and Case Studies of the Washington State Education Reform." Paper presented as part of the symposium "Testing Policy and Teaching Practice: A Multimethod Examination of Two States" at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle.
- California Department of Education. 1997. "Grade Four: Mathematics Content Standards." Available at <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/standards/math/grade4.html>>.
- Chapman, C. 1991. "What Have We Learned from Writing Assessment That Can Be Applied to Performance Assessment?" Paper presented at the Education Commission of the States/Colorado Department of Education Alternative Assessment Conference, Breckenridge, CO.
- Corbett, H. D., and B. L. Wilson. 1991. *Testing, Reform, and Rebellion*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Darling-Hammond, L., and A. E. Wise. 1988. *The Evolution of Teacher Policy*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Dorr-Bremme, D., and J. Herman. 1986. *Assessing Student Achievement: A Profile of Classroom Practices*. CSE Monograph No. 11. Los Angeles: University of California, Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE).

- Firestone, W. A., G. Camilli, M. Yurecko, L. Monfils, and D. Mayrowetz. 2000. "State Standards, Socio-fiscal Context, and Opportunity to Learn in New Jersey." *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* 8:35. Available at <<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaav8n35>>.
- Firestone, W. A., D. Mayrowetz, and J. Fairman. 1998. "Performance-Based Assessment and Instructional Change: The Effects of Testing in Maine and Maryland." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 20:2, 95–114.
- Goldberg, G. L., and B. S. Rosewell. 2000. "From Perception to Practice: The Impact of Teachers' Scoring Experience on Performance-Based Instruction and Classroom Practice." *Educational Assessment* 6:4, 257–290.
- Herman, J. L. Forthcoming. "Instructional Effects of Testing." In *Redesigning Accountability Systems*, edited by S. Fuhrman and R. Elmore. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Herman, J. L., and S. Golan. 1993. "Effects of Standardized Testing on Teaching and Schools." *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices* 12:4, 20–25, 41–42.
- Herman, J. L., and D. Klein. 1996. "Evaluating Equity in Alternative Assessment: An Illustration of Opportunity to Learn Issues." *Journal of Educational Research* 89:9, 246–256.
- Herman, J. L., N. Webb, and S. Zuniga. 2002. *Alignment and College Admissions: The Match of Expectations, Assessments, and Educator Perspectives*. Draft Deliverable to OERI, Contract No. R305B960002. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Kellaghan, T., and G. Madaus. 1991. "National Testing: Lessons for America from Europe." *Educational Leadership* 49 (November), 87–93.
- Koretz, D., S. Barron, K. J. Mitchell, and B. Stecher. 1996. *Perceived Effects of the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS)*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Koretz, D., D. McCaffrey, S. Klein, R. Bell, and B. Stecher. 1993. *The Reliability of Scores from the 1992 Vermont Portfolio Assessment Program*. CSE Technical Report No. 355. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Lane, S., C. A. Stone, C. S. Parke, M. A. Hansen, and T. L. Cerrillo. 2000. "Consequential Evidence for MSPAP from the Teacher, Principal, and Student Perspective." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Measurement in Education, New Orleans.
- Linn, R. L., and C. Haug. 2002. *Stability of School Building Accountability Scores and Gains*. CSE Technical Report No. 561. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- McDonnell, L. M., and C. Choisser. 1997. *Testing and Teaching: Local Implementation of New State Assessments*. CSE Technical Report No. 442. Los Angeles: University of California, Center for the Study of Evaluation (CRESST).
- National Governors Association. 2001. *Within Reach: Realizing the Vision of High Standards*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association.
- Quellmalz, E., and J. Burry. 1983. *Analytic Scales for Assessing Students' Expository and Narrative Writing Skills*. CSE Resource Paper No. 5. Los Angeles: University of California, Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE).
- Resnick, L. B. 1996. *Performance Puzzles: Issues in Measuring Capabilities and Certifying Accomplishments*. CSE Technical Report No. 415. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Rothman, Robert. Forthcoming. "Benchmarking and Alignment of State Standards and Assessments." In *Redesigning Accountability Systems*, edited by Susan H. Fuhrman and Richard Elmore. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shepard, L. 1991. "Psychometricians' Beliefs about Learning." *Educational Researcher* 20, 2–16.
- Smith, M. L., and C. Rottenberg. 1991. "Unintended Consequences of External Testing in Elementary Schools." *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* 10:4, 7–11.
- Stecher, B., and S. Barron. 1999. *Quadrennial Milepost Accountability Testing in Kentucky*. CSE Technical Report No. 505. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Stecher, B., S. L. Barron, T. Chun, and K. Ross. 2000. *The Effects of the Washington State Education Reform on Schools and Classroom*. CSE Technical Report No. 525. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Stecher, B., S. L. Barron, T. Kaganoff, and J. Goodwin. 1998. *The Effects of Standards-Based Assessment on Classroom Practices: Results of the 1996–1997 RAND Survey of Kentucky Teachers of Mathematics and Writing*. CSE Technical Report No. 482. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Stecher, B., and H. Borko. 2002. *Combining Surveys and Case Studies to Examine Standards-Based Educational Reform*. CSE Technical Report 565. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
- Wolf, S. A., and M. C. McIver. 1999. "When Process Becomes Policy: the Paradox of Kentucky State Reform for Exemplary Teachers of Writing." *Phi Delta Kappan* 80, 401–406.

# *The Federal Role in School Accountability: Assessing Recent History and the New Law*

Elizabeth DeBray

---

*In the last two major pieces of federal education legislation, accountability has moved front and center. The author analyzes these two statutes and suggests principles for the federal government's role in accountability.*

**T**he accountability wave that has swept over education in the past decade reached the federal government as well. Over the last four years, members of Congress hotly debated the role the federal government should play. Even though federal spending represents only seven percent of education spending nationwide, members of Congress from both parties argued that the federal government should use the leverage of aid to hold schools, districts, and states accountable for improving student achievement.

As Congress debated education policy, members offered numerous proposals around accountability. Some argued for using federal dollars for private-school vouchers, which would provide federal resources to hold schools accountable to parents. Others argued for requiring schools to show improved achievement for all racial groups and to report their results, thus using federal aid to hold schools accountable to states and districts for performance. While the responses differed, the proposals each expressed the common view that the federal government's responsibility focused on the consequences for states and districts when students remain in consistently low-performing schools. The policy that ultimately prevailed in the most recent federal legislation, the

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, is a combination federal- and state-level package of testing, setting goals, performance reporting, and sanctions for failing schools – a large expansion in the federal role in accountability.

The recent history of congressional debates over accountability opens an important window into the question of what role the federal government ought to play in holding schools accountable for student performance. In this article, I review this history in order to suggest three principles that must be central to that role. While the laws that are in place follow some of these principles to some degree, I believe Congress needs to do more to ensure that the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) works as intended: to improve the education of disadvantaged youth.

## ***The Changing Federal Role in Accountability***

Accountability in Title I, the large federal program that provides aid for schools with disadvantaged students, has shifted over the past thirty-six years from a focus on inputs to outcomes (Natriello & McDill 1999). During the 1970s and 1980s, accountability in Title I meant ensuring that the funds reached the target population of the

*Elizabeth DeBray is a post-doctoral fellow in the Advanced Studies Fellowship Program at Brown University.*

program. Although school districts were required to conduct certain federally prescribed testing to measure the progress of children being served, the federal government largely held districts and states responsible for ensuring that they spent money on certain types of children, such as English-language learners and those with economic disadvantages (Jennings 1998, p. 115).

The 1994 ESEA reauthorization altered the federal role in accountability for states and schools in two significant ways. First, the Clinton administration proposed that states adopt clear standards and assessments for all students in Title I, a strategy that was intended to use the money in Title I to drive the “seed money” for standards-based reform provided in Goals 2000, a much smaller federal program enacted earlier in 1994. Each state now had to set standards for academic content and performance; no state had ever had to have education standards to qualify for federal aid, so this was a significant change. Further, states would have to monitor student progress toward achieving the standards using the state’s regular assessment system, not separate Title I assessments, in effect holding Title I students to the same standards



as all other students, and many more schools would be given freedom to use federal aid to improve whole schools.

These provisions used Title I as leverage to encourage states to adopt the strategy of “systemic reform.” As conceptualized by Marshall Smith and Jennifer O’Day (1990), systemic reform proposed that student performance would improve if states adopted clear, high academic goals and instructional guidance, while leaving schools and communities free to determine the best means of accomplishing these goals.

There was far more flexibility in the ESEA as a result of the 1994 amendments: regulations were reduced by two-thirds (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and the Workforce 2000).<sup>1</sup> The law also mandated that states and districts disaggregate and report schools’ achievement data by racial and socio-economic subgroups. Although the law required states to implement accountability

---

Members of Congress argued that the federal government should use the leverage of aid to hold schools, districts, and states accountable for improving student achievement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Calculation of the two-thirds reduction comes from comparing the ESEA regulations just prior to the 1994 reauthorization (the Improving America’s Schools Act) with the full set of regulations that ended up covering IASA. This latter set of regulations was completed in 1996.

---

## The No Child Left Behind Act spells out a timeline for states to have 100 percent of students performing proficiently as measured by annual tests.

---

mechanisms tied to the results, the 1994 legislation only suggested penalties for schools that failed to make achievement gains; it did not specify what those sanctions should be. Flexibility for states was also a focus of the Education Flexibility Partnerships Program, which was passed by Congress and signed into law in 1999. The major provision of the “Ed-Flex” legislation was to grant states the power to approve waivers from federal regulations at the local level. The law was described as one that would free states of bureaucratic red tape and allow them to innovate, but only ten states currently take advantage of it.

The implementation of the 1994 Improving America’s Schools Act was uneven and the Clinton administration’s enforcement of it relatively weak. By January of 2001, only eleven states were in compliance with Title I assessment requirements and more than thirty states had received waivers from the U.S. Department of Education allowing them one to three additional years to comply fully with the law’s mandates (Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights 2001). Many states weren’t in compliance with the requirements to have a single set of standards and assessments for all students, such as those who were limited English proficient or students with disabilities. Many others had not disaggregated data by racial and ethnic subgroups (Robelen 2001). The Clinton administration, however, did not withhold funds from states that failed to

comply with the law. A major reason was the fight for survival the department faced after the 1994 elections, when incoming Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich of Georgia and his “Contract with America” called for its abolition.

### ***No Child Left Behind***

Ironically, given this history, the No Child Left Behind Act – the first reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act enacted by a Republican president and a partly Republican Congress – strengthens the federal role by increasing requirements for states. Specifically, the law spells out a timeline for states to have 100 percent of students performing at the same level of academic proficiency as measured by annual tests. It also creates a framework that attaches consequences for schools if they fail to make progress toward these goals.

The accountability provisions in the legislation came about because of a melding of proposals associated with a group of “New Democrats” with those of the White House. That is, they combine tough sanctions for persistent failure, a priority for President Bush, with a focus on closing achievement gaps that the Democratic lawmakers wanted to emphasize. The law, modeled after the Texas system, says that states must design a plan to raise all students in all racial and ethnic subgroups to the “proficient” level in twelve years. Although states would set their own definition of *proficient*, every state must test all chil-

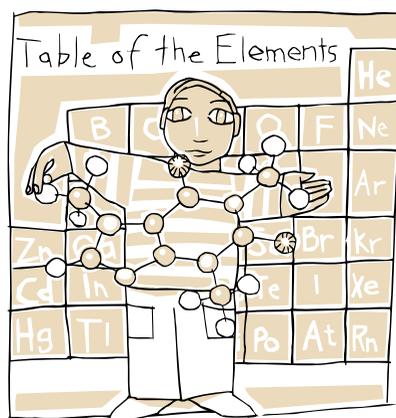
dren in grades 3 through 8 in reading and mathematics every year to measure progress toward proficiency. A critical provision is that states are required to raise the bar for schools every few years (i.e., the percentages of students in each group with proficient scores). A “safe harbor” provision was also added: if a school had one subgroup not meeting state goals, but reduced by 10 percent the number of students not proficient, the school could avoid penalties.

The key to the law was the provision requiring states to determine whether schools are making “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward the goal of universal proficiency by 2014. The 1994 law also required schools to demonstrate adequate yearly progress, but many states required such small reductions in the achievement disparities among groups that these states could meet the AYP goals for years and still have large gaps among demographic groups. The new law not only keeps schools on a steady upward trajectory, it also mandates that states participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and mathematics every other year as a “check” on the rigor of their state measures.

During the congressional debate, two researchers, Thomas Kane and Douglas Staiger (2001), raised doubts about the AYP provisions. Their study documented the likelihood that the law would result in the overidentification of schools as failing and elsewhere cautioned that, in schools, “the path to improved performance is rarely a

straight line.” Yet their opinions, as well as those of other experts on testing and measurement, were more or less ignored on Capitol Hill.

The technical concerns are significant, because No Child Left Behind raises the stakes for the ratings on school performance. Specifically, the law mandates concrete responsibilities for states and districts to intervene in failing schools. Schools not meeting AYP goals for two consecutive years will be placed in “school improvement” status, at which point students can transfer to a nonfailing school. After a third consecutive year of failing to make progress, schools will be placed in “corrective action,” and the district must intervene in the governance of the school. The interventions can include converting the school into a charter, arranging for private management, offering “supplemental services,” or after-school tutoring by a state-approved outside provider, which may be public or private. In the fifth year, staff can be replaced and the school “reconstituted.”



---

No Child Left Behind raises the stakes for the ratings on school performance. Specifically, the law mandates concrete responsibilities for states and districts to intervene in failing schools.

---

The congressional debate over the legislation revealed that there was great dissent, from both liberals and conservatives, for the imposition of testing mandates. Representative Major Owens (D-NY) said, “Testing doesn’t tell you whether the kids had a decent library. We’re being unfair to young people as long as we have a system of accountability that doesn’t hold the system accountable” (Miller, Levin-Epstein & Cutler 2001). This view did not prevail, however. Likewise, many Republicans adhered to a definition of accountability that would have given parents a choice to leave the public system entirely, a proposition that failed. Proposals to convert Title I and other categorical programs into a block grant, which would have given states far more latitude in how they spent the funds, were defeated, though Congress did adopt a compromise to allow seven states and twenty-five districts to enter into “performance agreements” to consolidate elementary and secondary education programs, excepting Title I and bilingual and migrant education.

In sum, as with most legislation, No Child Left Behind reflected what was politically possible on Capitol Hill and how much each side would give for consensus. The agreement revealed that the version of federalism members of Congress and the Bush administration support is a directive one. States must adopt a particular framework for their accountability systems, having latitude to choose tests and their own definitions of what constitutes proficiency. This framework places a heavy focus on test-based accountability and outcomes: each subgroup within a school has to make progress for the school to be making progress, and there has to be public reporting of data at the school, district, and state levels.

The legislation is also specific about what will happen to “failing” schools.

An important principle in federal policy is that of leverage. Ultimately, for the policy to succeed, a limited pot of federal dollars combined with some federal pressure must cause states, districts, and schools to implement a larger policy goal. For No Child Left Behind, that means states must put in place testing and accountability systems, districts must identify and support low-performing schools, and schools must do whatever they can to improve performance continually. And the federal government must oversee the whole enterprise to ensure that it is meeting what the law requires. But this scenario raises a host of questions. What level of enforcement will the Bush administration find politically possible to uphold? How will state departments of education, many facing serious budget cuts, find it administratively and fiscally feasible to comply? How will the people who work in schools categorized as failing find the capacity to improve their performance?

Consider this situation, hypothetical but very likely: A school in a high-poverty district fails to narrow the gap in scores between minority students and whites and is identified as failing. The required notifications are made. A few students will be able to transfer to a nonfailing public school after two years. After three, test scores are still low and the district and the state need the resources and capacity to intervene. The state, overwhelmed by the number of schools in corrective action, is unable to enforce the law. Over time, the federal government, in turn, has to decide how to respond and where, and how to publicly defend its enforcement decisions. What comes next? This is what skeptics of the current law are asking.

---

States must put in place testing and accountability systems, districts must identify and support low-performing schools, and schools must do whatever they can to improve performance continually. And the federal government must oversee the whole enterprise.

---

They are not opposed to accountability; they are simply raising questions about the limits of federal leverage, especially when the majority of state departments of education have neither staff nor funding to intervene effectively in hundreds of low-performing schools.

One question is to what extent the Bush administration has the political will to enforce the law. In any administration, a meaningful federal role is one



in which enforcement is taken seriously, and it is also one in which the government's enforcement policies are transparent. Will it be clear to the public why the administration enforces the policy in one state or district but allows lapses elsewhere? This will be of particular concern when states' definitions of proficiency and required rates of annual improvement differ widely. What criteria will the U.S. Department of Education use to judge the states' varying plans? Will the Department opt for selective enforcement of the law, cracking down

on a few high-poverty districts as an exercise in symbolic politics?

Or will a strict adherence to the law force states to abandon some promising practices because they do not fit the accountability mold of No Child Left Behind? For instance, Maryland, which initiated its accountability program in 1989, until recently used performance-based assessments that were designed to measure the performance of the school as a whole. Now state leaders have overhauled the system so the assessment system will yield student-level results, a change made in part to comply with No Child Left Behind. Vermont faces a similar dilemma. There, the state has selected a challenging assessment, the New Standards Reference Exam, in grades 4, 8, and 10; under the new law, the state may experience pressure to trade a powerful performance assessment for a norm-referenced test that is cheaper to administer.

Such a diversity of state-level strategies is a strength of the federal system, and that diversity could get lost under the new set of rules. Local school districts' power is significantly diminished, too. District administrators who previously were permitted to administer local assessments will doubtless wonder where "local control" is in the new law when so many instructional decisions accrue to state policy-makers.

The law provides for far better targeting and improved funding, and that

is an appropriate balance for heightened accountability requirements. As the Independent Review Panel that reviewed progress on the 1994 law noted, it is not viable to hold schools accountable until the program is adequately funded (see U.S. Department of Education 1999). And, in 2001, Congress not only increased the appropriation for Title I but also, for the first time, funded its targeted-grant and state-finance-incentive programs. Members of both parties recognized that this needed to be done in order for the program to meet its goals – a significant change on the Republican side since the Gingrich-era plans to eliminate the Department of Education.

It is unclear whether this consensus will last. President Bush's budget for 2004 calls for significantly less education spending than what Congress has authorized. Further, as governors have slashed state education budgets, it is clear that states no longer have the capacity to implement the kinds of policies they did during the economic boom of the 1990s. If the federal government does not adequately fund the law's mandates, both Republican and Democratic governors will resist politically, as Vermont's Howard Dean (D) and Louisiana's Mike Foster (R) at different times suggested they might.



### **Three Principles for Federal Involvement**

Based on the federal government's capacity for leverage and states' capacity for response, I suggest three principles that ought to form the core of the federal role in accountability.

#### **Equity**

The first principle is that of equity. The federal government ought to hold states and districts accountable for policies that require high academic achievement by students across racial groups and socio-economic levels and for reporting data to the public and to stakeholders in the education system. It should not be enough for some students to succeed, while others languish, particularly those students for whom the federal program was designed. And schools and school systems should be accountable for closing gaps in achievement by making public the performance data for all groups.

Based on the 1994 and 2001 statutes, Congress and the Clinton and Bush administrations have adhered to this principle. The 1994 law required reports on the performance of all groups of students, although few states actually carried through on this requirement. The 2001 law requires states to include the performance of various groups in their definition of school success and to report to the public on the progress of all students. If followed, these provisions will go a long way toward ensuring equity.

#### **Viability**

The second principle is that of viability. The level of academic performance required of school performance for which the federal government holds states accountable ought to be one that states have the capacity to enforce, administer, and fund. If the number of

schools identified as failing far exceeds the capacity of state departments of education for intervention, the margin in which No Child Left Behind can be used as a lever for outcome equity is very limited. Since Congress is due to reauthorize the law next in 2007 and the “all students proficient” goal is set for 2014, it is almost certain, in my view, that these goals are not static.

Adequate funding of the education law has become a major point of contention between congressional Democrats and the President since the law’s passage. During the congressional debate over the reauthorization in 2001, Representative George Miller, (D-CA) charged: “Reform without adequate funding is cruelty” (quoted in Bruni 2001). On the first anniversary of the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act in January, Democrats, including senators Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) and Joseph I. Lieberman (D-CT), sent President Bush a letter that read in part, “America’s public schools cannot overcome the enormous obstacles they face on the cheap.” Their letter demanded a \$7.7-billion increase in the federal education budget for the next fiscal year (2004). Bush, by contrast, has proposed a \$1.1-billion increase, saying that the country cannot afford more in time of war (Fletcher 2003).

Also central to the federal policy’s viability, as mentioned earlier, is the extent to which state departments of education have the human, technical, and fiscal resources to intervene effectively in schools determined to be in “school improvement” or “corrective action” status. Even a state such as New York, with an accountability system already in place for identifying and intervening in low-performing schools, has a relatively low number of staff assigned to oversee curricular and organizational

interventions. The law’s embedded theory of action is that the threat of state takeover and sanction will be an incentive for staff in Title I schools to work harder and thus improve academic achievement. In that case, schools may never reach the corrective action stage. The reality, though, is that many states already have lengthy lists of schools needing improvement, if not qualifying for a state takeover, and the needs of staff in high-poverty schools can’t be addressed by tighter accountability systems alone. Richard Elmore (2002) has termed this disparity between what

---

The reality is that the needs of staff in high-poverty schools can’t be addressed by tighter accountability systems alone.

---

the law assumes and what the system can presently deliver as “the capacity gap.” The law calls for state and district intervention to remedy schools’ failure to improve scores, but assumes that educational leaders have available the requisite expertise, planning capacity, and familiarity with “research-based” interventions. At some point, as Elmore observes, these ground-level actors quite literally need to know what to do. Without providing the capacity for states and districts to provide answers for schools, the law could set schools up for failure.

### **Consistency**

The third principle is that of consistency. Whatever its version of accountability, federal enforcement ought to be transparent to state and local policy-makers and consistent with the statute. Federal officials should be able to explain their enforcement decisions, i.e., why cite

this high-poverty district for implementation failure but not others? Similarly, the Department of Education ought to be able to explain clearly to state leaders why some state Title I plans have been approved and others have been rejected. Just as schools need guidance and support to turn themselves around, states need guidance to develop and implement appropriate policies that meet the federal requirements. Already there have been suggestions that the Education Department has not provided sufficient information to states as they put together their plans; without such information, the policies are likely to suffer.

Running across all of these is the principle of coherence. Do the various components of federal accountability policies in elementary and secondary education reinforce each other, working across state, local, and school levels with a fairly high degree of coherence? If they do not, they could limit the power of policies to improve schooling. For instance, accountability policies that take money away from high-poverty schools, as mandates for supplemental services potentially do, may reduce the ability of schools to operate effective Title I school-wide programs. Indeed, there is some evidence that prescriptive testing policies may interfere with the implementation of some whole-school reform models, the kind that the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program in Title I promotes (Bodilly & Berends 1999).

To summarize, the federal role in accountability has evolved, in the statute if not yet at the ground level, to one that places a strong emphasis on outcome equity. The future of No Child Left Behind hinges on the other two principles – the extent to which states

have the capability to administer and enforce the requirements, and the degree to which federal enforcement is transparent, consistent, and fair.

---

#### References

- Bodilly, Susan, and Mark Berends. 1999. "Necessary District Support for Comprehensive School Reform." In *Hard Work for Good Schools: Facts, Not Fads in Title I Reform*, edited by G. Orfield and E. DeBray, pp. 113–121. Cambridge: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University.
- Bruni, Frank. 2001. "Bush Pushes His Education Plan, and in a Calculated Forum," *The New York Times*, online edition (August 2).
- Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights. 2001. *Closing the Deal: A Preliminary Report on State Compliance With Final Assessment and Accountability Requirements Under the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994*. Washington, DC: Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights.
- Elmore, Richard. 2002. "Unwarranted Intrusion," *Education Next*, online edition (Spring). Available at <[www.educationnext.org/20021](http://www.educationnext.org/20021)>.
- Fletcher, Michael. 2003. "Education Law Reaches Milestone Amid Discord," *The Washington Post* (January 8).
- Jennings, Jack. 1998. *Why National Standards and Tests?* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kane, Thomas, and Douglas Staiger. 2001. "Rigid Rules Will Damage School," *The New York Times*, online edition (August 13).
- Miller, Julie, Michael Levin-Epstein, and Lynn Cutler. 2001. "Congress Moves Toward Bipartisan Education Bill," *Title I Report* (May).
- Natriello, Gary, and Edward McDill. 1999. "Title I: From Funding Mechanism to Educational Program." In *Hard Work for Good Schools: Facts Not Fads in Title I Reform*, edited by G. Orfield and E. DeBray, pp. 31–45. Cambridge: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University.
- Robelen, Erik. 2001. "States Sluggish on Execution of 1994 ESEA," *Education Week* (November 28).
- Smith, Marshall S., and Jennifer O'Day. 1990. "Systemic School Reform," *Politics of Education Association Yearbook*, 233–267.
- U.S. Department of Education. 1999. *Measured Progress: The Report of the Independent Review Panel on the Evaluation of Federal Education Legislation*. Washington, DC: U.S. GPO.
- U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and the Workforce. 2000. *Statement of the Honorable Richard W. Riley, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education*. Washington, DC: U.S. GPO.



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
Brown University  
Box 1985  
Providence, Rhode Island 02912

Non Profit Org.  
US Postage  
PAID  
Providence, RI  
Permit #202