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## Educational Accountability and Equity: Superintendent Perspectives

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## Educational Accountability and Equity: Superintendent Perspectives

Educational equity is understood as the recognition of a school system to ensure resources to safeguard that all students have equitable access, opportunity, and outcomes (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). Yet inequity persists in the American educational system. School accountability remains at the forefront of education policy to ensure equitable achievement between students from all backgrounds regardless of race, ethnicity, family income, linguistic background, and ability (Krejsler, 2018; Skrla, 2001). Researchers (Skrla et al., 2004) have acknowledged the positive effects accountability has had on equity, including a standard set of explicit expectations for all students, concentrating public attention to achievement gaps, data transparency, and calling attention to the role and responsibility of educational leaders to achieve equity for all students. However, they proposed that these aspects of accountability are insufficient to reach the promise of equity for all children.

Historically, numerous variations of federal law have aimed to bring the promise of educational equity to fruition. For example, *Mendez v. Westminster School District* and *Brown v. Board of Education* attempted to reconcile racial inequity in schools through desegregation. However, questions remain on their effectiveness (Aguirre, 2005; López & Burciaga, 2014). Next came *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, a result of President Johnson's attempt to resolve educational inequity brought on as a consequence of poverty (Robinson, 2018). As disparities in outcomes for children based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability, and language persisted, there came the onset of modern accountability through *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2001* (Darling-Hammond, 2018). Through changes to funding formulas and curriculum and increased emphasis on standardized testing and accountability, NCLB sought to remedy inequitable outcomes for all students (Darling-Hammond, 2018).

In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* was signed into law as a reauthorization and expansion of its predecessors (Robinson, 2018). ESSA retained educational equity as its goal seeking to close achievement gaps by providing access to equitable, high-quality education for all students (Robinson, 2018). Although there is still emphasis on standardized testing and accountability, more autonomy has been granted to states in setting their own goals. Additionally, there is consideration of other quality measures, including kindergarten readiness, climate, safety, absenteeism, college, and career readiness, access to advanced placement, and graduation rates (Robinson, 2018). Despite well-intentioned maneuvers toward improvement, additional factors still influence the implementation of accountability policy.

Research asserts that leadership is a crucial factor to consider in realizing equity for all (Goddard et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). Roegman (2018) argued that not only does educational leadership skillset matter, but the context in which educational leaders are situated greatly impacts their approaches to equity and effectiveness. The research offers that intersecting personal, occupational, social, and organizational contexts can result in reframing or negotiating what it means to lead for equity (Roegman, 2018). Roegman (2018) wrote, "Policies aimed at addressing inequities need to take into account the contextual nature of the work, including the types of capacity-building that need to occur at all levels of a school district." (p. 25). Given these considerations, it is critical to gain further insight from educational leaders of their perceptions on the relationship or disconnect between accountability efforts and equitable outcomes. This study examines the results of interviews of 13 public school superintendents in a large metropolitan area and identifies emergent themes in superintendent

thinking as it revolves around school accountability. These themes are couched in larger discussion of educational equity.

### **Research Design**

This article reflects a qualitative approach to understanding public school superintendent voices regarding experiences, feelings, and beliefs related to our ongoing era of accountability in a changing social environment. To ascertain insights about the stakeholders in the study that cannot be gained by simply interpreting statistics and numbers, qualitative inquiry was utilized (Lichtman, 2010). The qualitative data obtained in the study uncovered the participants' perspectives and experiences through their rich descriptions.

The particular method of research used included "in-depth interviews, and open-ended interviews" for the purposes of data collection (Patton, 2002, p. 4). The objective was to collect rich, thick depictions of how school leaders perceive the collision of rigid accountability requirements in an emerging social era of diversity and inclusiveness, as well as the development of a detailed textual description of the findings (Creswell, 2005; Patton, 2002). The goal was to bring to life, to make real, to illuminate from superintendents' perspectives, the underlying philosophies they have developed as a result of the experiences and stresses placed upon them in an everchanging environment.

### ***Participants***

A total of 13 public school superintendents were purposefully sampled. For purposive sampling, "researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population" (Berg, 2009, p. 50). Data were collected from school districts located in a major metropolitan region by graduate students in an administrative preparation program in Texas. The selection of 13 representatives served two purposes. First, the study was designed to attempt to capture a robust description of stakeholder perception and experience. Second, data gathering was influenced by course pedagogy and the instructional desire to ensure that the graduate students had an opportunity to appreciate the perspectives of district-level executive leaders of the continuing social foci on accountability and its relationship to newer social discussions related to social justice. The rationale behind their selection was the importance of developing an understanding of the thoughts and approaches of superintendents in an environment that often has very difficult demands of public schools and their leaders.

### ***Data Analysis***

Interview data was coded and analyzed. Constant comparative method was utilized (Boeije, 2002). This process ensured accuracy, as the information was drawn from multiple sources (Creswell, 2005). The analysis focused on the interviews and comprehensive analysis of all data (Bogdam & Biklen, 2003). Categories and codes were generated and revised several times until thematic summaries were able to be created from each interview through the identification of issues and themes from each. From these summaries, the researchers were able to identify emergent themes. The researchers then analyzed the transcribed data, utilizing coding and sub-coding multiple times until similar themes repeatedly became apparent. The interview data was further analyzed to substantiate and confirm evidence to support emergent themes. The overall process ensured valid results, as the information was drawn from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007).

### **Emergent Findings and Themes**

Based on analysis of the interviews, the following themes emerged:

- **Accountability:** Largely, superintendents believe in the need for accountability. Accountability is inherent in leadership. Accountability has made us better educators.
- **Egalitarian ideal:** Accountability does not take social conditions such as poverty, background, parental support, etc. into consideration.
- **Individual child versus the whole group:** one-size fits all approach measures objective data and not humans.
- **Just one component:** Assesses only a small part of the complete picture (snapshot data)
- **Snapshot stress:** Accountability glosses over some social issues and forces districts to not address the social issues in favor of trying to address the test.

Each of these themes, with reference to participant responses are discussed.

### **Accountability**

Generally, the participants acknowledged the usefulness of an accountability system and its impact on educator effectiveness and student achievement. One participant stated, “You know, I believe in accountability. I think it has probably done more to improve education since it started than anything else we’ve done recently.” Another participant agreed with that sentiment and expanded on that idea. They explained,

I think accountability is critical so I have no concerns about accountability systems. My concerns about our current state, and national for that matter, accountability lay somewhat in the test, and the assessments, and the standards that are aligned with the accountability ratings, the number of indicators, and the things that surround the concerns of assessments.

Another participant added, “I think I probably speak for all superintendents or educators. I think we all feel that we test students too much.” These participants note that although accountability is a good thing, the heavy emphasis on standardized testing is flawed when put in the context of striving towards educational equity. One superintendent gave a more concrete example while expressing frustration with over emphasis on standardized testing. They elaborated,

The same thing with accountability. In [city] our test scores would come back, our achievement tests, we’d be at 95-96-97% and everybody was going “yay.” When you disaggregate it out, we had so many white, affluent kids that they are all at 100%, but I had this whole group of kids who are like at 60%. We were overlooking them.

So, I think the accountability system is a good thing. And I think it should be, but it has grown and taken...it’s too much, they just can’t stop, ok. Stop it with the testing.

This participant expressed that excessive focus on testing does not provide for a comprehensive picture without nuanced considerations of context. These findings support research (Skrla et. al, 2004) that cited the promise of accountability in school improvement efforts.

### **Egalitarian Ideal**

Participant perceptions of accountability reveal concerns with implied egalitarian ideal of accountability. One superintendent mentioned,

People held expectations for achieving. Every district was different. Every state was different, and there was no agreement as to what people were expected to achieve. There was the norm reference test, the ITBS and the California and various others. But those weren’t prescriptive in nature.

Some of the participants explained that this egalitarian, one-size-fits-all approach to student achievement does not consider challenges brought on in various contexts. One gave an example, “Certainly, the ELL challenges are part of the special needs that you might have in the community. But [named affluent community] could probably take 95% of their kids and throw them under a tree with 60 of them with one teacher and every one would be college bound by the end of the year. They just have that as their background, their makeup, their parent support; experiences they bring to school each day, all those things will make them successful.”

Another participant added to this discussion with more elaboration. They noted, “It will take three times the effort, if that’s large enough. It’s going to take a huge effort to get a child from poverty, with no background experiences that they bring to the classroom, to get to the same point of college readiness in most cases.”

Other participants explained that challenges such as these require creativity and nuanced approaches to leadership. One described accountability this way, “It conflicts with my thought of leadership in that it doesn’t reward for taking risks. And it doesn’t reward people for creativity unless those things resulted in a higher accountability rating.” These findings align with Roegman’s (2018) suggestion that educational polices such as accountability measures need to take into consideration the circumstantial nature of leading for equity.

### **The Competition Between the Individual Versus the Group**

Moreover, there seemed to be competing interpretation of what contexts should be considered. On one hand one participant articulated,

“It is much more into individualized to the child than I believe the accountability system is. I think our accountability system... it does consider every child with subgroups and, you know, looking at every child. But I don’t believe that it meets all the needs. I think if all we keep our eye on is the state accountability system, we are going to pass up an opportunity for a lot of children to have happy school experiences.”

For this participant, there was a belief that there should be some consideration about each individual child and the type of experience they encounter in school. One participant mentioned the accountability system as an entity that conflicts with their core educational philosophy stating, “That is something in my philosophy I often tell our people. It’s not what our scores are, it’s who our scores are. It’s about the people, the individual kids. So, that’s a little bit about how it conflicts with my philosophy.” This statement elicits the question of the role of individualism in accountability measures.

Some participants noted that accountability should be more comprehensive in its measurement of student achievement. For example, one participant mentioned,

“It measures the child, not measures the school. I would prefer a more holistic approach to student assessment with testing being a part of assessment and not total assessment, and that once again, we do statistically sound, psychometrically based sampling of our student body to assess schools.”

One participant also reflected,

“I think my basic value is that we should be there to help develop well-rounded students, who are free thinking and able to make a positive impact on society. Sometimes a test will not actually identify the potential of a student because some students, quite frankly, may not do so well on assessments. That doesn’t mean they don’t have the capacity to learn or the potential to do something great in life.”

Another participant expanded on that thought by voicing,

But bigger than that, the simple pencil and paper assessment of math, science, social studies, writing, language arts do not necessarily define the whole education. That is the piece I struggle with within the system. You want to create whole education for kids. Not just the book work piece. That is certainly a part of it, a critical part of it. There are certain skills we want our kids to have. But at the same time, they are not all measured by those particular types of assessments and they certainly aren't all in those same places at those same benchmarks. So that is the piece that conflicts with just a basic philosophy of what we do in education for kids in preparing them for their future.

These comments from the participants call into question the idea that accountability achieves equity for all students when students as individuals are not considered.

### **Just One Component**

Another critical aspect of this discussion was that the participants believed that accountability largely focuses on just one component - testing, brings on more problems than benefits. One superintendent lamented,

And if you ever hang your hat on just that one test, then you are doing a disservice. So, I think as long as you go into it with the standpoint that this doesn't define us, it's important, but so is morale, so is teacher turnover, so is perception in the community. All of these things are important. None necessarily more so than the other.

This participant voiced that one snapshot does not tell the whole story of whether or not students are receiving a quality education. Another participant added,

I believe that the conflict deals with the test assessment being a one-shot deal; it's not multiple measures throughout the course of the year. It's one measurement, based on one given day, or multiple days, in this case, depending on which test is being administered. That is not a true snapshot of student performance. So that, in and of itself, conflicts with my values and philosophy of making sure that we will utilize the skills sets of the whole child from when we get them in August, all the way through May, instead of just the Spring snapshot.

Another noted,

I have four sons. At the end of the day my youngest is a fifth grader, so this is a big testing year for him. When I see him at the end of the day and I talk about his school day, I want him to learn, but I'm not as concerned about his test score as I am about... is he making relationships? Is he learning those life-long skills that he needs to learn about getting along with others? about having a positive teacher? about loving to learn?

Many of the participants felt as though the accountability system and process itself is not equitable. One person noted,

So, I think that is a stupid way for the state to assign those ratings. Just imagine if we did that in the classroom. If we gave 10 assignments and we took the lowest grade and said, that is your grade for the year. It just doesn't even make sense.

Another participant added,

I know, in my position, accountability is supposed to be a wonderful thing, but I think it is way over done. I think that the whole notion of having one selling an accountability system, one in which all the testing data we have, one test can cause a school or district to become unacceptable is ludicrous. There's got to be a better way to hold people accountable for the work that they do.

Frustration with accountability being structured the way it is was a recurring theme from the participating superintends. An additional participant commented,

It is just taking a snapshot and giving a campus or district a rating, and of course, the rating equates to your lowest single indicator, which is so misleading. And I always feel sorry for districts with very diverse populations where one student might make a difference, or one indicator was low. They are doing phenomenal things with other kids, but they get the rating that was assigned to the lowest single indicators.

According to these superintendents, the process is not equitable. It is punitive and it does not paint a full picture. Moreover, it does not lead to educational equity.

### **Snapshot Stress**

In all, the participants of this study overwhelmingly agree that the “snapshot” nature of accountability is problematic. One participant explained how some components conflict with one another stating,

Well, I think AYP and ADIS conflict a little bit in that if you put a child in the place that’s most beneficial for them, it might hurt you on one of the two accountability systems. So, I think that we have had to weigh the idea that we are going to put our children in the best possible place for them to learn even if it causes us difficulty meeting AYP. Often the best situation for them to learn is the special education situation.

In addition to contemplating whether or not accountability sometimes exists in tension with what may be best for students, another participant argued the need to consider the detrimental effects that poverty and historical, structural racism has on students. This person explained,

We tend to ignore the acerbic effects of poverty although we say we don’t. We tend to ignore the fundamental fact that historically under-represented peoples experience disproportionate percentages of poverty. In our district, where 72% of our African American population is economically disadvantaged. The way we currently report out, it would have lay people, and in fact educators believe, that the African American sub group is weak in Mathematics. Therefore, it becomes the African American problem as opposed to recognizing that 72% of those children live within 25% of the poverty level. If we were reporting out along the line income first and then ethnicity, I think that would be more apparent. What we are dealing with is the stated acerbic effects of economic fragility in home and lack of social capital across some cultures because of a history of not fully participating in the American dream.

Another participant shared similar concerns noting,

I don’t think accountability has fully adjusted itself for the more challenging issues that some districts face over others. I think it will always be tougher for our district to reach those accountability standards than it will for affluent districts and the standard is the same. There is no adjustment, there is no accommodation, there is no differentiation in the challenges that the school district might face, one to the other, and I think that is a flaw in the system. The high poverty. The strongest correlation to lack of success on a test like that is the high poverty.

Participants note that snapshot data does little to address systemic root causes of disparities in education. One participant mentioned the need to consider longitudinal data on students to identify and address problem early on. They commented,

And we jump on the high school a lot because of the dropout rate. But that may be where they’re dropping out, but they are disengaging in 3rd and 4th grade whenever they are not

successful with usually dividing, division and compound-complex sentences. We've got to diagram those. You know, all of those things that we do. These findings echoed those of Walker (2017) who asserted that accountability in public policy presents a disconnect between accountability expectations and support availability. Walker (2017) urged policy makers to shift from a snapshot results orientation to one that considers implementation of processes and supports, a true equity focused accountability system.

### Discussion

The themes that became apparent through the interviews indicate a tension between objective expectations and the subjective, human nature of education. Due to federal and state accountability pressures and the increase of social and societal pressures for equity, leaders and teachers unfortunately are forced to choose which to prioritize (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). Erichsen & Reynolds (2020) also posited that there is a need for a focus and change in accountability practices and equity strategies, as both are important and have tremendous impact on children. Issues such as allocations of resources tend to exacerbate the problems with the egalitarian ideal. Inequities in resources have been a problem for many generations. Darden and Cavendish (2011) stated the more than two generations of students have passed through public schools since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, and resources remain unequally apportioned. While this remains true, due to the lack of accountability surrounding inequitable practices and policy surrounding school resource allocations, many states such as New York have implemented a bonus system that funds "Well Developed" schools to improve resource allocations (Dixon-Ross, 2020).

The accountability mandate makes an inherent assumption that school funding issues are solely the responsibility of the state. Not all agree with the assumption. Yan (2019) argued that accountability, school funding and equity practices are the responsibilities of all stakeholders at the state and federal levels. Dixon-Ross (2020) took this argument further by positing that the superintendent and school leaders, because of their roles with leading and executing change and improving systems and structures, are the most responsible for equity-related outcomes of accountability practices. Darden and Cavendish (2011) identified inequities that take place because of parental efforts in affluent schools. There are cases in which active parent groups secure advanced programs, science curricula, art or music programs outside of state-provided funding. Other schools, without the active parent base, are unaffected and remain formula funded and without additional resources.

Over the last decade, low-income communities have had an influx of federal funds through Title 1 and post-COVID ESSER funds formulated to address inequitable funding practices, but the fact still remains that inequality in education expenditures persist (Taylor et.al., 2023). Therefore, funding is not as much the concern and affluent parents are not as critical in school funding success as it relates to more opportunities. The larger question is the extent to which leaders leverage additional funds to address the equity issue (Turner & Spain, 2020).

The tension in the accountability system extends beyond resources. Through the interviews, superintendents identified an issue of context - the individual versus the group - that creates disconnections within inclusive educational philosophies. In recent years, many accountability systems have incorporated a performance measure that addresses specific subpopulations (Race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, mobility, special programs) that begins to open up the discussion around the individual versus the collective. This requirement also has the potential as a systematic structure for further examination of the equity issue in closing the



achievement gap for diverse learners. This is an important outcome because teachers engage in sensemaking and attribution as they relate to understanding student data. School context, according to Bertrand and Marsh (2015), plays an essential role in sensemaking for teachers. Moreover, that very context informs teachers about vital pedagogical and instructional activities and steps. A statewide mandate to pay specific attention to subpopulations has the potential to marry accountability and equity together which may alleviate some of the discomfort of the superintendents. This metric serves as a level of accountability for equity.

When teachers are guided by school context in understanding data, issues such as instruction, student understanding, the nature of the test, and student characteristics are the four primary sources for attribution (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015). If individual student characteristics are rendered inconsequential as a result of attributions due to accountability, pedagogy and instruction are adversely impacted. Accountability systems have evolved as federal and state education agencies have taken more responsibility in shifting the context of how schools analyze data and make data-driven decisions that support success for all students (Yan, 2019). Group-oriented responses from teachers has the potential of diminishing the import of the research that indicates that focus on the individual child is essential. For example, Mehalik et al. found that superior academic performance in science concepts learning is enhanced when students are able to ask their own questions and learning is motivated by meeting student needs that they, themselves, articulate, through a systems design (as opposed to a guided-inquiry design) (2008).

Professional learning communities provide a space for teachers to engage in similar learning through discussing data, reviewing student work, instructional planning, modeling lessons and receiving feedback. These opportunities allow teachers to build capacity in their craft, improve self-efficacy, and provide high levels of ownership for the success of all their students (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020).

Tangential to the tension superintendents discussed regarding individual student needs versus group needs is the understanding that the current accountability system tends to assess only one component of an individual's education. A systems-design approach, according to Mehalik et al., has superior performance when considering knowledge gain, student engagement, and retention, as well as its application to student subpopulations, particularly African American students.

Wholistic assessment of student has not been a common practice in schools, specifically schools that serve diverse and economically disadvantaged students. Affluent schools have communities and parents who advocate for teachers and leaders to incorporate and consider the whole child and ensure that their children have activities and opportunities to develop them academically, socially and emotionally. Lee and Lee (2020) argued that a wholistic approach, over time, has a positive impact on student achievement, not just the achievement of children in affluent schools.

Along the same lines, superintendents clearly identified snapshot stress as a highly problematic aspect of the current accountability system. It is common knowledge that tests function to only capture a snapshot of student learning (Jones & Egle, 2004). Moreover, the snapshot data feeds into policies that impact how public education is funded. In fact, many of the policies that focus on performance-based examinations have effectively increased the challenges of BIPOC students in accessing equitable opportunities (Bush-Mecenas, 2022). Accountability is an important component of education to measure student learning and leverage the data to fill the gaps and determine enrichments needed to improve learning (Turner & Spain, 2020). However, leveraging snapshot data as an overall method of assessing the success of a child does a

disservice to the multi-faceted layers of human learning and offers a limited scope on who children are (Lee & Lee, 2020).

### **Recommendations**

Superintendents are placed in difficult positions as they seek to provide leadership in an environment that provides competing meta-values. The tensions between meeting student needs, the needs of marginalized populations, and accountability expectations are a minefield through which decisions must be made. Prior to establishing clear recommendations and next steps for leaders, Lee and Lee (2020) argued that it is critical to advocate that federal and state education agencies consider whole child efforts as they measure schools for effectiveness. School superintendents and school leaders follow the lead and the direction of state and federal guidelines and expectations. The competing pressure of doing what is best for children and what is best for accountability, based on the sentiments of the research participants, is unfair and creates stressful environments for all stakeholders.

To assist leaders in functioning in this environment, Bush-Mecenas recommended utilizing continuous improvement processes to achieve equity (2022). At the same time, Bush-Mecenas commented that there are very few empirical studies that have addressed the issue. To that end, a strong recommendation would be to approach continuous improvement with an equity goal and program assessment mindset. Progress has been made in states such as Texas, where targeted focus lies in the subpopulations that have historically unperformed (Labadie, 2021). In addition, programs requirements like those inserted into Special Education have functioned to ensure that accountability for equity has become embedded in the fabric of the system structure. Improvement efforts around equity would follow this same practice with other marginalized groups of children in schools such as emergent bilinguals, gifted and talented, economically disadvantaged & diverse ethnic groups (Turner & Spain, 2020).

One method or approach to continuous improvement is a focus on the organizational learning culture in conjunction with or instead of an emphasis on data. Firestone and Gonzalez (2007) stressed this approach and its reliance on teacher and principal voices, as opposed to a sole dependence on test data. Walker expanded the concept by identifying that expectation and opportunity gaps in schools need to be replaced with an “affection” gap (2017). This alternative approach illuminates the moral repercussions of school leadership. In its practice, Walker encouraged the development of pathways of engagement for those in the community who are affiliated with the school (2017). These pathways would provide not only additional input to the development of an inclusive culture, but also an enhanced social investment and the ethical accountability that participants in the culture would have to one another. The simplicity of listening to the voices of stakeholders creates a culture where accountability and personal ownership of scholar data is not a “must do” but a “want to do” a “need to do.”

If the focus of improvement processes and the tools through which improvement processes are to adapt to meet the needs of all students, colleges and other preparation programs must adapt curriculum to prepare future leaders. Key in this preparation are reflective conversations with future leaders about what the balance of the sometimes-competing efforts of accountability and equity will look like. Moreover, these organizations must also invest in researching and publishing the most effective practices and processes that yield measurable educational equity.

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