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Accountable Leadership

by Richard F. Elmore

Leadership demands in American public schools have changed dramatically in the past 20 years. Whether—or how—the *practice* of leadership will change to meet those demands is an open question. The change in demands is largely a consequence of the introduction of performance-based accountability—policies that evaluate, reward, and sanction schools on the basis of measured student performance. While the merits of these policies are debatable, the fact that they have changed—probably fundamentally—the demands placed on school leaders is not.

Before proceeding to the tactical and strategic implications of this change, two common misconceptions in debates about accountability and school leadership must be clarified. The first is that changes in the conditions under which school leaders operate necessarily lead to changes in leadership *practices*. If practice is defined as the knowledge, skill, and values embodied in the behavior of educational leaders, there is little evidence to suggest that changing the conditions under which leaders operate leads to systematic changes in their practices. Historical evidence (Cuban 1984, 1988; Tyack and Hansot 1982) suggested that the practice of school leaders—characterized primarily by a focus on managerial duties—has remained consistent despite dramatic changes in the social, economic, and cultural conditions surrounding public schools. The default culture of public schools—characterized by the atomization or fragmentation of teaching, the buffering of instructional practice from external influence, and the belief that teaching is primarily an “art” that is not susceptible to systematic and replicable knowledge—has been powerfully resilient in the face of major cultural changes. To say that the teaching environment has changed significantly due to an increased focus on performance-based accountability is to say nothing in particular about how the practice of school leadership might change.

The second misconception is that, before the advent of performance-based accountability, schools were “not accountable” and now they are “accountable.” Schools are *always* accountable, regardless of the policies under which they operate. What varies among schools is the specific “form” of accountability, which is commonly influenced by policy. Policies, however, do not determine whether schools are accountable. In other words, *all* schools operate with implicit or explicit action theories that determine to whom, for what, and how they are accountable.

The framework outlined here is built on research sponsored by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), reported in part in *The New Accountability: High Schools and High-Stakes Testing* (Carnoy, Elmore, and Siskin 2003) and in *When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?* (Abelmann et al. 1998). These theories (Newmann, King, and Rigdon 1997) deeply affect how teachers and school leaders think about their work, how they determine their authority, how that authority is defined and circumscribed, and for what they are accountable. From this perspective, performance-based accountability systems—first from states and now primarily from the federal government—are an attempt to influence the terms of accountability, not to create accountability where none existed before. Policy makers, as well as professional reformers, often think the reforms they sponsor are unique in the history of education and are the primary cause of events that occur after their adaptation. This conceit—and the misconception on which it is based—leads to serious and adverse consequences for schools.

How Accountability Works

School leaders form their conceptions of accountability from three sources: individual beliefs and values about what they can and should do, or *individual responsibility*; collective norms and values that define the organization in which individuals work, or *collective expectations*; and formal mechanisms by which teachers account for what they do. Schools vary in how they blend these concepts. For example, in atomized schools, individual beliefs and values dominate, collective expectations are weak, and formal mechanisms of accountability are ineffective. In these schools, accountability is defined by what individual teachers think students can do, not by their work environment or by the supervision of school leaders. As schools become more coherent and effective as organizations, rather than collections of individuals, collective expectations are more influential over individual teachers’ work, and the work of school leaders becomes defined as the explicit reinforcement of organizational values. This process of moving from an atomized state to a more coherent organizational state is called *alignment*. The alignment of individual values with collective expectations, reinforced by the processes of account-



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ability, results in internal accountability. As internal accountability develops, schools become more effective as organizations rather than as groups of individuals.

The research conducted for CPRE and other research (Bryk and Schneider 2002) suggested that higher levels of internal accountability are associated with greater success in the context of external accountability systems. Schools that operate as coherent organizations are more effective—tactically and strategically—in their external environments. On a tactical level, schools with higher levels of internal accountability are more skillful in deciding on which curricular areas to focus, determining how to approach the instructional problems posed by

performance measures, developing their own measures of performance, and learning how to respond to external pressures in ways that are consistent with their own core values. On a strategic level, schools with higher levels of internal accountability are more skilled at positioning themselves vis-à-vis external authorities and keeping them at bay.

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Schools with lower levels of internal accountability are much less successful. They are less likely to exercise control over student curriculum and performance. They also are more likely to grasp for superficial solutions to external pressures—for example, teaching test items rather than developing and teaching higher-level content. And, they are more likely to set expectations in the prevailing culture of atomization and the existing abilities of individuals—for example, pushing harder on individual teachers instead of designing collective responses that make the work of the organization more powerful.

A key factor in understanding internal accountability is the idea of “agency” or “locus of control” (Elmore in press). Moving from a culture in which the work of the organization is the sum of the work of its individuals to a culture in which individuals’ work is shaped by collective expectations, values, and commitments requires the exercise of agency at both the individual and collective level. Individual commitment to collective values requires individuals to choose to have their beliefs, values, and practices influenced by their colleagues and by outside knowledge, and to choose to value collective results over individual results. The formation of explicit organizational values requires the creation of settings in which those values can be discussed and agreed upon, or the exercise of collective agency.

One consequence of atomized American schools is that most educators tend to perceive themselves as having low agency. Teachers tend to identify the personal character-

istics of their students as the causal factors that influence student learning, rather than weaknesses in their teaching. Administrators tend to blame external pressures as the determinants of their actions, rather than their own beliefs, knowledge, and skills. The research sponsored by CPRE found that the most common response to external pressure for accountability was to make the existing atomized structure work better rather than make the organization work more effectively—a key indicator that schools are populated by people with low agency.

Accountability as Organizational Response

Accountability, therefore, is a matter of organizational response rather than compliance or implementation. Policy makers tend to think they are initiators of action, and people in schools are implementers. Accountability policy tends to revolve around getting schools and districts to comply with the requirements of the law and, in so doing, implement what legislators intended.

The working model of accountability outlined here clearly indicates that this view of policy making is fundamentally defective. At best, policies set the general direction that schools are supposed to pursue. The actual outcomes are weighted toward the school's culture and processes—factors over which policy exercises only indirect influence. Policy, therefore, operates on the margins of established organizations and governmental institutions in education.

Rather than thinking of accountability as a problem of compliance or implementation, instead consider the range of responses that schools have to external pressure, understand the factors that affect those responses and, in turn, shape external pressure and support to influence those factors. If the working theory outlined is correct, the main factors affecting schools' responses to external pressure from performance-

based accountability systems is the level of conformity among educators' conceptions of responsibility, the organization's collective purposes, and the degree to which educators believe they influence or exercise agency over student learning.

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Modifying organizational response is fundamentally different from altering implementation or compliance problems. With implementation or compliance, interest lies in the fidelity between what the policy says educators should be doing and what they are actually doing. Response requires attention to the degree to which people exercise agency over the factors determining their collective efficacy. It is not difficult to see how fidelity

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and agency can conflict. Compliance actually can diminish agency, and agency can subvert compliance. Dependence on external authority doesn't make people more effective agents in their work; it can actually make them less effective. Having their own ideas about what will work, active thinkers invent solutions to problems that policy makers haven't considered.

Accountability is a delicate dance between policy makers, whose expertise is limited to particular aspects of law and politics, and practitioners, whose expertise is—or should be—bound by the finer features of classroom practice and organizational culture and structure. Policies refract through schools like light through a prism. Similarly, accountability produces different responses from schools based on their level of internal accountability. Understanding the conditions that produce these varied responses and deciding what to do about them is the problem of educational leaders.

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Accountability as Improvement

Most external accountability systems embody primitive and unspecified theories of school improvement. Schools are expected to improve their performance over time, as measured by external tests. Just how this occurs, what it entails, and the factors determining progress are not specified. Research (Elmore 2003) suggested organizational response patterns when schools are engaged in instructional improvement due to external accountability policies. First, improvement is fundamentally a process of individual and organizational learning. Educators must learn to do new things to improve student learning and improve their schools' performance. To accomplish this, they have to gain access to the knowledge they need and assimilate that knowledge into their practice. Evidence suggests that neither policy makers nor practitioners understand this condition of improvement. Both seem to think that improvement is contingent on making better use of existing knowledge and skills rather than acquiring new knowledge and skills. Policy makers typically don't consider the issues of new knowledge and skills in their willingness to invest in the infrastructure or in the pacing of accountability requirements. Practitioners initially tend to respond to external accountability requirements by doing exactly what produced the existing student performance, rather than asking what is needed to change it.

Second, improvement is not a linear process. As with any developmental process, people do not increase their knowledge in a steady, uniform manner, nor does knowledge manifest itself that way. Exploratory research showed an increase in student performance that is directly attributable to new instructional practices focused on specific student learning issues. This is followed by periods of level or slightly declining perfor-

Second, improvement is not a linear process. As with any developmental process, people do not increase their knowledge in a steady, uniform manner, nor does knowledge manifest itself that way. Exploratory research showed an increase in student performance that is directly attributable to new instructional practices focused on specific student learning issues. This is followed by periods of level or slightly declining perfor-

mance while individuals consolidated their new knowledge and identified the next set of problems on which to focus. Neither practitioners nor policy makers seem to understand this pattern very well. Most accountability policies are based on the premise that school improvement happens in a roughly linear fashion, and that schools' performance can be assessed reliably on cross-sectional—not longitudinal—annual evidence of student performance. Most practitioners in the schools I visited are surprised, and usually deeply discouraged, when their performance levels off after a period of improvement, thinking that if they continue to do what produced the previous performance gains, they will continue to improve. I have yet to find an improving school in which this is the case. Improvement entails solving different problems of instructional practice at different performance levels. Improvement is a continuous, developmental process that requires different types of knowledge and skills at successive development stages.

Third, improvement is both a technical and social-emotional process. Educators have to learn and become fluent in new instructional practices, often with different content constructions designed around different expectations based on student capabilities. These expectations are manifested in different types of student work that require higher levels of teacher skills and knowledge. Simultaneously, educators need to deal with the emotional ebb and flow of success, failure, and stasis. Life in schools in the default culture is predictable. Teachers pursue the same practices in insulated settings year after year. If these practices do not produce the same learning outcomes as in previous years, teachers tend to attribute the lack of success to the characteristics of the students. Improvement, on the other hand, requires people to internalize responsibility for student learning, exercise agency and control over their practice, and change their methods in response to organizational expectations and external demands. When a teacher's initial experience is successful, as is often the case in schools that are developing internal accountability, it hurts emotionally—having internalized responsibility for students' learning—to discover that improvement is not a continuous, linear process.

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Improvement, or increases in the quality of instructional practice and student performance over time, is a practice as well as a process. Successful teachers and principals recognize that they now know how to do things they did not know previously and that their knowledge and skills are transferable from one domain of instructional practice to another. For example, what was learned about designing professional development when introducing the new literacy curriculum is useful in the initial stages of designing professional development for the new math curriculum. Not

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surprisingly, people in improving schools think of themselves as skillful practitioners, not just of the work required to produce student performance but also of the work required to create the conditions for improved student performance.

Improvement also requires the use of distributed cognition (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). Most instructional problems are highly complex, and the knowledge required to solve them comes from expertise outside of the organization—new curricular models, consultants, and professional developers—and from resident expertise within the organization. Improvement means finding and using outside expertise tailored specifically to individual needs and capitalizing on the varied expertise within the organization. Not surprisingly, schools that are accomplished at improvement are fluent in finding and capitalizing on both types of expertise. The result is that expertise is distributed in the organization; no person or role monopolizes the entire body of knowledge needed for improvement. The work becomes about connecting people with different

levels of expertise and making sure they work together productively.

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The Dimensions of Accountable Leadership

There are good reasons why school leaders often are discouraged by changes in their working conditions due to performance-based accountability. They are being asked to do something they do not know how to do. Many existing school leaders would not choose to do this work even if they were

given the opportunity to learn how to do it. It is a different kind of work. It requires different knowledge and skills, and it entails different norms and expectations. It means working outside the zone of competence in which most experienced school leaders are used to working. It questions their accustomed claims to authority and expertise. A discernible shift occurs in the social contract between schools and their authorizing agencies. This shift brings different entailments for leaders. The question is whether a change in the social contract will alter the practice of school leadership—whether atomized schools will be resilient in the face of shifting conditions in the external environment and, if so, what the consequences for the public education sector will be.

These are important questions. I suggest that a model of leadership practice can be gleaned from understanding accountability and improvement. The basic tenets of this model are:

Accountable leadership focuses on the development of internal accountability.

Internal accountability is defined as coherence and alignment among individuals' conceptions of what they are responsible for and how, collective expectations at the organi-

zational level, and the processes by which people within the organization account for what they do. Internal accountability precedes and determines all school responses to their external environment. An incoherent and atomized organization will have an incoherent and atomized response to external influences, whether performance-based accountability systems or other sources. People in schools (Elmore 2002; 2004) primarily learn values and expectations through practice; they do not learn new practices as a consequence of learning new values and expectations. Accountable leadership, therefore, must focus on modeling common values through engagement in the work of instructional practice.

Accountable leadership stresses the importance of agency—individually and collectively.

Schools with high internal accountability have high agency at the individual and collective level. People who assume individual and collective responsibility for the consequences of their practice are powerful factors in their immediate and extended environment. People learn agency—especially in a default culture that stresses lack of efficacy, passivity, and powerlessness—by working in ways that demonstrate the causal connection between their actions and what students learn. Accountable leadership models stress agency as a condition for powerful influence in the broader environment.

Accountable leadership focuses on the technical and social/emotional dimensions of improvement.

External accountability systems, even if poorly designed, reward improvement. Improvement is a practice as well as a process. It begins with changes in the instructional core that address the problems of student learning, and entails acquiring external knowledge and mobilizing internal knowledge to address those problems. It uses organizational structures and processes to nurture and requires practices that result in increased performance. Improvement is rarely linear; it involves periods of growth followed by periods of consolidation, stasis, and perhaps decline, while new knowledge and practices become part of the working repertoire of individuals. Individuals—especially those who have internalized responsibility for student learning—are discouraged when they discover that improvement is not linear and continuous. They, therefore, require motivation, encouragement, and support during these periods.

Accountable leadership is distributed leadership.

As schools succeed in creating internal accountability and nurturing and building practices of improvement, they become places where leadership is distributed according to expertise. Traditional, role-based models of leadership are incompatible with more evolved forms of improvement in schools. Authority necessarily follows the contours of expertise as improvement practices develop. New knowledge enters the organization from the outside. Decisions need to be made as to what knowledge is appropriate for the school's particular problems and how that knowledge will be disseminated throughout the organization. Some teachers know more than others about the instructional problems their school faces and the practices that address those problems. Their expertise needs to be deployed to help nurture and develop successful practices throughout the organization. Improvement requires distributing leadership coherently around focused problem solving in the organization.

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