

Accountability and Abdication: School Reform and Urban School Districts in the Era of Accountability

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Introduction

The current school reform era has moved through a series of phases, coupling state centralization with a focus on school-level change at each step. Yet this era of reform also has a deeper history. In many ways, this era was a backlash to school desegregation. During school desegregation, educational policy became explicitly connected to promoting equity and challenging the dominance of whites and their interests. It also represented a decline in the influence of business and industry in educational affairs. It can be argued that the most progressive cases of school desegregation in the South were championed by business interests because of fears that the image of a racist community would undercut the migration of business to the South.

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However, it is also true that schooling during desegregation clearly served wider social goals rather than reaching beyond the realm of economics. Many business leaders found it in their interest to avoid the controversy of desegregation by stepping away from direct involvement on school boards and other venues. However, the economic downturn of the late 1970s left business looking for scapegoats and education became the social institution of choice that fulfilled this need.

The arguments contained in *The Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Education and Excellence, 1983) blamed schooling for a general societal decline and implicitly implicated that the problems in schools stemmed from a focus on equity. In the language of the times, excellence was touted as a necessity if America was to be economically competitive. In this deeper history, there was also an interest in “reining in” public funding while simultaneously facilitating the need for change, thus the argument was made that money was not the solution to the problem. In short, excellence was expected to come with no appreciable increases in funding for schools. Indeed, excellence would also be coupled with efficiency emanating from the creation of a competitive market in education that utilized proposals for vouchers and other measures.

This deeper history then reveals the dynamics that would plague the school reform era until the present day. Schools were to redirect their efforts to excellence but they were to do so under conditions not of support but rather of threat. It should be of little surprise then that it proved rather difficult to produce dramatic demonstrations of measurable results. The threat itself became transformed into a movement that focused on specifying standards and then requiring schools to implement those standards. Yet without resources schools could do little more than simply comply with such edicts. This led policymakers and policy entrepreneurs to conclude that schools lacked the capacity to reform on their own, thus promoting the development of a school reform industry. Ironically, public funding would be made available to support this industry even if the schools had been denied funding for their earlier reform efforts. New American Schools (as one of the principal design organizations for school reform) decided that education was a new market and gave up its nonprofit to become a for-profit venture (Hare, 1999). Yet the efforts of this new industry did not result in dramatic changes in educational outcomes. The inherent difficulties in changing schools soon became readily apparent and (rather than admit defeat) politicians decided to emphasize accountability and remand the responsibility for reform to the public schools themselves. It could be cynically argued that since school reform turned out to be hard to achieve, accountability was a way to demonstrate the failure of the public schools thus facilitating the privatization of education. However, accountability policies created evidence that some schools did need considerable assistance while reinforcing school reform as part of the stigmatization process (Murillo, 2002). With the comprehensive school reform act at the federal level and parallel efforts at the state level, schools could access funds to reform (or to purchase reforms) when test data indicated the school was low performing. School reform thus took on the stigmatizing character common to social welfare policies.

While the school reform era seemed to focus on school-level change, it was actually a process of state (and federal) centralization. Setting standards and creating high stakes testing programs were state efforts with which schools were expected to comply. Thus school-level reform became implicated in linking individual schools more tightly to state policy. This in turn put school districts in a novel position. That is, how was the district to understand its role when accountability policy linked the schools tightly with the state policy? In some instances, accountability policies created a situation where some districts found that abdicating their authority over local schools made good sense. Indeed, our studies of urban school districts revealed that this abdication can take more than one form. For us, the situation being created by accountability policy means that we may need to rethink the idea of school districts as public institutions.

In this article, we will review the history of school districts in order to set the context for the changes being prompted by accountability policy. Next, we will discuss our research (funded by the Rockefeller Foundation) in four urban school districts and how it illuminated the ways in which school districts were struggling to find their role on this redefined scene of public policy. Finally, we will suggest some ideas for reconceptualizing school districts themselves.

A Brief History of School Districts

Driver, Thorp, and Kuo (1997) argue that there are three significant periods in the history and development of school districts. From about 1810 to 1870, state and federal governments began the initial establishment of educational policy. As the state began to assume primary responsibility for education, large Eastern cities began to pressure for standardization in education. Immigration had resulted in masses of uneducated and non-English speaking students, and urban leaders were seeking a common school that would homogenize and Americanize children. They pressed for compulsory education and attempted to create “The One Best System” for education (Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Tyack, 1974). Thus central offices assumed a bureaucratic form in which the superintendent and central office were responsible for teacher hiring, textbook selection and budget allocation. These same leaders successfully lobbied state legislatures to sanction efforts at standardization and centralization. The net result was:

...a basic division of labor was set in place during this period, state governments took responsibility for establishing general laws and policies governing all public schools with an eye for standardizing education across schools in each state; and the district administrations in the cities assumed responsibility for implementing not only local policies but also these state laws and directives. (Driver, Thorp, & Kuo, 1997, p.11)

From 1870 to about 1930, the industrial revolution led to a new organizational form for industry including specialization and differentiation of jobs, specified rules that directed operations, and a bureaucratic hierarchy to enforce the rules.

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“Administrative progressives” within schools began to design schools on the industrial model. This resulted in the differentiation of students, graded classrooms, testing for student placement, attendance requirements, and distinct courses with specialized course content. At the district level, the incipient bureaucratic form that already existed (Katz, 1975) became more elaborate and standardized. Separate departments were created for personnel, curriculum, accounting, etc. Leadership by educational professionals was promoted and the appropriate preparation for such professionals became training in administration and management. To accomplish all this, state education codes were strengthened to promote standardization in education. These codes also specified the role of school districts as insuring compliance with state codes and even specified the structure of district bureaucracies to insure school level compliance. District administrators adopted newly developed “school surveys” (checklists of characteristics schools and districts should have) and implemented the recommendations these surveys implied (Tyack, 1974). These surveys became so popular that they had the effect of gradually homogenizing the structure of school districts and even the functions assigned to the different departments. As Driver, Thorp, and Kuo (1997, p. 13) conclude: “The central functions of compliance and control became more established during this period; and the basic structure of school districts to carry out these functions began to be standardized across school districts.”

From 1950 to the present, the increasing role of federal policy, as a result of the civil rights movement and the Cold War, meant that the state became responsible for insuring district compliance with federal regulations as well as state laws. State codes also expanded during this period in response to lobbying of interest groups representing types of children (especially exceptional children), and school districts became responsible for the administration and compliance of such “categorical” initiatives. To meet this challenge, school districts expanded their bureaucracies. Driver, Thorp, and Kuo (1997, p. 14) conclude that the result of these expansions is that “. . .districts have not only grown larger, but also more homogeneous, as they all establish the same types of departments or offices to administer these new programs.” Furthermore, he points out that the wide array of federal, state and local policies has fostered a “highly rule-bound organizational culture in districts” (p.15).

In short, school districts were historically developed to maximize compliance and control functions via standardization and uniformity of policy and procedures. As noted above, the recent reform era brought increased state centralization and reinforced this specific historic role of school districts. Yet accountability policy (Noblit, Malloy, & Malloy, 2001), and the high stakes testing that accompanies it, have essentially centered the individual schools as the focus of state efforts. School districts now find their historic control and compliance functions less salient since the state now directly requires compliance of schools. Moreover, the schools’ performances on high stakes tests implicate the district. Despite this, the historic control and compliance functions of districts have little effect in this situation. Instead, districts must assume a facilitative function for schools for which they

have not been designed (Glickman, 1993). Our research on urban school districts enables us to explore how school districts have dealt with this dilemma.

The Study

Our study was designed to examine how urban school districts facilitated (or did not facilitate) the implementation of James Comer's School Development Program (SDP). In doing so, we learned that the urban districts were using school reform to respond to the dilemma accountability was creating for them. We studied four school districts utilizing an embedded case study design (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). Two of the districts were very large and two were of a more moderate size. We conducted case studies of each district as well as two schools within each district. We spent 16 person days in three waves of data collection over the years 1999-2000 in each site using multiracial teams of researchers.

In the district offices we interviewed a range of officials (superintendent, school board members, district administrative personnel, etc.) repeatedly to understand how the district was facilitating the SDP and other reform initiatives, what the history of reform was in the district, and how the district worked with schools. The central offices also provided a wide range of data on student achievement, attendance, mobility, demographics, and school improvement efforts. The schools were selected because they represented different levels of implementation of the SDP. In the schools, we observed meetings involving the SDP initiative, other teacher and school wide meetings, parent meetings, classrooms, and teacher planning periods. We interviewed principals, teachers, parents, community members, and students. Again the focus was on the history and process of school reform, the effectiveness of various reform efforts and more specifically, the implementation and effectiveness of the SDP.

While we were focused on the SDP, we learned a great deal about reform in the districts and about the pressures of high stakes testing. This is the data we will analyze and discuss in this article. In that context, what we learned about Comer is important only in terms of its ability to evidence the ways in which school districts used reform efforts to facilitate responses to accountability policy. For our full study see Noblit et al. (2000).

Brief History of Comer's School Development Program (SDP)

In the early 1960s, researchers at the Yale Child Study Center began examining the problems of children who were systematically excluded from society's social and economic mainstream. Given the role that schools play in the ongoing development of children and adolescents, the researchers at the Yale Child Study Center decided that schools represented the best place to both help and study children (Comer et al., 1996). Dr. James P. Comer, a child psychiatrist, was chosen to lead a fledgling program that would be implemented in two troubled public elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut. The program emphasized the application of the principles

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of social and behavioral science to every aspect of the school's function. It was believed that the application of these principles would improve the school's climate by fostering improved relationships among those involved with the school's operation. Additionally, researchers hoped that these principles would foster a significant leap in the academic and social growth of the school's students (Comer, 1995).

This effort resulted in the creation of a school-level approach to educational reform that addressed the full spectrum of a school's operation (Comer et al., 1996). Comer's team emphasized analyzing the school as a system in order to understand the complex interactions occurring within this system. Using paradigms from the fields of child psychiatry and public health, Comer designed the School Development Program to allow parents, teachers, administrators and staff to understand each others' needs and to then cooperate with one another in addressing those needs in an integrated and organized fashion (Comer et al., 1996).

Using School Reform for Accountability

Each of the districts we studied was struggling with how to use reform to address the state's high stakes testing program. Oceanic School District (all district names are pseudonyms) is one of largest districts in the United States, serving largely minority students. Given the size of the district, schools are organized into regions which are administered by regional offices that assume many of the responsibilities commonly attributed to school districts. The first effort at reform started in 1985 with an attempt to implement Site-Based Management. By 1992, the district was beginning to turn to externally designed reform packages. In doing this, the district educated the schools on various reform strategies and provided district funding to schools, thus allowing them to contract with the reform organizations. The central office developed an office staff specifically to provide technical assistance in implementing various reforms. With experience, though, the district decided to focus on one particular reform and utilized the central office to both sponsor this reform and to educate the schools about the particulars of the reform. However, with a change of superintendents, the district's technical assistance capacity has ceased and district funding for reform has also been eliminated. Instead, state funding to low-performing schools and Title 1 funds have meant that the schools now have their own funds and make decisions about what reform strategy to pursue. Therefore, the district's role in reform is only to inform schools about the various reforms available to them.

Cornwallis School District is the third largest school district in a Southern state and has a student body that is roughly 50 percent of color. The district is the result of merger of three districts completed in 1993. The new district had to attend to the logistics of merging three central offices and to address the low performing schools in the central city. To deal with this, the district began to explore reform options and was convinced that the SDP was a reform that was most likely to be effective. The district developed a centralized staff, "the action team," whose job it was to garner considerable expertise with the SDP and to aggressively promote

its benefits. Yet the district had little leverage with schools unless they were having problems with the state's high stakes testing program. This occurred, in part, because efforts to require one specific reform were made difficult by the politics of consolidating the districts. To require all schools to implement one reform would have met with considerable resistance. Nevertheless, the superintendent used the action team to create local training in the Comer model. Moreover, the Superintendent used testing results to encourage each school to adopt a reform strategy. This was accomplished by requiring each school with low scores to explain what they were doing to raise their scores. Schools could choose what reform they thought best fit their needs, in part because the school principals argued that the schools were individually responsible for their own achievements. The district tried to sell Comer as an "umbrella reform" which would allow the selection of a range of instructional programs since the structure of Comer emphasized a specific governance system. However, school-level personnel argued that it was clear that test scores were the "bottom line" for the Superintendent and so they ultimately gravitated towards instructional packages believed to yield test score gains in the very short term.

River City School District is one the largest districts in a deindustrializing state. The city is deteriorating in many ways. Industry has left the city and with it jobs have disappeared. The tax base has seriously eroded, leaving little money for the school budget. While there are a wide range of social classes and ethnic groups in the city, the schools have become almost exclusively minority and poor. The schools have a history of low performance that eventually led to the district being "taken over" by the state, the ultimate threat of state accountability policy. For districts that have been taken over, the state has a "presumptive model" of reform. This model is widely regarded for its prescribed nature and focus on skills that are tested in the state's accountability system. The state appointed superintendent has been "overemphasizing" test scores according to school-level personnel, but it is also clear that this is what the state has required of him. The state is also channeling funds to the schools so they can purchase school reform packages that are geared for short-term achievement test gains. The schools are grateful for the funding but as one principal put it, "we can and do float alone." These "loose reins" persist as long as test scores are improving. If a school continues a pattern of low performance it can be taken over with staff being reassigned and new leadership installed. The "presumptive" model for school reform would also be required. In River City School District, accountability has led to direct state control of the schools and district, and education is thus defined only in terms of test results.

Ellington School District, like Oceanic, is one of the largest districts in the United States. Ellington also has a student body that is largely minority and a reputation for low performing schools. In many ways, the state's accountability program was created largely to target Ellington's schools. Ellington is a highly decentralized system, making accountability the primary mechanism for control within the district. Like River City, low performing schools can be taken over if a pattern of low performance is evident. If a school is put on probation for low

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scores, the district requires the school to use a structured curriculum that is tightly aligned with the state's tests and to purchase reform strategies from a list of approved "partners." For a partner to be approved the reform strategy must be geared towards short term test score increases. The district also has a list of "vendors" that provide strategies more geared to whole school reform efforts. However, these vendors cannot be purchased by schools having low test results. Thus schools with achievement problems are prevented from attempting to take on fuller efforts at reform.

In these four districts we can see a range of ways utilized by school districts in their attempts to manage the dilemma created by accountability policy. In each case, the school district is struggling to use school reform to achieve ends mandated by the state for the schools. Yet each attempt reveals that school districts are ill suited for the task. In fact, we want to argue that in each case we can see school districts engaging in different forms of abdication of their responsibilities to educate children.

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We came to see these school districts as using various combinations of two distinct patterns in their efforts to address accountability through the use of school reform. The first pattern is what we came to regard as "shopping mall reform," a term adapted from Powell, Farrar and Cohen (1985) who used it in reference to the high school curriculum and multiple missions. Ellington may well be the most dramatic example of this pattern since the district sees itself as the mall where schools come to purchase reforms from partners and vendors. Yet even in this case we see that districts are marketing certain types of reforms as better suited for some types of schools as opposed to others (low performing schools can only purchase short-term "test-gain" packages). The other districts also have elements of shopping mall reform that tend to emerge from districts not seeing their role as mandating reform. In these districts (as in Ellington) we see the second pattern of reform. These reforms are believed to induce test score gains in the short term and are essentially required for the most troubled schools in the state's accountability system. In River City, the state has approved this form of "presumptive" reform and insisted that schools wishing to continue with other reform efforts must show how these efforts have contributed to a pattern of test score gains. Other districts have found it harder to enforce a presumptive reform but nonetheless recognize it as something they would like to do if they could manage the resulting political ramifications. It is this pattern that we call the "one best reform." Ironically, in these districts, schools can escape the press for reforms marketed for short-term achievement gains by being successful in raising test scores.

In practice, it is evident that the districts have been experimenting with both of these patterns because they are seen as the only two patterns that make sense in this era of accountability. Oceanic, for example, was well on its way to mandating a specific reform when the superintendency changed hands. This all but eliminated central office sponsorship and funding of specific reforms. Cornwallis was well on its way with this pattern when the superintendent left for another district that was

known for its “one best reform” efforts. In both of these districts, there is now some variant of “shopping mall reform.” Ellington, again, is most revealing because it shows how districts, even when going to “shopping mall reform,” feel constrained by accountability and high stakes testing. These constraints limit competition (even within a market model of reform) to those reforms who market themselves for short-term test gain. This emphasis characterized all of the urban districts we studied and is the basis ultimately for what we regard as their abdication of responsibility.

To understand this abdication, let us review the emphases of high stakes testing and how it has encouraged school districts to move away from responsibility for school level achievement. First, the cases above show the results of state-driven high stakes accountability policies, which following the research that began with effective schools (Edmonds, 1979), sees the *schools as the unit for improvement*. This emphasis means that should school districts assume responsibility for the performance of their schools, they could then potentially come under challenge. Thus school districts are attempting to *reposition themselves as less responsible for achievement* at the school level. In this regard, districts seem to want to be regarded more as having a “staff” function rather than a “line” function as defined in traditional bureaucratic language. That is, districts do not want to be seen as supervisors and thus held as responsible for school level performance. Instead, these districts would rather be perceived as existing to support school level efforts much like support staff in traditional bureaucracies.

We argue that three conditions structure this specific repositioning of school districts. First, the ubiquity of change in urban districts makes it difficult for districts to plan and deliver a program that will build over time. Frequent changes in the superintendency and the continuously evolving politics of schooling have characterized these difficulties over the last 30 years. Second, the wider context of reform and accountability directly affects what is regarded as appropriate. For example, the reform era (since the 1980s) first meant the re-assertion of state control following federal oversight of school desegregation. Later, reform was associated with renewed federal control of funding based on successful compliance with *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) federal legislation. School districts have found themselves serving multiple masters for several decades and seem to have learned that abdication is reasonable given the vicissitudes of changing educational policy. Third, regardless of whether it is the state or federal government that is driving the reform, the emphasis has moved from school improvement to short term achievement gains. With this emphasis, the action is at the classroom level and is increasingly reflected in the form of test preparation efforts. The district can support this emphasis, but its history of using control is of little salience here. Districts move towards shopping mall reform or towards mandated reforms marketed to increase test scores because that is what “counts,” and because they are ill prepared to help in other ways. As a result, superintendents seemingly understand the limits of their charters as leaders of school districts.

Our conclusion from all of this is that school districts are abdicating their

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responsibilities in one of two ways. First, regardless of federal funding that encourages it, school districts are abdicating their responsibility for systemic reform. The argument for systemic reform is compelling. Children should have reasonably similar chances of improved achievement in any school in any given district. Thus districts should be responsible for insuring the district as a whole can deliver on this. Yet in repositioning themselves, districts have become complicit with state and federal emphases on school level changes. It is in the interest of districts given the conditions discussed above to cede responsibility on systemic reform. Second and more important, districts are abdicating their responsibilities for developing the whole child. Clearly, not everyone would accept that schools are responsible for the full development of child as advocated by Comer (1980). Yet it is difficult to justify narrowing the emphases of education to that being tested as has been the practice since the earliest efforts in high stakes testing (Corbett & Wilson, 1991) and is clearly evident in the districts we studied.

School is about more than reading and math in the elementary grades. At a minimum, science and social studies should be included, but the epidemic of obesity in this country would also raise physical education to a high priority. Similarly, the arts are essential not only to our culture but to developing creative capabilities that affect the economy. In secondary schools, we test students on more subjects but we also have a more elaborated curriculum and a host of health and social issues that are being ignored in the press of high stakes testing. It is clear that this narrow focus on test scores, and the repositioning of school districts as a form of “staff” to support local school reform efforts, abdicates the districts’ responsibility as a local and public institution.

Rethinking School Districts as Public Institutions

It is clear to us that there is little hope of tinkering with educational policy to change the situation above. School districts have learned what is required of them in this current era of accountability and the abdications discussed above serve to protect them from the politics that characterize the current era of school reform. We think that what is needed is a reinvigoration of the school district as a public institution. In what follows, we are not naïve. Clearly, these ideas require substantial changes in law and in public consciousness. Moreover, given our space limitations, we cannot fully explore the wider issues. Nevertheless, we would feel remiss if we only documented the situation and did not consider the types of changes that seem to be necessary.

First, Giddens (1994) argues that dialogic democracy involves creating a public arena in which controversial ideas can be addressed through dialogue rather than via pre-existing forms of power. Dialogic democracy can be coupled with notions of generative politics that allows people to “make things happen” (p. 15) rather than things happening to them, and to develop a sense of positive welfare focused on “self-development and social care” (p. 152). In thinking of school districts as potential sites of dialogic democracy, we would ask districts to reduce their roles

as agents of state policy and to base their actions less on control while becoming more responsible for the enabling of local diverse interests to participate in dialogue regarding school advancement. From such encounters, new local politics may emerge than could enable communities to develop schools and school systems that would better serve local communities.

Second, Broder (2000) argues that direct democracy could replace representative democracy with more popular involvement. There are alternative definitions of this general idea including Barber's (1984) "strong democracy" and Sarason's (1995) "political principle" that have important differences. However, all of these ideas share the belief that citizens who have a more direct voice in political decisions will reinvigorate democracy even as they redefine it. School districts might change from being governed by elected boards to being driven by town meetings—meaning that it would be in the interest of everyone to participate as fully as possible in the deliberations over time. This would certainly undercut state control even if some might fear the vicissitudes of popular involvement. Nonetheless, direct involvement of the populace could allow school districts to be renowned by the communities and families they serve.

Third, Etzioni (1998) proposes that communitarianism balances individual liberty and rationality with a concern for the common good (Selznick, 2002). Communitarianism wishes to balance rights and responsibilities in the context of a responsive community that emphasizes a moral voice. While there are variants of communitarianism, the approach can be argued to be "deeply democratic" (Etzioni, 1998, p. xix) and shares elements of Barber's "strong democracy" and/or Broder's "direct democracy." School districts could be seen as arenas in which the common good is articulated and both rights and responsibilities are articulated and embodied. The challenge here is to see the city as a place that brings the divisive histories of race, class, gender and privilege together in a view of "one people" rather than simply a set of competing interests. It may be that the public school district is the one arena that may allow such a powerful development.

We are convinced that rethinking school districts as public institutions will ultimately be structured by how the wider society defines the future of democracy. Yet we would argue that school districts are a prime site for shaping this wider redefinition of democracy as well. School districts are local and participatory arenas, starting points for political careers, and a primary (and potentially positive) intersection of the poor with the public sector. It may be possible for communities to use school districts to hold other authorities accountable for the policies they make. Since states and the federal government have led school districts to abdicate their historical responsibilities, it may be that the public can fashion school districts as a new agency for their will.

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