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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study to explore organizational alternatives available to states for overseeing educational reform are presented in this paper. The structures and uses of eight exemplary state accountability mechanisms were analyzed. Seven of these mechanisms have already been implemented in South Carolina, Connecticut, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, New York, and California, and one is in the development stage. In each state, indepth telephone interviews were conducted with two to three state education staff. The first section analyzes the organization and design of different types of accountability mechanisms and highlights the various ways in which states approach accountability. The second section discusses how the approaches have worked by examining their uses and consequences. The concluding section proposes a set of critical components for state accountability mechanisms based on the positive experiences of the states studied. Five criteria for a state accountability mechanism include empowerment by state government, monitoring as a primary mission, independence from implementors, strong relationships with parties external to the government, and communication with multiple constituencies. Three tables are included. (29 references) (LMI)

ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS FOR STATE EDUCATION REFORM:

SOME ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

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ABSTRACT

A major challenge facing state policy makers who are demanding a high level of accountability in education is to design an accountability mechanism to track the progress of education reform. This article examines the structure and uses of eight exemplary approaches to accountability to find out what makes each mechanism work. Emerging from the analysis is a common set of design characteristics for state accountability mechanisms that form the beginnings of a new theory about state governance in education.

With the school reform movement of the 1980s, state policy makers have made major monetary and political investments in education. State budgets feature new money for education; on state agendas, improving the quality of education is a high priority. As state commitments have increased so have demands for accountability. In a recent survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures, accountability was identified as a top priority of committee chairmen, and when the 1989 state legislative sessions opened, more than thirty states had accountability issues scheduled for discussion (Pipho, 1989).

The challenge facing state policy makers who are demanding a high level of accountability is to determine which accountability mechanism is best, in what contexts and for what purposes. This essay examines a range of exemplary approaches to accountability to find out what makes each mechanism work. Emerging from this analysis is a common set of design characteristics for accountability mechanisms that form the beginnings of a new theory about state governance in education.

An accountability mechanism in education is defined as a body or group that uses educational indicators to track the progress of education policy -- are state education reforms improving schools? Its function is to oversee (monitor and evaluate) the performance of the education system and to propose needed changes to policy makers. Effective accountability mechanisms feed information into the policy cycle, improve schools, and according to the National Association of State School Boards, should be "biased toward action." Their purpose should be "not just to inform the public on the state of education, but to take significant action" (1988, p. 8).

Most states have assumed primary responsibility for accountability and so accountability mechanisms usually are established at the state level with access to the state's data bases.[1] "Assigning the State primary responsibility [for accountability] often capitalizes on the greater technical capacity and resources at that level," observed the U.S. Department of Education's State Accountability Study Group (1988, p. 16). Cibulka (1989) further found in his study of accountability systems in Illinois and South Carolina that the state is a critically important motivator of local school districts:

> ...among South Carolina school officials interviewed, virtually every superintendent was able to cite some positive change in policy and practice which ensued due to the [state] accountability process...The central point is that the state policy facilitated the likelihood that local action would be taken (p. 9).

In fact, policy studies have found that state reforms enhance local activism, as districts often respond to state initiatives by adding to them (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Verstegen, 1988).

Background

State legislatures have ultimate oversight responsibility but the responsibility, in practice, often devolves by default to legislative policy committees because a broad range of accountability mechanisms and their feasibility are not immediately known. However, the standard conclusion in research on the oversight process is that oversight is a neglected function largely because policy committees prefer spending time on more politically appealing activities. Rosenthal (1981), in a study of state legislatures, observed that the political rewards for introducing and passing new legislation are greater than those associated with monitoring implementation of existing legislation, which is time-consuming and less often leads to substantial or concrete results: "Legislators try to achieve concrete results, but oversight seldom leads to the elimination of governmental programs or to the generation of large budgetary savings" (Rosenthal, 1981, p.119). Therefore, during the legislative session, policy development activities, which give legislators opportunities to enhance their prospects for reelection (Mayhew, 1974), take center stage and little time is available for oversight of existing programs.

State departments of education also have traditionally been involved in overseeing the implementation of education policies and programs. For instance, state departments often receive requests from legislative policy committees to conduct monitoring or evaluation studies. In the 1980s, the popular "top-down" approach to education reform has put a squeeze on departments. State departments of education have more responsibilities but resources, including money and staff, remain fairly constant (Fuhrman, 1989a). Hence, state departments of education, like legislative policy committees, usually are overburdened and more interested in things other than oversight.

Purpose of the Study

The present study analyzes alternatives to the legislative policy committee model to expand the range of accountability mechanisms available to states for overseeing education. The mechanisms described here also help relieve the squeeze on state departments of education. Prior research on educational accountability has focused on developing indicators to assess the impact of education reform. The present study is distinguished by its focus on the mechanism or group who uses the indicator data and is responsible for holding school districts accountable. The research issues investigated here relate to governance, whereas most other studies of accountability focus on measurement issues.

The discussion that follows is based on an investigation of exemplary state accountability mechanisms. The intent was to include mechanisms that highlight the range of diverse approaches for overseeing education, apart from the traditional legislative policy (education) committee. The selection process was based mostly on nominations by national associations of state officials.[2] Mechanisms were nominated based on perceptions of superior performance. In addition, the chairperson and research staff for the U.S. Department of Education's State Accountability Study Group were consulted because of their familiarity with state systems. After telephone interviews, seven mechanisms in seven different states were selected for further study. It is important to note that the mechanisms included here do not represent the universe. Other state boards of education, for example, have accountability systems; Connecticut's is simply the best, as judged by the nominators. Innovative approaches outside the education arena also were considered since monitoring skills are generic[3] and most likely transferable, without much difficulty, from one policy area to another. The eighth mechanism discussed in this study is one such approach: it is emerging and has not yet been tested to monitor the performance of education reform.

Data for this study were collected primarily from telephone interviews with staff for the accountability mechanisms, using a structured guide. For each mechanism, two to three people were interviewed for sixty to ninety minutes.

The first section of this essay analyzes the organization and design of different types of accountability mechanisms and highlights the various ways in which states approach accountability. The second section discusses how the approaches have worked by examining the uses and consequences of the accountability mechanisms -- what difference have they made? The essay concludes by proposing a set of critical components for state accountability mechanisms based on the positive experiences in the states studied.

Models of Accountability Mechanisms

All eight state accountability mechanisms in this study have similar purposes: to find out how education reforms are working, and to improve schools and education. Their process for conducting accountability studies or evaluations also is remarkably similar.

First, the mechanism at the request of, or at least in consultation with, policy makers selects an evaluation topic. Next, the evaluation study is designed and conducted, either by the mechanism, itself, or by staff under the mechanism's supervision. The last step is issuing the final report. Typically, the final report is issued as a product of the accountability mechanism regardless of the mechanism's involvement in conducting the evaluation.

Although purposes and procedures are similar, those in control of the mechanisms vary considerably. Some of the accountability mechanisms are housed in the legislative branch; one in the executive branch; and several use resources in the private sector. The mechanisms also differ in terms of the "directors" of accountability: they vary from generalists to functional specialists (evaluation experts) to policy specialists (education experts). For purposes of discussion, the mechanisms are grouped under four types of models, depending on who is in charge: the legislative oversight committee model, the executive branch model, the partnership model, and the third-party model. One mechanism under the partnership model joins the education and business communities; the other couples state and local systems. Mechanisms under the third-party model involve management consultants from universities or private accounting firms.

Prior research on legislative oversight (Bibby, 1968; Kaiser, 1977; Ogul, 1976; Rosenthal, 1981) has identified a number of institutional or structural factors associated with successful oversight including:

- Legal authority -- This is the most obvious of the factors since without authority oversight efforts are minimal.
- Status of the oversight body -- The higher the status of the members of the oversight body, the more opportunities members will have to influence oversight. Usually the higher a member's status, the greater the access to resources needed to conduct oversight.
- Member priorities -- Members of oversight bodies are faced with a variety of obligations. How important the member perceives an area determines how much attention that area receives. Therefore, if oversight is a top priority, it will receive a great deal of attention.
- Staff resources -- An adequate staff and the willingness to use it are vital factors for effective oversight; without them oversight is virtually impossible.

These oversight factors provide a useful framework for analyzing the strengths of the accountability mechanisms in this study. All eight mechanisms, not surprisingly, have legal authority or a statutory basis for oversight activity; the other oversight factors are stressed more in some states than in others. Table 1 summarizes features relating to these factors for all eight accountability mechanisms.

Insert Table 1 about here

Legislative Oversight Committee Model

While three exemplary mechanisms that are part of the legislative branch are all joint house-senate oversight committees, they involve the legislature's "education experts" (members who serve on education committees) to varying degrees. The Select Committee on Education in Tennessee combines eight education experts with eight finance committee members. In Texas, legislative leaders in the house and senate (e.g., speaker of the house, lieutenant governor, finance committee chairs) comprise the majority of the ten-member Legislative Education Board, with only two seats reserved for education experts -- the chairs of the two education committees.

The third mechanism in this group exploits program evaluation and auditing committees commonly found in many state legislatures. As described here, the mechanism is based on Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission but has not yet been tested to oversee education reform on a regular basis.[4] Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, like the Legislative Leader Committee in Texas, is controlled by generalists. In Virginia, however, members typically stay on until they leave the legislature (some have served since the commission's inception in 1973), so many become _de facto_ evaluation specialists during their tenure. (Committee staff have expertise in evaluation but typically are policy generalists.) The committee, by law, must draw a portion of its membership (about 50 per cent) from the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees. "The commission's direct link to the two money committees," one staff member observed, "makes the commission a prestigious assignment and the most powerful legislators want to serve." The committee's membership, like the mechanism in Texas, traditionally includes ranking house and senate leadership (chairs of the fiscal committees, majority/minority leaders, president pro tem).

Not only does the status of the committee facilitate membership recruitment, but it also is a factor associated with oversight activity. Bibby (1968) and Ogul (1976) in their studies of Congress found that oversight is more likely to occur when committee assignments are sought by legislators with more than average competence and when members have seniority and training/experience in Congress. The higher a member's status, the greater the access to resources needed to conduct oversight. Furthermore, legislators seeking assignments to oversight committees most likely regard the enterprise as important and so are willing to devote resources to oversight activities.

A second strength in the design of the mechanisms following the legislative oversight committee model is their limited scope of authority. Prior research on state legislatures (Wohlstetter, 1989) shows that oversight is not neglected by legislative committees when oversight is among the committee's stated priorities. The mission statement relieves members of their policy development responsibilities and, in effect, gives them permission to spend time monitoring and, equally important, to claim credit with their constituencies for such activities. The accountability mechanisms established in Tennessee and Texas in the 1980s as part of the state's major education reform act have as their primary mission the oversight of education. Since the Tennessee and Texas oversight committees do not raise legislation, members are not distracted by immediate concerns as standing committees are.

The evaluation-audit committee is limited by function to oversight -- the committee does not have bill raising authority, for example -- but is responsible for overseeing seven different areas of state government, only one of which is education. In a recent study of education committees in eleven states, Rich Jones of NCSL warns: "Legislators must realize that a committee can afford to pay attention to only a few programs a year (1988, p. 106)." In Virginia, the committee's agenda is limited, subject-wise, by a review cycle that focuses committee activity on particular policy areas. For example, when education was evaluated over a two-and-a-half to three-year period, <u>some</u> (not all) of the other policy areas also were reviewed.

Studies of Congress by Bibby (1968) and Ogul (1976) suggest that oversight is more likely to occur when staff resources are sufficient in number and expertise, and when committee funds are adequate. State government expert, Alan Rosenthal, agrees and adds that the legislative oversight model is best suited to state contexts where committee staff and staff leadership are strong and legislative support, in terms of committee membership and funding, are strong as well. On all these dimensions, the evaluation-audit committee alternative is strongest among the three legislative oversight committee mechanisms, having an independent operating budget, its own staff (with experience and advanced degrees) and strong staff leadership.

The staff in Virginia, moreover, are evaluation experts who pride themselves on independence from the legislature as well as the executive branch, as one staff member explains:

> Division chiefs and the director are the only staff that interact with legislative members. Work is done totally outside the view of legislative members. The staff receive input at the front-end, and typically are very secretive about their work, having no contact with the legislature until the final briefing.

Although independence enhances credibility, staff without substantive expertise may be unfamiliar with the issues being evaluated, so committee staff must educate themselves about each program they review which tends to lengthen the study process. In Virginia, committee staff typically spend two to three months at the beginning of the study process reading documents from both the academic and professional literatures and conducting 200 to 300 interviews. Another strategy is to have education committee members who know the problem areas define the focus of the evaluation, since it is these committee members who field complaints by constituents and interest groups. Their participation would stir legislators' interest in the evaluation, which would later benefit the program evaluation and audit committees when they must work through standing committees to enact legislative changes. Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission system provides for subcommittees with members of substantive standing committees, such as education, involved in selecting and scheduling topics, and coordinating studies with the standing committees that have jurisdiction over the subjects under review.

Having access to staff, as in Tennessee,[5] probably is not sufficient for accountability mechanisms. According to Anderson and Elliott (1986), who studied oversight in the South Carolina General Assembly, a committee needs staff that are answerable only to the committee to avoid conflicting loyalties to groups other than the committee. In no case should the committee's work receive secondary priority. Furthermore, without assigned staff, committee members have no one to press or prod them to focus on oversight.

In addition to providing resources for oversight, appropriating staff and money establishes a contractual relationship between the legislature and the mechanism. Contracts can be implied such as in Virginia where the legislature relies on one of its own committees to serve as the accountability mechanism, issuing in effect an in-house contract. Other times the contract is explicit as when the legislature enlists an independent consultant (see "the third-party model," p. 21). Regardless of type, a contract helps establish an audience for monitoring information. The government has a vested interest in what the mechanism produces since they have committed to a contract, allocated resources, and paid in advance for the services. Furthermore, contracts often conclude with public hearings or meetings which better enable the mechanisms to feed information into the policy cycle by providing them with a public forum for presenting their findings.

Executive Branch Model

Accountability mechanisms housed in the executive branch are more easily subject to charges of "conflicts of interest" than mechanisms that are independent of implementing agencies. The accountability mechanism described in this section illustrates how the executive branch can retain some independence and effectively monitor education reform.

The state of Connecticut vests responsibility for accountability with its state board of education. The nine-member board is appointed by the governor, and according to one board member: "Being appointed makes it easier for us to stay out of politics. We don't have campaign promises to fulfill or axes to grind." The board keeps its distance from the legislature, too. The commissioner carries the board's agenda to the legislature as well as testifies before committees on the board's behalf.

The board likewise maintains independence from the education community. Board members typically are not professional educators or from education constituencies. In 1988-89, the board included: three former legislators; three representatives from the private sector (an attorney, businessman, and physician); and three former local school board members. As one board member explains, "The state board views itself as representative of the general citizenry who holds educators accountable." Indeed, the board takes positions that often are at odds with the teachers unions' views. In the recent past, the board set high (not minimum) standards for students and teachers, and also rejected a proposal to create a separate teacher standards board that unions strongly supported.

The Connecticut State Board of Education derives oversight powers from its statutorily mandated mission that charges the board with "promoting the improvement of education in the state...and reporting on the condition of the public schools and the quality of instruction." Oversight, however, is not the sole or even a primary mission of the state board. The board conducts oversight in addition to its other responsibilities of setting policy and standards, and providing leadership and services to local school districts.

Prior research has shown that political variables, such as the balance of power between the state and local districts, influence the development, implementation and monitoring of education reform (Fuhrman, 1989b; Wohlstetter, 1989). When states traditionally have been leaders in education policy, state control of education through legislative mandates and oversight is accepted practice. Conversely, in Connecticut where local control traditions are strong, a specially-created, state-controlled accountability mechanism (as in Tennessee or Texas) most likely would not be politically viable because of the implied loss of local discretion.

A major contributor to the state board's success as an accountability mechanism is the wealth of the state, which Connecticut uses partly to enhance staff professionalism among state agencies. The department of education's division of research and evaluation, which serves as staff to the board, boasts 70 professionals, status (a division, not a unit), and sophistication (many staff hold doctorates; the division chief, a Ph.D. from Stanford). Indeed, the state board of education mechanism seems best suited to a context where strong local control norms inhibit the creation of an independent accountability mechanism, but where the state has sufficient wealth to beef up department resources specifically for accountability activities.

The governance structure in Connecticut also is very compatible and supportive of the state board as overseer. The board appoints the commissioner of education and the commissioner manages the state department of education. The state board, in effect, functions as a board of trustees for the state department of education, with the commissioner in the role of CEO. A professional educator, the commissioner serves as staff to the board. Members rely on him to formulate ideas and bring policy options to them. Also, since the commissioner holds press conferences and has a good relationship with the media, the board relies on him "to get the word out -- to give the public the sense the board is monitoring the condition of education." Communicating findings beyond the education community also keeps education reform salient on the state's agenda.

In the executive branch model, unlike many accountability mechanisms, final reports are issued as products of the staff (state department of education), not the mechanism. According to board members, this arrangement makes practical sense since the accountability unit is located near, and has direct access to, the data bases from which evaluations and recommendations are developed, which avoids duplication of efforts and encourages reliable and responsible reporting. Board members further argue that problems of subjectivity and errors in data collection are tempered by information reports to the public which act as checks on the system.

Partnership Model

While other models feature accountability directors in one branch of government at the state level, the two variations of the partnership model rely on pairings. South Carolina's accountability mechanism joins the executive and legislative branches, along with the education and business communities; New York's joins the state and local governments.

The South Carolina mechanism includes three different components, all of which were established by the state's major education reform act of 1984 and amended in 1989 by the "Target 2000 -- School Reform for the Next Decade" Act. One component, the Select Committee to Oversee the Implementation of the Education Improvement Act, is under the direction of the legislature and is composed mostly of legislative leaders, as in Texas. The executive branch also participates with the governor, lieutenant governor and state superintendent of education serving on the select committee. The second component is the Business-Education Subcommittee. The group is a subcommittee and "the working arm" of the Business-Education Partnership for Excellence in Education whose original members were appointed by the governor in the early 1980s to develop a plan for education reform, which became the South Carolina Education Improvement Act of 1984. Elected by the partnership, the subcommittee's membership must be composed of ten business and civic leaders, six educators, and four legislators. The third component of South Carolina's mechanism is the Division of Public Accountability established in the state department of education as part of the 1984 reform package.

The primary mission for all three components is oversight of the Education Improvement Act (EIA). Although the mission is shared, functions are distinct. The division of public accountability, which has data capabilities and access to the department of education's data bank, is responsible for preparing an annual assessment report on student performance (<u>What is the Penny Buying for South Carolina?</u>), for the subcommittee and the select committee. The subcommittee functions as an independent monitoring body representing the public. For example, the subcommittee serves as an advisory committee to the division of public accountability and is responsible for providing citizens -- this includes the Business-Education Partnership which by law meets quarterly -- and the state legislature with an evaluation of the progress of EIA's implementation. The select committee is the EIA oversight committee in the legislature and its annual report keeps members well-informed:

> The annual report includes a review of all oversight activities conducted by the Committee, and reports findings and conclusions resulting from program reviews, studies and evaluations. Specific program-related issues for which recommendations are proposed by the Committee are also included for consideration (Research Director, EIA Select Committee).

The select committee also functions as a clearinghouse for all proposed EIA changes: legislative amendments and budget proposals are considered by standing committees only after the select committee's recommendation or approval.

Linkages to various constituencies, both within and outside government, have been a key strength of South Carolina's mechanism, according to the executive director of the subcommittee. Research on implementation suggests that education reforms need time to mature, and that changes in practice and performance lag behind electoral cycles (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). As a result, the original coalitions that work to support education reform may be broken up by elections before the reforms mature. The newly-elected leaders, moreover, may not have the same commitment to the reforms as their predecessors (Thomas, 1987). South Carolina's diverse membership, which includes business and community representatives, educators, the governor and legislators, helps sustain momentum for the reforms: the more committed reformers prod the less committed to stay on the bandwagon. According to the executive director, the membership also is helpful in "getting the word out" to various constituencies about educational progress, and such communication has been instrumental in retaining a broad base of support for the reforms six years after their enactment.

New York's accountability mechanism pairs state education specialists in the executive branch -- the Board of Regents (comparable to a state board of education), the commissioner of education and the department of education -- with local school districts. The mechanism, which began a two-year pilot test during Fall 1989, was established earlier that year by the Board of Regents, New York's chief education policy maker[6], as part of its Excellence and Accountability Program (EAP). According to one of its creators, a key principle of the program is that accountability should be primarily a local function, with state intervention only when a breakdown in the system occurs.

The primary role of the partners at the state level is to set broad policy guidelines and minimum achievement standards for local districts. In contrast to state-controlled mechanisms in the study sample, New York's establishes individual schools as the locus of accountability based on the idea that local districts should be accountable foremost to local constituencies.[7] Individual schools will have flexibility to create their own educational programs and monitor outcomes. Local districts, in effect, will be allowed to operate their own accountability systems, provided that school performance meets the minimum standards set by the Board of Regents. The state department of education's Office of Quality

Assurance will play mainly a supportive role, offering technical assistance to help districts create programs and develop standards of excellence for their individual educational plans.

The commissioner's role with the accountability mechanism will be reactive in that the commissioner will step in only in response to a local district's request or because of poor performance. The powers vested in the commissioner are significant. For example, the commissioner has the power to deregulate school districts on an individual basis. According to EAP, any district can request a variance to waive, for instance, a reporting requirement if the district can demonstrate that what it wants is better than what the state prescribes. The commissioner also has the authority to intervene when local school districts fall below minimum state achievement standards and continue to decline for three years. For poor performing schools, the commissioner can revoke their state license, force the school to shut down, and takeover the responsibility of providing a quality education for the students.

EAP was designed on the assumption that a fully and accurately informed public is an essential component of accountability. A key strength of the mechanism, therefore, is the extent to which monitoring activities and results are communicated to multiple constituencies. State guidelines for the pilot test require schools to solicit input from community members (e.g., parents, business representatives, cultural institutions) in developing their individual educational plans, and also to publish annual reports and present the results (district-wide and school-by-school) at local public meetings. With an informed public, the reforms benefit from volunteer monitors (the public) who track implementation and sound alarms when the reforms are not working or need improving (Wohlstetter, 1990).

At the state level, the Office of Quality Assurance will develop and maintain a second data base for each district, in addition to the district's own, composed of information contributed by every school district. This state data base will be used to compare districts across the state and to develop the minimum achievement standards with which all districts must comply. Finally, with the benefit of its own public relations unit, the Board of Regents plans to communicate results to various constituencies through published reports and public hearings held throughout the state about twenty times a year. From the literature on oversight (see p. 7), it is also likely that publicity by the Board, whose members enjoy considerable statewide visibility and status, will help elevate oversight on local district agendas.

Third-Party Model

Conflicts of interest are a problem for accountability mechanisms in education. Often program administrators -- state departments of education and local school districts -- are also responsible for collecting evaluation data. David Savage of the Los Angeles Times sees the dual role of implementor and evaluator affecting reliability:

> When something called the National Assessment of Educational Progress puts out a report saying that students today are reading better, a reporter and his/her editors tend to view that finding as reliable. When the Los Angeles school district puts out a report saying that its students are faring much better, the reporters and editors are at least mildly skeptical (1989, p. 22).

To solve the problem, Donald Thomas, former director of the South Carolina Education Department's Division of Public Accountability, proposes contracting with a third-party to achieve effective accountability.

> I think it is just a given that agencies of government have a tendency to serve themselves rather than the clients they were established to serve...I think once the accountability portion of any agency is subsumed by that agency the chances for abuse are far greater than if the accountability program is an independent process (Thomas, 1987).

The fourth group of accountability mechanisms features subcontracting with third parties to evaluate education reforms. One mechanism relies on a university consortium to track progress while the other mechanism utilizes performance auditors in independent accounting firms.

The university consortium mechanism originated in 1983 with PACE -- Policy Analysis for California Education. There are now about 20 states that use similar mechanisms, to varying degrees, to evaluate school reforms and state education practices.

PACE's priority or primary mission is not oversight. In fact, program evaluation is only one of the consortium's five, self-assigned tasks. The other four are: 1) collecting and distributing objective information about the conditions of education in California; 2) analyzing state education policy issues and the policy environment; 3) providing technical support to policy makers; and 4) facilitating discussion of education issues. To date, PACE has conducted one large-scale evaluation of California's major education reform, Senate Bill 813, which was enacted in 1983.

The directors of PACE, most of whom are professors at schools of education, are education experts and closely tied to California's education and political communities. "The four PACE directors have over one hundred years of combined experience working with state education and political leaders," reports one director. This experience enhances PACE's status and credibility within the education community. Moreover, the university-base helps PACE project an image of objectivity and neutrality, as Savage of the Los Angeles Times observes:

> Michael Kirst and Jim Guthrie [directors of PACE] can get more attention for their reports because they are professors at Stanford and Berkeley, respectively. If they both taught remedial English at West Los Angeles Community College, their findings would be given less credence in the press, solely for that reason. When looking at a research report, editors and reporters want to know about the reputation of the authors, their affiliations and the basis for their findings (1989, pp. 22-23).

Unlike other accountability mechanisms in the sample, PACE directors are involved in all aspects of conducting evaluations, from selecting topics to data collection, analysis and report writing. PACE studies are staffed by education specialists, usually faculty and graduate students from the member institutions.

Another difference with PACE is its independence from the state: PACE is not empowered by the government to conduct oversight. Unlike many other mechanisms, the consortium is a private research organization, not a legislatively-mandated body. The government also plays a small funding role. Although the PACE evaluation of Senate Bill 813 was a state contract, most PACE studies are self-initiated, not government-authorized. On-going financial support is provided by a private foundation and this arrangement enhances PACE's independence.

Without a state mandate, PACE relies on personal contacts to interest policy makers in its studies. The directors have strong personal and professional relationships with all key state policy makers, including the state superintendent, the state board and state department of education, the governor's office and the legislature. According to one director, "The contacts help us from outside the system feed important study findings into the policy process." PACE also has a "superb relationship with the media" and has developed somewhat of an expertise in dealing with the press. For example, press conferences are held for all major reports to comment on the findings. The publicity, of course, adds visibility to the issues and puts pressure on the policy makers to act or, at least, pay attention.

The last accountability mechanism in the sample creates explicit government contracts with performance auditors in the private sector. This mechanism has not yet been tested in the field of education; however, the concept is not new. In fact, most Big-Eight accounting firms have performance audit divisions and some smaller firms specialize in performance audits.

Local school districts in a number of states (e.g., California, Maryland, Virginia) currently are required by statute to undergo independent financial audits. The performance audit mechanism, proposed here, expands current audit requirements into the performance arena. This idea also is not new. State mandates for performance audits already are used in the field of transportation, for example, where requirements call for independent performance audits of service providers every three years.[8] Like other mechanisms in this study, performance audits of local school districts would focus on the extent to which program results have been achieved, with an aim toward improving the education system.

One strength of the mechanism is its independence from the implementors of education reform, namely departments of education and local school districts. As evaluation specialists, performance auditors arguably would have fewer conflicts of interest than mechanisms with ties to the education community.

Despite its independence, the performance auditor mechanism still would depend on monitoring data typically collected by implementing agencies. (Even PACE, which does a substantial amount of original data collection, relies heavily on state department of education data.) Following the transit industry model, the credibility of the audit could be enhanced by having performance auditors first focus on compliance questions -- is the school district collecting and reporting statistics appropriately? -- and then focus on management issues including trends over a three-year period and recommendations for administrative and legislative changes.

Another unique feature of this mechanism would be the specificity of its legislative mandate. In the transit industry, authorizing legislation specifies data elements that transit operators must collect (e.g. vehicle miles, in-service mechanical failures), and assessment measures (ratios of data elements) that auditors must use to evaluate performance (e.g., number of vehicle miles per in-service failures), in addition to a three-year evaluation cycle.

A similar approach to education may be just around the corner. Twenty-three states already have in place indicator systems that offer a smorgasbord of data elements, according to a 1987 survey by the Council of Chief State School Officers. And within the research community, attention is focused on creating new educational quality indicators to assess the impact of reform (see, for example, Kaagan & Coley, 1989 and Shavelson et al., 1987).

Uses and Consequences of Accountability Mechanisms

Weiss (1989), in her study of congressional committees as users of analytic information, developed "the categories of use" method to analyze the impact of congressional committees. As overseers evaluating performance, accountability mechanisms are, by definition, users of analytic information. This information, according to Weiss (p. 425), can serve four main functions:

- Support -- certifies that the pre-existing position is right

- Warning -- signals that a problem is (or is not) severe
- Guidance -- indicates better alternatives
- Enlightenment -- offers new constructs, new ways of thinking about issues

Respondents' observations about how the accountability mechanisms actually work suggest they can serve any of the four functions but tend to concentrate on the first three, as Weiss found with the committees in Congress. In addition, each mechanism in the sample has a dominant function, one that is performed almost to the exclusion of the others. Some mechanisms apparently serve one function better than others. Table 2 provides a summary of the functions of accountability mechanisms, based on responses to the question, "what difference -- symbolic and tangible -- has the group made to the state generally and to education reform, in particular?"[9]

Insert Table 2 about here

Across the mechanisms, the most common function is guidance where monitoring information clarified legislative intent, or led to legislative provisions or amendments. In all instances cited by respondents, information use focused on detailed issues rather than broad policy strategy. The mechanisms also tended to have strong connections with education committees, since following up on the mechanism's advice usually required legislative action.

Several mechanisms in the study sample combined the warning and guidance functions. For example, in South Carolina when the state department of education's Division of Public Accountability discovered that 45 percent of the state's high school students failed all three parts of the exit exam required for graduation, the division recommended to the legislature that a priority order be established for serving compensatory and remedial students so that those who needed instruction most would be served first. As a result, the EIA Compensatory and Remedial Program was redirected from the elementary schools, where the focus had been on early detection, to providing high school students who failed one, two or three parts of the exit exam with remedial instruction.

The function that was next in frequency is support. Some respondents cited cases where accountability mechanisms helped strengthen the coalitions supporting education reform. In Texas, where the legislature meets only every other year, the LEB has been instrumental "in keeping education issues on the front burner and alive with the public and the press." In South Carolina, where business community representatives serve with educators and legislators on the Business-Education Subcommittee, the mechanism has helped retain significant business interest in education. "Business has been a major partner in selling education reform," commented the state superintendent of education. The mechanism also has fostered healthy working relationships among participants.

> 'There were times, early on, when there would be a C.E.O. sitting next to a teacher, and they would barely speak to one another,' said Terry Peterson, the subcommittee's executive director. 'Now, they'll sit by each other and talk' (Flax,

1989).

Informing the public about the progress of reforms also can lend support by reinforcing reform advocates' confidence in their stand and by weakening opponents' support. The PACE study of Senate Bill 813 in California purposefully did not address whether or not the reforms were improving education. Entitled How State Education Reform Can Improve Secondary Schools, the PACE study sampled only schools that were improving and documented the reform's benefits (Odden & Marsh, 1988). PACE findings featured in some 40 or 50 newspapers invigorated public interest in education in California and also provided ammunition to reform advocates' policy debates at the state level.

The final function is enlightenment, in which mechanisms help change the way people think about issues. One substantive illustration mentioned was in Tennessee with the issue of equity. Through its analysis of monitoring data, the Select Oversight Committee on Education discovered significant differences between small-rural and big-city school districts regarding programs and funding. The oversight committee's report received considerable press coverage, and rural districts learned for the first time that programs being implemented in the big cities were unavailable in their districts. Since then a lawsuit on behalf of small school systems has been filed against the state to remedy the inequities between Tennessee's rural and big-city districts.

Conclusions and Implications

As mentioned at the outset, the purpose of this study was to expand the range of organizational alternatives available to states for overseeing education reform. The underlying rationale was that if accountability mechanisms effectively monitored performance and proposed needed changes to policy makers, educational practice would improve.

Emerging from the analysis of the eight exemplary accountability mechanisms is a set of criteria that apply to the design of any mechanism, regardless of the state governance structure for education or political context. The criteria propose that any effective accountability mechanism should:

(1) Be Empowered by State Government. Accountability mechanisms that receive a government contract to monitor education reform employ the government as an interested audience for their reports. The government has committed resources (money and staff) in advance and will want to know the return on their investment. Furthermore, presenting findings in public forums, such as committee hearings or meetings, enhances the likelihood that monitoring information will impact policy.

(2) Have Monitoring or Oversight as a Primary Mission. Specially-created accountability mechanisms whose main task is oversight spend more time monitoring than re-tooled policy making bodies that have simply added oversight to their other responsibilities. Specially-created mechanisms attract members who consider the oversight enterprise important and

members can claim credit with their constituencies for such activities when oversight is the primary mission.

(3) Be Independent from Implementors. Accountability mechanisms that remain separate from implementors of the reforms do not evaluate their own performance and, thus, at least avoid the perception of "conflicts of interest." The mechanism's image of objectivity and neutrality, moreover, enhances the credibility of their reports.

(4) Have Strong Relationships with Other Policy Actors and With Leaders Outside Government. Accountability mechanisms with members who represent various constituencies help sustain momentum for the reforms by expanding interest beyond only a few groups. Strong connections with state policy makers also increases the likelihood that monitoring information will be acted upon since following up on the mechanism's advice often requires government action.

(5) Communicate Findings to Multiple Constituencies. Accountability mechanisms that actively publicize monitoring results help stimulate and maintain interest in education reform. Publicity also puts pressure on policy makers to act or, at least, pay attention to the reforms.

Table 3 indicates the extent to which the mechanisms in the study sample possess these five characteristics.

Insert Table 3 about here

Taken together these design elements form the beginnings of a new theory about state governance in education that can guide policy makers decisions' about who should be responsible for accountability and how they should be organized.

Current events indicate that states increasingly are deciding to deregulate high-achieving school districts and takeover "academically bankrupt" districts. Accountability mechanisms control the information from which such decisions are made. This preliminary study suggests that different types of accountability mechanisms are suited to various contexts and purposes; none of the eight accountability mechanisms is best. Further research is needed to elaborate on the capabilities of each mechanism, including the relationship between the type of mechanism and particular accountability activities undertaken, and the effects of such activities on education policy and practice.

Table 1.
Key Features of Accountability Mechanisms

Models & Variations	Composition	Scope of Authority	Staffing
Legislative Oversight Committee Model			
Education-Finance Committee (Tennessee)	16 legislators. 8 from education committees & 8 from finance committees.	Single policy area.	No independent staff. Use standing committee staff & Speaker's staff.
Legislative Leader Committee (Texas)	10 legislators. Majority are legislative leaders. Also includes house & senate education committee chairs.	Single policy area.	1990 appropriations included separate staff for LEB.
Evaluation-Audit Committee (Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission)	14 legislators. 7 must be members of house & senate finance committees.	7 areas of state government: education, enterprises, general government, individual & family services, justice, resource & economic development, transportation.	27 research staff.

Table 1, (cont'd).

Models & Variations	Composition	Scope of Authority	Staffing
Executive Branch Model			
State Board of Education (Connecticut)	9 members appointed by governor.	Single policy area.	No independent staff. Use Commissioner's staff & SDE's division of research & evaluation (70 staff).
Partnership Model			
Education-Business Partnership (South Carolina)	12 on Select Committee & 20 on Business-Education Subcommittee. Members include governor, SPI, legislators & representatives from business & education communities.	Single policy area.	a) Division of Public Accountability (SDE): 11.5 FTE. b) Select Committee: 1 FT director c) Business-Education Subcommittee: 1 PT director & 1 PT administrative assistant.
State-Local Partnership (New York)	16 on Board of Regents, appointed by governor, & individual school districts.	Single policy area.	a) Board of Regents: Commissioner & SDE's Office of Quality Assurance. b) Individual School Districts: staffing at the discretion of local districts.

Table 1, (cont'd).

Models & Variations	Composition	Scope of Authority	Staffing
Third-Party Model			
University Consortium (Policy Analysis for California Education)	4 professors from public & private schools of education.	Single policy area.	Faculty & graduate students from member institutions. Ranges from 6 to 10.
Performance Auditors	Performance auditors with private accounting firms.	Multiple policy areas.	Subcontracts with performance auditors in private accounting firms. Performance audit teams range from 2 to 10, depending on number of service providers evaluated.

Table 2.
Functions Served By Accountability Mechanisms

Models & Variations	Guidance	Support	Warning	Enlightenment
Legislative Oversight Committee Model				
Education-Finance Committee (Tennessee)	D*			X
Legislative Leader Committee (Texas)	D	X		
Evaluation-Audit Committee (Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission)	D		D	
Executive Branch Model				
State Board of Education (Connecticut)	D	X		
Partnership Model				
Education-Business Partnership (South Carolina)	D	X		

Table 2, (cont'd).

Models & Variations	Guidance	Support	Warning	Enlightenment
Third Party Model				
University Consortium (Policy Analysis for California Education)	X	D		
Performance Auditors	X		D	

* D denotes dominant function.

Table 3.
Ratings for Accountability Mechanisms on Critical Components

Models & Variations	Be Empowered by State Government	Have Monitoring or Oversight as a Primary Mission	Be Independent from Implementors	Have Strong Relationships with Other Policy Actors and with Leaders Outside Government	Communi- cate Fin ings to Multiple Constitu- encies
Legislative Oversight Committee Model					
Education-Finance Committee (Tennessee)	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Legislative Leader Committee (Texas)	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Evaluation-Audit Committee (Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission)	High	High	High	Low	Moderate

Table 3, (cont'd).

Models & Variations	Be Empowered by State Government	Have Monitoring or Oversight as a Primary Mission	Be Independent from Implementors	Have Strong Relationships with Other Policy Actors and with Leaders Outside Government	Communi-cate Fin ings to Multiple Constitu encies
Executive Branch Model					
State Board of Education (Connecticut)	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate
Partnership Model					
Education-Business Partnership (South Carolina)	High	High	Moderate	High	High
State-Local Partnership (New York)	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Moderate	High
Third-Party Model					
University Consortium (Policy Analysis for California Education)	Low	Moderate	High	High	High

NOTES

1. The U.S. Department of Education's State Accountability Study Group reported that 35 states have provisions requiring the state to maintain education data bases or performance accountability systems (1988, Table 7: Key Dimensions of the 50 State Performance Accountability Systems, pp. 28-29).

2. The national associations included the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the National Governors' Association.

3. The program or substantive knowledge of evaluators has been de-emphasized in the literature on evaluation practice. Program knowledge was not included among the attributes necessary and sufficient for sound evaluations in a report by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1981). Furthermore, the general conclusion from the evaluation literature is that program knowledge appears to have little bearing on the degree to which evaluation information is used (Alkin & Associates, 1985).

4. Part of the appeal of the evaluation-audit committee mechanism is that program evaluation and auditing committees are already institutionalized: over 40 state legislatures have some form of program evaluation unit in place (Jones, 1988). They also are underutilized in the education area (Pethtel, 1985; Wohlstetter, 1987).

5. Like the mechanism in Tennessee, the Legislative Education Board in Texas initially was not given authority to hire its own staff. However, during the 1990 session, the Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 1 which, among other things, authorized separate staff for the Legislative Education Board.

6. The Board of Regents is composed of sixteen members, appointed by the governor, who serve on a part-time basis. The position of president of the board or "chancellor" is full-time and salaried. The Board appoints the commissioner of education who acts as head of the state department of education which, in turn, serves as staff to the Board.

7. There are nine states, in addition to New York, where the state and local school districts share accountability responsibilities. Two other states, Minnesota and Vermont, require that local districts design their own performance accountability systems (U.S. Department of Education, 1988, Table 7, pp. 28-29).

8. References to performance audits of the transit industry are based on statutory requirements in the state of California.

9. New York's state-local partnership mechanism began, on a pilot basis, during Fall 1989. Since information is not yet available for judging its use, the mechanism is not included in Table 2.

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