

# Leadership in the Age of Accountability

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*by Thomas R. Guskey*

Many school leaders today, not to mention many teachers, view “accountability” as a loathsome political monster. Looming over educators, insensitive to the many problems they face, it wields the carrot of rewards in one hand and the club of sanctions in the other. Some educators even blame accountability for perverting their noble purposes, twisting their sensibilities, and corrupting their integrity.

Reviewing reports of cheating on state assessments, a keynote speaker at a recent public forum stated that accountability systems are responsible for “making good people bad and bad people worse” (Chester 2005, 3). He concluded that the accountability imposed by recent federal and state laws had negatively affected educators’ ethics and professionalism, although no discussion ensued about any evidence of cheating before current accountability measures took effect.

Is accountability truly to blame for this alleged distortion and corruption? That’s hard to imagine, because accountability programs in education are really nothing new. Efforts to make educators more accountable for results have been under way in some states for more than three decades. Most people would agree, however, that what brought education accountability to the forefront was the No Child Left Behind act (U.S. Congress 2001), which made accountability its centerpiece. And even the most adamant critics of NCLB would concede that regardless of the outcome of future elections, education accountability in one form or another is likely here to stay.

## **“No Child Left Behind”**

The NCLB accountability system seeks to improve all children’s education by identifying schools that need improvement and taking corrective action. As nearly every school leader knows, the system stipulates that all students should achieve a state-defined “proficient” or better level in mathematics and language arts. Annual, measurable standards in

those two areas must lead to 100 percent proficiency by 2014 (Porter, Linn, and Trimble 2005).

Leaders also know that NCLB requires schools to meet specific “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) goals based on the percentage of students achieving at or above state-established proficiency standards. Those academic-achievement goals must be met not only by the total group of students in each school but also by student subgroups: the economically disadvantaged; members of major racial and ethnic groups; the disabled; and those with limited English-language proficiency. Although NCLB and associated interpretations by the U.S. Department of Education specify many AYP requirements, states retain latitude in determining several critical features of AYP. For example, states decide what performance levels will be considered proficient—and recent analyses have documented immense disparities in state definitions of proficient achievement (Linn 2003; Linn, Baker, and Betebenner 2002; Peterson and Hess 2005).



## **Accountability and Education Reform**

But why is accountability featured so prominently in these education-reform initiatives? And why do so many educational leaders view accountability negatively? After all, accountability implies simply looking at evidence, analyzing results, and assigning or attributing responsibility—all seemingly neutral activities.

Analysts suggest that two beliefs of policymakers and legislators have fostered recent accountability measures. The first was nurtured outside education: the widespread business model of setting clear targets and attaching incentives for reaching them. It seemed only natural to the decision-makers that applying those same principles to education would produce comparable improvement. No evidence shows, however, that these principles work well in educational contexts, and there are many reasons to doubt that they can be applied directly without significant adaptation (Stecher and Hamilton 2002).

The second belief stems from frustration with educators' seemingly steadfast refusal to accept accountability—specifically, responsibility for student learning outcomes. Despite strong evidence that teachers influence student learning and achievement significantly (see Hanushek 2004; Hershberg 2005; Sanders, Saxton, and Horn 1997; Wright, Horn, and Sanders 1997), many educators and education organizations staunchly oppose using measures of student learning as primary criteria in evaluating teacher quality.

Obviously, many different factors affect student learning, and many of them lie outside educators' control. A prominent Educational Testing Service report showed, for example, that a range of factors, the majority of them external to schools, may contribute to gaps in student achievement (Barton 2003). Denying the role of outside influences will not endow school leaders and teachers with the capacity to improve student learning, and efforts to address home- and community-based challenges must continue (Rothstein 2004). Nevertheless, the impediments of nonacademic environments should never lower expectations about what educators can do to help students learn well, nor should such factors be used to disavow either responsibility for helping all students learn or accountability for what they achieve.

## **Succeeding with Accountability**

Improving education today requires an entirely different view of the matter. Instead of viewing accountability as a straitjacket that hinders teaching, school leaders and teachers should embrace the opportunity to show various constituents the positive results. That will require two fundamental changes: new courage to ask difficult questions constantly, and new skills to find honest answers to those difficult questions.

*Constant Questioning.* Understanding why students perform as they do and getting to the root of existing teaching or learning problems require more detailed assessment and analysis than annual state assessments afford. Instead of reviewing large-scale assessment results once a year, administrators and teachers should begin analyzing classroom assessment results weekly. State assessment results come too infrequently and too late to make much difference in student learning. School leaders and teachers need to supplement such intermittent, external assessment results with ongoing, formative classroom data, both to acquire the deeper understanding they need to improve the learning process and to obtain consistent information about student progress throughout the school year (Herman, Baker, and Linn 2004).

That means school leaders must have the courage to ask tough questions: “Who is not learning?” “What are they not learning?” “Why?” More important, they cannot be satisfied asking those questions once a year. They must instead ask them after every assignment is evaluated, every quiz corrected, and every project scored. They should encourage teachers to attend regular faculty meetings prepared to share and discuss the results of their most recent classroom assessments and to include samples of student work that add meaning to the results. Faculty meetings can then become opportunities to explore problems and difficulties openly, as well as to share improvements and celebrate successes.

This kind of courage carries a new level of shared responsibility and trust. It also requires a new kind of leadership that emphasizes collaborative strength and mutual interest in all students’ success. Dedicated, hard-working educators are sometimes tempted to protect their positive professional self-images when explaining student performance, especially if the results fail to match expectations or aspirations. Accountability, however, requires replacing personal defensiveness with professional inquisitiveness. It means openly sharing results in a professional atmosphere focused more on solving problems than on assigning blame. Most important, it means taking responsibility for making the changes needed to improve results.

*New Skills.* The second requirement for success in accountability involves developing new skills to find honest answers to the tough questions. Limited time and resources often restrict teachers’ capacity to make the best and wisest choices. In addition, selecting the most effective method, strategy, or approach to solving a particular learning problem often requires knowledge that the professionals involved may or may not possess (Hess 1999). Not only must school leaders therefore provide regular opportunities for teachers to share results and seek practical solutions collaboratively; they must also be prepared to go outside their schools to find appropriate answers. Expertise at the district,

regional, and national levels represents a valuable resource. Clearly, taking the initiative to contact experts, seek their advice, and creatively implement their recommendations falls to school leaders.

These new skills also imply openness to multiple methods, expertise in implementing those methods, and understanding of and commitment to the philosophy on which the methods are based. Accountability means that educators can no longer choose teaching methods based on personal impressions, glitzy materials, slick sales pitches, or ease of implementation. Instead, they should be able to show that rigorous, systematic, unbiased evidence of effectiveness supports the methods they choose (Cooper 2005). Educators must also be prepared to gather evidence throughout the implementation process to ensure that improvement efforts remain on track while they are adapted to a school's unique character, culture, and context.

## Conclusion

The most important issue for any education-accountability system is producing the desired effects—improving the capacity of schools and teachers to deliver high-quality curriculum and instruction, and increasing student learning of valued content. Instead of reacting to an imposed accountability agenda, educators need to set their own clear agenda for accountability. They must take the lead in setting clear goals, establishing plans to achieve those goals, using data to monitor progress regularly, and adjusting plans accordingly in a cycle of continuous improvement. If educators make accountability their responsibility, the benefits to all students will be immediate, highly visible, and most impressive.

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