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Holding Schools Accountable: Is It Working?

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Abstract
The authors share findings from a body of research on emerging accountability systems conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Comments
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A *KAPPAN* SPECIAL SECTION ON SCHOOL REFORM

Holding Schools Accountable: Is It Working?

The authors share findings from a body of research on emerging accountability systems conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

BY RICHARD F. ELMORE AND SUSAN H. FUHRMAN

THE THEORY that measuring performance and coupling it to rewards and sanctions will cause schools and the individuals who work in them to perform at higher levels underpins performance-based accountability systems. Such systems are now operating in most states and in thousands of districts, and they represent a significant change from traditional approaches to accountability. The new approaches focus primarily on schools, whereas in the past states held school districts primarily accountable. The new approaches focus on performance and other outputs, whereas in the past districts were held accountable for offering sufficient inputs and complying with regulations. Moreover, there are significant consequences, such as substantial bonuses or the threat of school closure, associated with the new approaches, whereas in the past the worst sanction, the withholding of school aid, was only rarely applied, on the ground that students would suffer the most.

Researchers associated with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) have examined these emerging accountability systems in a number of ways. CPRE has

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conducted interviews and large-scale surveys of teachers and principals in two research sites that are using new accountability systems: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina and the state of Kentucky.[1] We studied the internal accountability systems in 20 public, charter, and independent schools and then followed up in three high schools in each of four states with very different accountability approaches.[2] In a number of cities, we looked at school reconstitution, one of the most severe sanctions applied to failing schools.[3] In a study of eight states, we examined how federal, state, and district accountability interacted and how schools were affected by the various systems.[4] We also surveyed all 50 states and profiled their policies regarding assessment, performance reporting, accountability, and alignment between their Title I and general systems of accountability.[5] Our research yielded a number of findings.

1. *Accountability systems attract the attention of teachers and administrators.* Setting student achievement goals for a school helps provide teachers with a focus for their work and increases the energy devoted to instruction. New accountability systems help channel teachers' work to the most important goals, largely those included in the performance measure.

In the Kentucky and Charlotte-Mecklenburg studies, we found that teachers valued the personal satisfaction from increasing student learning, the professional recognition for doing a good job, and the receipt of a monetary bonus. Bonuses seemed to be less of an incentive for many teachers than a "thank you" for a job well done, but teachers tended to agree that a bonus was an important symbol of accountability or efficiency to the public. Negative outcomes, which were equally motivating, included increased pressure and stress to improve results, fear of being labeled as a "school in decline," and the accompanying professional embarrassment, loss of freedom through state-directed assistance or "takeovers," and expanded work hours.

2. *Teachers and schools vary in their responses to accountability systems*. A number of scholars have worried that focusing on test scores can severely narrow the curriculum.[6] In this scenario, teachers discard favorite units and drill students exclusively on assessed content. Sometimes that drill exceeds "instruction" and crosses over into overt "test preparation." In those cases, it appears that the content is being learned only in the context of a specific test, without any broader application.

However, CPRE work in 10 states suggests that, while narrowing does occur, so do other types of responses. In Kentucky, for example, the accountability system is credited with expanding the content taught to include writing and the humanities. We have seen elementary principals and teachers who are active reformers, as shown by rich examples of student work and many innovative pedagogies.[7] We have also observed high school teachers embracing reform. The teachers in one New York high school accepted the "Regents-exams-for-all" policy enthusiastically. They took personal responsibility for student progress, used data to improve instruction, added instructional time, and increased professional development.[8] In a Vermont high school, teachers were shocked at low test scores and used state-mandated "action planning" to set ambitious data-driven goals and to emphasize open-ended mathematics questions, to change the algebra sequence, and to broaden the literature curriculum.[9]

3. *Internal accountability precedes external accountability*. A school's ability to respond to any form of external performance-based accountability is determined by the degree to which individuals share common values and understandings about such matters as what they expect of students academically, what constitutes good instructional practice, who is responsible for student learning, and how individual students and teachers account for their work and learning.

In many schools, individual teachers' conceptions of their own responsibility have the greatest influence over how schools address accountability issues. The big questions — Accountability to whom? For what? And how? — are answered by the accretion of the decisions of individual teachers, which are based on their own views about their capacity and that of their students, rather than by collective deliberation or explicit management decisions. Teachers' judgments are powerfully influenced by preconceptions about the individual traits of students and about the characteristics of families and communities. And they are typically uninformed by systematic knowledge of what students might be capable of learning under different conditions of teaching.[10]

Teachers and principals in such schools often deal with the demands of formal external accountability either by incorporating them in superficial ways —

claiming, for example, that the new demands are consistent with existing practice when they clearly are not — or by rejecting them as "unrealistic" for their students. For example, schools operating under such severe sanctions as reconstitution and probation in San Francisco and Chicago do not appear to be making fundamental changes in their core processes. Instead, they seem to be placing considerable emphasis on test preparation. Some of these schools may incorporate structural changes (such as breaking up into smaller schools), but few appear to be making extensive or deep efforts to rethink their instructional programs.[11]

4. *Accountability for performance requires changes in schools' internal capacities for instruction.* Responding to external performance-based accountability systems is not simply a matter of reorienting existing teaching methods and organizational routines toward new purposes. Virtually all schools, no matter what their demographic characteristics or prior performance, must do different things, not just do the same things differently. And these new things require new knowledge and skills, part of which are related to internal accountability. But a larger part of the new knowledge must be organized around instructional practice. New expectations will be raised regarding what content different types of students can learn and at what rate, what new instructional materials are required, what pedagogy is necessary to reach students not previously expected to master complex content, how instructional time is used, and how the school day is organized.

5. *Capacity matters, but not much is being done about it.* Most state measures designed to assist low-performing schools, while well-intentioned, are relatively weak ways to actually increase the instructional capacity of schools. Local school systems have been slow to respond to demands for the new kinds of professional development that are required to meet the expectations of performance-based accountability systems. Schools seem to be responding in ways that emphasize their existing strengths and weaknesses rather than in ways that challenge their capacities for self-improvement.

We have some good examples of what states and districts can do to help schools respond constructively to performance pressure. For example, states can support infrastructures for technical assistance and professional development, such as Maryland's Regional Staff Development Centers or California's Subject Matter Networks, and they can set standards or quality criteria for professional development. States can also support curriculum development; some even create specific curriculum frameworks that help districts and schools develop day-to-day curricula that are linked to standards.[12] Of the 22 districts in eight states that CPRE studied over the last five years, a number were developing their own evaluation expertise so that they could help schools use performance data. Several were developing new, more intensive approaches to professional development and providing school-based support for teacher learning. Some of the districts we studied were exerting substantially more control over curriculum than they had in the past, providing more guidance and materials to schools. This was especially true in mathematics, perhaps because the districts assumed such guidance was less necessary in reading. And many districts were providing targeted support and additional resources to low-performing schools.[13] However, not all the study sites undertook capacity-building efforts, and, given the scope of the problem, many approaches were insufficient in size or strategic power. Much greater investment is required, and much more thought about designing and supporting intelligent ways to build schools' capacity for improvement is needed.

6. *Stakes matter, but we need to know more about how they matter.* Students, teachers, administrators, schools, and school systems respond to the full range of stakes or consequences embedded in performance-based accountability systems — all the way from publicizing test scores, through identifying students and schools for remediation, to denial of graduation and school takeovers. But the responses are not always what policy makers had hoped for. Moreover, different types of schools respond differently to the same stakes. For example, low-capacity, low-performing schools often do not respond to student- and school-level consequences by improving their internal accountability and capacity for instruction. Instead, they often respond by doing the same things they were doing, only doing them harder. And high-capacity, high-performing schools often respond to the stakes of an accountability system — even to such low-level stakes as publicity — more quickly and more imaginatively than lower-capacity, lower-performing schools.

Furthermore, the distribution of rewards and sanctions within a given accountability system often rais-

es unanticipated problems in schools' responses. For example, teachers often say that they have neither the capacity nor the responsibility for student learning in systems in which the consequences of accountability fall on students but not on schools. Likewise, teachers often say that they have little leverage over students in systems in which the consequences fall mainly on schools but not on students. Even systems that include rewards and sanctions for both students and schools attach relatively heavy stakes to individual student performance and relatively light stakes to school performance. Students can fail to graduate by failing to pass a test; schools and the individual adults who work in them can be identified as "failing," but this designation carries with it a remote threat of closure or some form of assistance in the short run.

CPRE conducted surveys of teachers in eight states that vary with respect to where rewards and sanctions are applied (to schools or students or both) and with respect to the importance of the stakes in their accountability systems. In all of them, teachers believed that "schools" were held more accountable by states for student performance than they themselves were. In general, the same was true of their view of accountability for local districts; schools may be in the line of fire, but they are less direct targets than districts. In contrast, principals were seen as holding teachers accountable for student performance but not quite as strictly as they held teachers accountable for their teaching. The lowest ratings were those teachers gave to their colleagues. Teachers do not think their fellow teachers hold them accountable for student performance or for their teaching — evidence of the absence of internal accountability as we have been describing it.[14]

So while we can see the effects of rewards and sanctions in the implementation of performance-based accountability systems, it is clear that the policies themselves are not designed to account for the complex reactions that occur in schools and school systems.

7. *The expectations underlying performance-based accountability systems are often unclear to the public, to students, to schools, and to school systems.* In many schools and communities, the purposes and expectations behind performance-based accountability systems have been reduced to an essentially test-based form of compliance. The prevailing assumption is that the test measures what policy makers want and that schools should take the steps necessary to teach what the test measures. In fact, performance-based accountability systems are not based on this assumption. They are instead predicated on the assumption that calling attention to academic performance induces schools and the people in them to pay attention to what they do, how they teach, and what their expectations are for student learning. Moreover, they are designed to encourage schools and districts to develop the internal capacities to improve their performance on these core functions.

We are seeing that these new systems do call attention to performance and cause people to focus on it, but developing internal capacities is much more difficult. Although states and districts are investing in capacity-building, many more resources and more strategic use of them appear to be needed. It may be that institutionalizing this broader, more complex view of performance-based accountability will require different kinds of policies than now exist.

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