Promoting More Coherent and Balanced Accountability Systems

Chris Domaleski, Damian Betebenner, and Susan Lyons

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Introduction

• In recent years we’ve witnessed the growth and ultimately the dominance of test-based accountability

• What’s more, accountability systems are heavily – sometimes exclusively – directed by state and federal systems

• How is this model working?
How well is the current model working?
Restoring Balance

• What’s wrong with current policy and practice?
  – Federal and state influence is outsized
  – There is a scarcity of strong local systems
  – Lack of focus on utility

• We suggest a system that is vertically and horizontally more coherent, flexible, and balanced
Easy, right?

SALES ARE DROPPING LIKE A ROCK.

OUR PLAN IS TO INVENT SOME SORT OF DOOHICKEY THAT EVERYONE WANTS TO BUY.

THE VISIONARY LEADERSHIP WORK IS DONE. HOW LONG WILL YOUR PART TAKE?
The Promise of Accountability

• Signals what outcomes are valued
• Provides information about school performance with respect to prioritized outcomes
• Prescribes supports and interventions to improve performance
• In the best case, accountability incentivizes the right kinds of behaviors and actions and helps identify where and how improvement can be supported
The Federal Role

- Emphasis on “equity”
- ESEA was passed in 1965 as an initiative to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students
- Early accountability provisions were focused on compliance and inputs
- The ‘footprint’ of ESEA has grown in scope over the years
  - Annual grade level assessments with uniform state tests that meet proscriptive requirements
  - States implement federally constrained accountability systems, heavily based on results from these tests
The State Role

• Authority addressed in state constitution. Policy directed by state legislators and boards.

• Role has grown over the years, in no small part due to increased federal role (not just ESEA).

• Critically, states establish the content and rigor of academic standards for public schools. This also implies a responsibility to provide support and resources for these standards.

• Weiss and McGuinn (2017) cite five ‘essential roles’
  – Articulating vision, priorities, and goals
  – Implementing standards and assessments
  – Designing and implementing state accountability system
  – Overseeing and implementing state and federal funding
  – Communicating about critical educational issues with stakeholders
The Local Role

• Education is fundamentally a local responsibility

• School boards and district leadership govern schools

• Responsibilities include:
  – Creating an environment and conditions to support learning
  – Hiring and supporting educators and staff
  – Establishing and implementing the curriculum
  – Establishing budgets and raising necessary funds
  – Managing day-to-day operations related to facilities, transportation, and nutrition
Promoting Coherence and Balance

• While there is a role for federal and state influence, we think it is out of balance.

• The federal and state systems should not be the only thing that matters. Local systems, tailored to specific needs and conditions, can and should be developed and implemented.

• Importantly, the relationships among federal, state, and local systems are important in creating a coherent and balanced system.
Recommendations

• Principled Design
• Reciprocity
• Distinct District Measures
• Differentiated Local Systems
• Evaluation and Ongoing Improvement
Principled Design

• Each ‘level’ should focus on the core policy priorities.

• Currently, the federal system is too rigid and top-heavy.
  – Examples: proscriptive requirements for SQSS, annual testing in each grade, prohibitions for differentiating for exceptional schools (e.g. alternative schools)

• An inflexible federal system leads many states to pursue their priorities outside of ESSA. This creates multiple, competing, potentially incoherent systems.
Reciprocity

• Accountability is more than a collection of indicators.

• Effective systems should specify, develop, and help sustain the conditions under which success is thought to occur.

• Elmore (2002), “for every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation.”

• In the best case, systems specify how support and capacity building should occur (e.g. funding, research, curate and communicate promising practices, provide training etc.)
Distinct District Measures

• Presently, most district systems (at the state level) are simply an aggregation of school results (e.g. districts are ‘super schools’).

• We suggest district specific indicators tied to their unique responsibilities, such as:
  – Funding
  – Principal and teacher qualifications
  – Climate and safety reports
  – Access to arts, music, physical education, etc.
  – Parent/ community outreach
Differentiated Local Systems

• Local systems are better positioned to address specific methods and practices more specifically than federal and state systems can or should.

• Districts can monitor local inputs such as new teacher induction programs, curricular resources, drop-out prevention programs, professional learning etc.

• Local system can include indicators that reflect unique characteristics of schools such as those related to career/technology preparation, achievements in visual or performing arts, programs to promote leadership and service etc.
• Reporting outcomes alone is an impoverished theory of action.

• Theory of action, logic model, or similar can be good vehicle to guide evaluation.

• The central claims and assumptions should be revisited regularly and revised based on evidence.

• Evaluation must consider relationships among systems.
Final Thoughts

• We don’t assume accountability means “calculate and classify.”

• The promise of accountability is best realized when it represents a systematic and collaborative approach to identifying and supporting “what matters” and “what works.”

• We need to move away from ‘Rube Goldberg’ systems and consider how to promote utility in design and implementation.
For more information:

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