

# Promoting More Coherent and Balanced Accountability Systems

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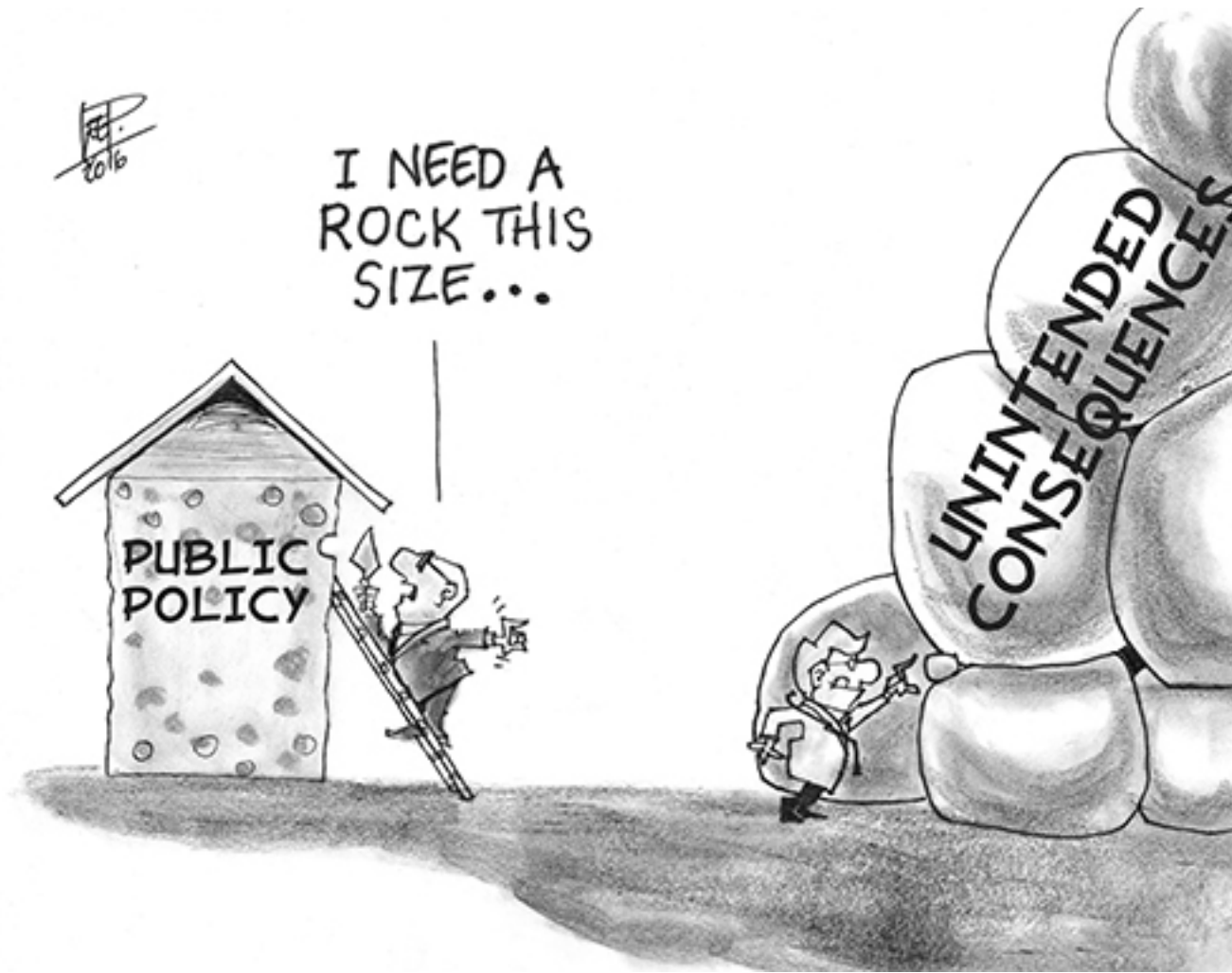
Reidy Interactive Lecture Series

September 27, 2018

# 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?



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# 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 prescriptive 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.

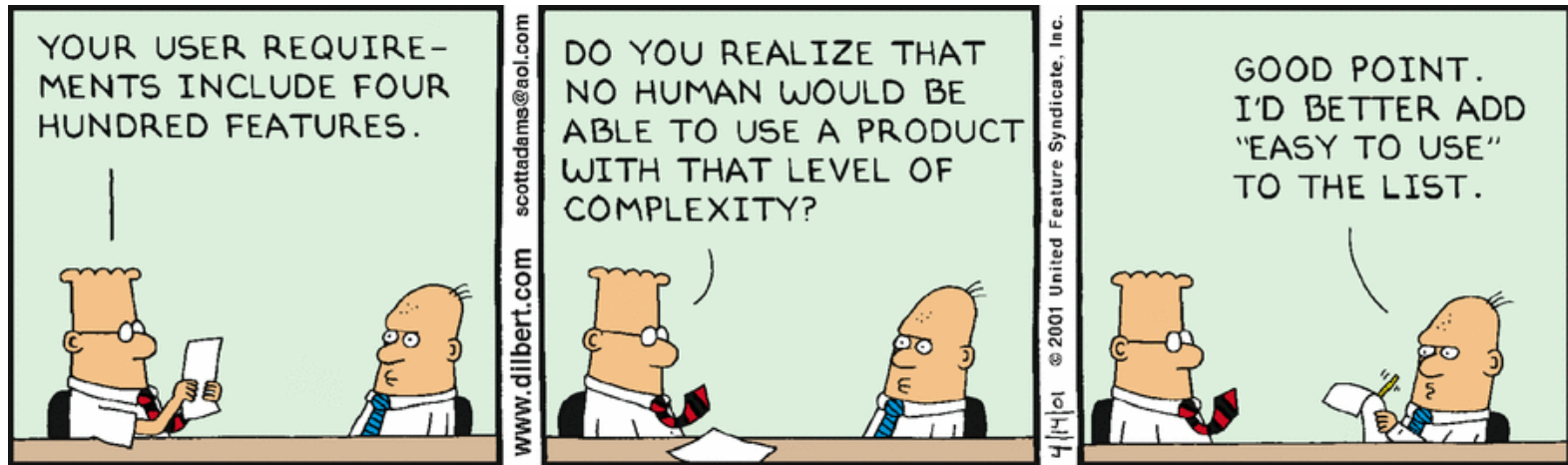
# Evaluation and Improvement

- 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.



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