

Distributing the Responsibility for Student Learning: Possibilities for the Next Generation of Accountability Systems

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“I never expected to see all these suburban schools on the watch list...”

U.S. Congressional Representative Judy Biggert (R, IL) in Dillon, S. New York Times (Sept. 5, 2004)



Can we fix NCLB?

- If “fixing it” means having all students learn meaningful content and skills to a reasonably high level, then it is doubtful, especially given the current system.
- Some have suggested that the structural issues are so overwhelming that what’s happening in schools is only the tip of the iceberg.
 - This argument then gets extended to say that it doesn’t pay to “beat up schools” until the structural issues are addressed.



What if All Students Were Proficient?

- Postsecondary capability
 - Assuming many more students would want to attend college, would they have a place to go?
- Employment capacity
 - It does not seem like our current economic structure could sustain many more people competing for high-wage jobs.
- Economic stratification
 - Isn't our capitalist economy based upon stratification of wages and opportunities? Do we need a new economic model or do we really want 100% to be proficient?



But what about current students?

- We cannot walk away from school accountability just because we don't like how the discussion is being framed.
- Many of the fine speakers over the next two days will offer important suggestions and more immediate solutions for improving the validity of NCLB.
 - We need to take these seriously and work to implement them in order to improve the current system.



Beyond the Next Generation

- I've decided to, as Margaret Wheatly puts it, "think of the possibilities."
- In other words, this might not be the very next generation, but it's important to have a vision of how we'd like things to be...
- My purpose here is to outline a vision for an accountability system that focuses on meaningful learning and attainment for all students, and where responsibility for student learning is distributed among the many institutions that can affect this learning.



– Attribution versus accountability

A Distributed System

- Responsibilities for student learning are not limited to students and teachers and should also include, among others:
 - Students
 - Teachers
 - Districts
 - Policy Boards
 - Legislatures
 - Parents
 - Schools
 - Universities
 - State DOE



Students

- If students are more than just recipients of curriculum and instruction, we could argue that they should be held accountable for their role in the system.
- Unfortunately, this often gets instantiated as passing a single test for promotion/graduation.



Student Accountability

- Student accountability systems should be designed such that students learn how to set and achieve goals.
- Students should be expected to collect and evaluate evidence against standards over extended periods of time.
- For younger students, this should just be done in the context of classrooms, while older students might have to make their documentation of evidence more public in order to graduate.



Parents

- Research is clear that parental influence in the pre-school years and throughout school is highly related to student achievement.
 - This does NOT mean that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can't learn, but it is definitely easier if the parents are involved and supportive.
- Therefore, if students are to reach high levels of achievement, it would be fair to expect parents to contribute.
 - This does not relieve schools of the responsibility for reaching out to parents to help them learn how to be educationally supportive.



Parental Accountability

First, it is important to recognize the limits of what we can and should require of parents.

- For example, what if parents were told, “we’d like to have your child come to full-day kindergarten, summer enrichment, or some other program, to make up for lack of readiness,” and the parent refused?
 - Could we ask the parent(s) to sign a waiver saying that their child can be “left behind”? Probably not, but should the school be held as accountable for this child as others?
- Parent Report Cards
 - We created some models where parents report, according to various categories, how well they support their child’s learning (e.g., monitor homework, provide a quiet place to study, limit TV).
 - If parents do not report their efforts, should the school be just as accountable for these students as others?



Schools

*The business of schools is to invent tasks, activities, and assignments that the students find engaging and that bring them into **profound interactions with content and processes** they will need to master to be judged well educated [emphasis added].*

Schlechty, P.C. (2001) *Shaking up the schoolhouse*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass



Schools

- Just because the attribution in this system is distributed, does not mean that schools and teachers are off the hook.
- Unfortunately, most schools do not implement Schlechty's vision or any vision that encourages students towards meaningful learning.
- It is not fair to blame the current testing system for instruction targeted toward low-level learning goals—this was clearly the situation prior to NCLB.
 - On the other hand, the current testing pressures have likely distracted school leaders from pursuing more ambitious performance-based reform efforts.



School Accountability

- There will be many talks during this conference offering details about valid school accountability designs, but just a few words here:
 - Schools need to be held accountable for promoting deep understanding of important content and for encouraging students to be learners.
 - If this requires a fundamental shift in the assessment systems being used, then that should be part of the discussion.
 - This will likely require an accountability design that relies on more than once/year large-scale assessments.
 - The administrators and teachers should share the responsibility for increasing school-level achievement.



Teachers

- Clearly, teachers have the most important role for fostering student achievement.
- Given the current structure and culture of schools, teachers need encouragement, incentives, and tools to focus their energies on maximizing student learning.
- I argue that teachers collectively are responsible for student achievement, but I'm hesitant to focus achievement-related accountability at the teacher level, rather than the school level.



Teacher Accountability

- If we do not use accountability approaches based on aggregating longitudinal measures of achievement at the classroom level, what should we do?
 - We need to broaden our view of teacher accountability so that teachers are continually encouraged to improve their craft.
 - Within-school accountability systems (e.g., principal evaluations) should incorporate achievement growth measures, but as part of a larger portfolio of evidence.
 - Some models, such as the Milken model or the Denver performance plan, offer some visions for basing teacher accountability on specific goals jointly established by the teacher and principal.



Districts

- There is no question that district educational leaders are dealing with considerable accountability pressures under current models.
- In a distributed system, the district would still be expected to focus on student learning, but instead of being held accountable only for student achievement, district leaders might be held accountable for more intermediate goals as well.



District Accountability

- Examples of district intermediate goals:
 - Curricular focus
 - Does the district select curriculum on the basis of empirical evidence? Is it focused on clear learning goals?
 - Professional development programs
 - Do the PD programs follow research-based approaches (sustained, focused, job-related)?
 - Local assessment development
 - Has the district supported/led the development of a local assessment system to enable teachers to get more timely and relevant feedback about student learning?
- The intermediate goals must specify how the district should fulfill its role for supporting schools. These district measures could be factored into school accountability results.



Teacher Preparation Programs

Recognizing that a good part of the audience is involved in this work, I'll be a little careful here...

- There is pretty strong perception in both state departments of education and K-12 settings, that much of what happens in teacher preparation programs is not very relevant to improving K-12 education.
 - More rigorous recruitment & selection of candidates
 - Expectations for research-based preparation
 - More stringent recommendations for candidacy
 - Better longitudinal evaluations



Teacher Preparation Accountability

- “Current practice” systems—NCATE, etc.
 - Most have little connection to how well the pre-service teachers succeed
 - Nevertheless, current accreditation process can be made useful to focus on best practices
- Long-term evaluations
 - Retention—we know there are many more people certified to teach than are actually working in schools.
 - One important outcome could focus on the proportion of graduates that continue in the field for a certain number of years
 - Effectiveness—If we had the right kind of data system, we could link measures of teacher effectiveness with the pre-service program.
- Some of the school/district accountability results could be “shared” by the various teacher preparation institutions.



State Departments of Education

- Since the control of schools resides with state governments (even in local control states), the state departments of education should have an important role in fostering academic achievement.
- Many state departments, for a lot of legitimate reasons, focus more on compliance monitoring than on support for teaching and learning.



DOE Accountability

- State departments are already held accountable under NCLB, but in a fairly punitive fashion.
- DOE's need to be provided the resources and then be held accountable for improving the achievement of students on a statewide basis. Similar to the district accountability, state DOE's should also be accountable for specific intermediate goals, such as professional development, support for curriculum and local assessment, and research-based practices and programs.



School and State Boards

- What responsibility do these policy boards have for improving education?
- What are the consequences for these boards if achievement does not improve?
- For example, what if these boards had to stand down and not seek reelection (or appointment) if they did not fulfill their role adequately?
 - Obviously, defining “adequately” is not an easy task, but initially, we can link the boards’ performance with that of the achievement trends and support of important intermediary goals such as professional development in their district.



School Delivery Standards

- As Lorrie Shepard often reminds us, initial conceptions of standards-based education included the concept of school delivery standards. This concept has fallen by the wayside in current policy discussions.
- We desperately need good economic models to provide guidance about costs for educating students (ALL) to a proficient level.
 - Current discussions and legislative initiatives are hindered by a lack of quantitative indicators about the costs of schooling. Therefore, the only benchmark is what things have cost in the past and this has not been very useful.
 - I didn't say it was easy.



What about an Experiment?

- Given the current love for experimental designs...
- What if the resources for a sample of schools were increased by a third?
 - In one-third of the randomly selected schools, we could increase teacher salaries by approximately a third
 - In another third, we could increase the number of teachers to give teachers more time to work on their craft
 - Sadly, the remaining schools would serve as the control group
- We could then study the short- and long-term effects on many outcome variables including, but not limited to achievement.



School Delivery Accountability

- If we had these models, we can then evaluate legislative success at fulfilling their part of the promise.
- Imagine being able to say to a legislative finance committee,
 - “It is going to cost X , but you’ve only appropriated $1/2X$. Should we educate 100% of the students to a lower standard or 50% to the target standard?”
- We NEED the MODELS!



Conclusions-A Systems Approach

- It is important to understand the relationships among the various components in terms of fostering student learning
- We need to get these relationships “right”, otherwise one group will always feel like it is unfair.
- People/groups generally respond more positively to accountability when they feel like they have control over the outcomes.
- The components within and across sub-systems need to be aligned with the goals of the educational system in order for this to work effectively.



Conclusions-School Delivery Standards

- It should be clear by now that once we move outside of the school/teacher level, we are talking about various instantiations of school delivery standards.
- Unfortunately, implementation of these standards is somewhat, but not fully, contingent upon the resources provided by the state and federal governments.



Conclusions

- Partitioning variance vs. accountability—
 - Some of the components (e.g., parents, legislature) do not lend themselves to accountability indicators and these might be used to “adjust” the school/district results.
 - More traditional accountability approaches can be employed for other components (e.g., teacher ed, school boards) as well as incorporating these into school/district results.



Conclusions

- This discussion does not preclude the need to continue to work within the current system to get as much out of it as possible.
- But, if you believe, as I do, that the potential for the current system is limited, we need to continue to work build systems that can truly support meaningful teaching and learning.
- This distributed approach should not be viewed as an “all or nothing” system—we should continue to add components if they meet the validity requirements of fairly attributing responsibility for improving learning.

