

STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY MOVEMENT NEEDS TO

PUSH, NOT PUNISH

The education reform movement in the United States has increasingly focused on developing new standards for students. Virtually all states and many districts have begun creating standards for student learning, curriculum frameworks to guide instruction, and assessments to test students' knowledge.

These measures often are accompanied by accountability schemes that reward and sanction students, teachers, and schools based on trends in test scores. Although standards-based reform was intended to leverage systemwide changes in curriculum, teacher preparation, and school resources, in many cases the notions of standards and "accountability" have become synonymous with mandates for student testing that have little connection to policy initiatives that directly address the quality of teaching, the allocation of resources, or the nature of schooling.

Assessment data are helpful for creating more accountable systems to the extent that they provide relevant, valid, timely, and useful information

about how individual students are doing and how schools are serving them. Indicators such as test scores are information for the accountability system; they are not the system itself. Accountability occurs only when a useful set of processes exists for interpreting and acting on the information in educationally productive ways. This may seem a straightforward notion, but it is significantly different from

the predominant conceptions of accountability in the contemporary policy arena.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY

The American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education have issued standards for

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the use of tests that indicate that test scores are too limited and unstable a measure to be used as the sole source of information for any major decision about student placement or promotion. The test-based accountability systems in dozens of states and urban school systems stand in contravention to these professional standards.

However, the negative effects of grade retention and graduation sanctions should not become an argument for social promotion, the practice of moving students through the system without ensuring that they acquire the skills that they need. The alternatives include at least the following:

- Enhancing preparation and professional development for teachers to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills they need to teach a wide range of students to meet the standards;
- Redesigning school structures to support more intensive learning – including creating smaller school units that team teachers to work with smaller total numbers of students for longer periods of time;
- Employing schoolwide and classroom performance assessments that support more coherent curriculum and better inform teaching; and
- Ensuring that targeted supports and services are available for students when they are needed.

EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHANGE

Some urban districts have used these strategies to upgrade student learning and to create a more genuine accountability to parents and students. Their successes offer a very different model for standards-based reform, one that rests on the use of standards and assessments as a stimulus for professional development and curricular reform rather than as punishments for schools and students. Examples include the statewide reforms in Connecticut that have sup-

ported substantial improvements in a number of cities (featured here are New Britain, Norwalk, and Middletown – among the state’s lowest-income and once lowest-achieving districts); New York City’s School District #2, and New Haven, Calif.

Connecticut

Connecticut provides an especially instructive example of how state-level policy makers have used a standards-based starting point to upgrade teachers’ knowledge and skills as a means of improving student learning. Since the early 1980s, the state has pursued a purposeful and comprehensive teaching quality agenda. Over 15 years, the state used teaching standards, followed later by student standards, to guide investments in school finance equalization, teacher salary increases tied to higher standards for teacher education and licensing, curriculum and assessment reforms, and a teacher support and assessment system that strengthened professional development. An emphasis on improving teaching was supported by a thoughtful assessment system used to guide professional development and curriculum reforms, but expressly not to retain students, deny diplomas, or punish schools. Dramatic gains in student achievement (accompanied by increases rather than declines in student graduation rates) and a plentiful supply of well-qualified teachers are two major outcomes of this agenda.

Among the 10 Connecticut districts that made the greatest progress in reading between 1990 and 1998, three — New Britain, Norwalk, and Middletown — are urban school systems in the group identified as the state’s “neediest” districts based on the

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percentage of students eligible for free lunch programs and their state test scores. Critical to their progress were the state’s teacher policies that have enabled districts to hire and retain highly qualified teachers, and the required beginning teacher program that provided state training for all mentors, thus increasing the knowledge and skills of veteran teachers along with beginners involved with the program. In addition, district officials credited state- and locally supported professional development, focused on how to teach reading through a balanced approach to whole language and skill-based instruction, how to address reading difficulties through specific intervention strategies, and how to diagnose and treat specific learning disabilities. The state’s ability to provide extensive disaggregated data about local progress on curriculum goals measured by the state assessments guided these efforts, and high-quality professional development offerings supported them.

New York City District #2

A remarkably similar set of strategies produced similar results in New York City’s Community School District #2, a diverse, multilingual district of 22,000 students, of whom more than 70% are students of color and more than half are from families officially classified as having incomes below the poverty level. Climbing achievement was a result of the district’s decision to make professional development around common standards of teaching the central focus of management and the core strategy for school improvement.

The district has sponsored eight years of intensive work on teaching strategies for literacy development and four years on mathematics teaching. These efforts included intensive summer institutes, school-based coaching, partnerships with local universities, and a strong focus on recruitment and

evaluation of teachers and principals. District #2, and later New York City, adopted the curriculum frameworks of the New Standards Project and formed an alliance with the University of Pittsburgh's new Institute for Learning, piloting its performance assessments of student learning, which use portfolios and extensive student work samples as well as constructed response tests. Assessment results were used to guide professional development and the assignment of the most expert teachers to students with the greatest educational needs.

New Haven, Calif.

A similar set of strategies enabled New Haven, Calif., to evolve from a low-achieving school district with the usual host of urban problems to a high-achieving district widely acknowledged to have an expert teaching force. In the early 1980s, superintendent Guy Emanuele launched a focused reform emphasizing extensive recruitment and careful hiring of teachers, rigorous evaluation, extensive mentoring and professional development, and support for teacher leadership. As in Connecticut and in District #2, standards for students were developed and enacted as a professional development activity, using state and national frameworks as the starting point for engaging teachers in thinking through what students should know and be able to do, how it should be assessed, and what curriculum and instructional strategies could allow them to succeed. The standards and assessment system is used as a tool for instructional planning, guiding changes in staffing, instructional programming, resource allocation, and class configurations.

IMPROVING THE CHANCES OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Ultimately, accountability is not only about measuring student learning but actually improving it.

Consequently, genuine accountability involves supporting changes in teaching and schooling that can heighten the probability that students meet standards.

The changes in teaching and assessment strategies needed to achieve new content and performance standards require increased knowledge and skills on the part of teachers. Teachers need deep understanding of subject matter, student learning approaches, and diverse teaching strategies to develop practices that will allow students to reach these new standards. To provide this kind of expertise to students, districts must pay much greater attention to the ways in which they recruit, hire, and support new teachers and the ways in which they support veteran teachers. Cumbersome and counterproductive personnel practices in many large district bureaucracies have resulted in the hiring of hundreds of untrained teachers when qualified personnel were available and in the attrition of far too many beginning teachers who are left to sink or swim without support. These practices create a continuous revolving door of inexperienced and under-prepared teachers in schools where student failure rates are the highest. Neither standards nor assessments will help students learn more effectively if they do not have a stable community of competent teachers to support them in their learning. Until school systems address the dramatic inequalities in students' access to qualified teachers, other curriculum and assessment policies will prove ineffective in increasing achievement.

In addition, schools and districts need to provide systematic supports for ongoing teacher learning in the form of time for shared teacher planning, opportunities for assessing teaching and learning, more exposure to technical expertise and resources, and opportunities for networking with other colleagues. These invest-

ments in building teachers' capacities pay off in improved student outcomes (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). In addition, as teachers learn to develop and use performance assessments, they discover more about their students and the effects of their teaching. This allows them to build more responsive and supportive teaching strategies that support the attainment of higher standards for a greater range of students (Darling-Hammond, Aneess, & Falk, 1995).

Providing these opportunities will require a clearer focus on teacher learning as a critical ingredient for enhanced student learning and as the most important preventive for the escalating costs of compensatory education, special education, grade retention, and other manifestations of student and school failure. Allocating resources to support teacher learning includes restructuring school time and staffing patterns to allow teachers time to work and learn together.

Schools that have restructured to provide more shared planning and professional development time for teachers are also more successful at meeting the needs of diverse learners. When teachers can share knowledge with each other and can access expertise beyond the school, they learn how to succeed with students who require special insights and strategies. This kind of restructuring of time often requires rethinking staffing arrangements as well as schedules. In U.S. schools, where only 43% of total education staff are classroom teachers (as compared to 60% to 80% in many European schools and in Japan, for example), the costs of supporting non-teaching staff absorb the resources needed to provide planning time for teachers. Thus, whereas teachers in many other countries have as much as 15 to 20 hours per week for joint planning and learning, U.S. teachers have only three to five hours weekly

for class preparation, usually spent alone (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). Creating time for teachers to work together often means reducing the number of nonteaching staff, pullout teachers, and specialists and reassigning them to teaching teams in order to increase staff for classroom teaching.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALL

The issue of standards and accountability cannot be separated from issues of teaching, assessment, school organization, professional development, and funding. Efforts aimed at better supporting learning for all students so that they can successfully progress through school must include changes that address the overall fabric of education.

Academic success for a greater range of students will be facilitated by

initiatives that:

- Use standards and authentic assessments of student achievement as indicators of progress for improved teaching and needed supports, not as arbiters of rewards and sanctions.
- Provide professional learning opportunities for teachers that build their capacity to teach ways that are congruent with contemporary understandings about learning, use sophisticated assessments to inform teaching, and meet differing needs.
- Encourage the design of classroom and grouping structures that create extended, intensive teacher-student relationships.
- Create strategies for school accountability that examine the appropriateness and adequacy of students' learning opportunities

and create levers and supports for school change.

Ultimately, raising standards for students so that they learn what they need to know requires raising standards for the system, so that it provides the kinds of teaching and school settings students need in order to learn. Genuine accountability requires both higher standards and greater supports for student, teacher, and school learning.

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