

Do-Over or Double Down?

Working Toward a New K–12 Education Accountability Ecosystem

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Why are we interested in accountability?

- Allies who converge much more often than not in other areas of education reform can diverge as proponents of rule-based accountability and proponents of choice-based accountability.
- In the past couple years a lot of people and organizations have been weighing in on the future of school accountability.
- ESSA implementation is on the horizon

**For the purpose of this project, how do
we define accountability?**

Defining accountability

- *Handbook of the Economics of Education:*
 - “The process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures.” Central authorities collect data on how students are performing and then judge schools based on it.
- *Merriam-Webster:*
 - That dictionary defines being accountable as “subject to giving an account, answerable.”

Defining accountability

- Schools are held accountable by having to give an account of what they do and what results they produce. They must answer for their actions.

What did we do?

- EdChoice hosted two back-to-back convenings of identified influencers in Ft. Myers, Florida, during the week of April 23–27, 2018.
- We pursued a full agenda. The total time of the substantive programming surpassed eight hours in either small group or large group sessions, not including breaks or meals.
 - Producing more than 40 hours of video and nearly 800 pages of transcripts

What did we do?

- In total, there were **47 participants** from 20 states and DC. We sought diversity and balance based on demographics and professional experience:
 - 23 women, 24 men
 - 7 African-American, 2 Hispanic, 1 Asian-American
- A number of participants came from outside the “education reform” arena.

What did we do?

- Each of the two convenings comprised of four focus groups that we also called “affinity groups” based largely on professional background:
 - ***Engaged Outsiders*** (entrepreneurs, business community representatives, school board members)
 - ***Practitioners*** (primarily educational administrators: traditional public, charter, and private)
 - ***Policy Advocates*** (from a wide assortment of organizations)
 - ***Researchers*** (both university and think tank-based)

What did we do?

- Over the course of two days, **affinity groups** met in both small and large group settings (facilitated by Hanover Research) to discuss the past, present, and future of accountability in K–12 education.
- Affinity groups also participated in a **simulation activity** where they had the chance to develop and propose an accountability system for a midwestern state.
- What had been shared, agreed on, and debated in the small group sessions was subsequently **reported out** and discussed in large group sessions.

Lessons Learned from Last 20+ Years

Lessons Learned

- ***Successes*** (as generally viewed by participants)
 - Increased Focus and Attention on Equity
 - Greater Transparency
 - Increased Data Literacy
 - Improved Test Scores

Researcher: “I think if you look at the research literature, I think it's hard to argue against accountability raises test scores and the subjects that it sanctions or that it's applied to. I think we don't, exactly, know why those test scores go up. Are students learning more, are schools better at teaching the test? Probably some combination of both.”

Lessons Learned

- ***Missteps*** (as generally viewed by participants)
 - Narrowing the goals of schooling
 - Incentivizing gaming and “drill and kill” strategies
 - Including evaluations of teachers drove pushback

Practitioner: “The current state accountability system...has a narrowing effect on high quality curriculum and what's ultimately taught”

The Current State of School Accountability

The Current State of School Accountability

Four Issues Central to Ongoing Debates

(1) Lack of Clarity of Purpose

Practitioner: “There's a lot more to forming a human being than just getting them to regurgitate an answer on the assessment. So, things around character, civic education, what does it mean to be human, what is human dignity, there's just a whole bunch of things that I feel like fell by the wayside, because they aren't measured, and it naturally fits in with the information age...”

The Current State of School Accountability

(2) Layering

Practitioner: “I think this whole idea of federal, state mandates to fix is really difficult for a school to absorb when a lot of these, they are all with good intent. Strategically at large, I think you’ll see positive outcome, but then when you drill down again, each school, each community, each student needs something so different...”

The Current State of School Accountability

(3) We're Not Measuring What Parents Care About

Researcher: “Is it what we, the experts, think they [parents] should care about? And they don't care about the same things. But I also think that's probably a mistake to lump them all in the same category. Parents want different stuff...”

The Current State of School Accountability

(4) Politics

Engaged Outsider: “... Whatever accountability system gets put forth, the next iteration, I think you have to think about the politics as much as the policy. If not, even more so.”

Researcher: “... Who really benefits from accountability? Not educators. Not parents, really. Potentially, they could, down the line. But, it's not very traceable. Taxpayers? They care so little about that. So, you're not gonna get a constituency that's gonna go to bat for accountability because no one really sees direct, tangible benefits.”

The Future of K–12 Accountability

The Future of K–12 Accountability

(1) New Priorities

- Restoring Trust
- More Candor about Tradeoffs
- Focus on Forming Human Beings
- Build on the Strengths of America
- More Continuous Improvement, Less Carrots and Sticks
- Serve All Children

The Future of K–12 Accountability

(2) New Data on...

- **Student Characteristics** (family structure, chronic absences and tardiness)
- **Academic Performance** (test scores beyond reading and math, longitudinal data, norm-referenced tests)
- **School Quality** (waiting lists, demand indicators, course offerings, micro-credentials and industry certifications)

The Future of K–12 Accountability

(2) New Data on...

- **School Climate** (student and teacher retention, parent satisfaction surveys, school safety, climate and engagement surveys, 360 evaluations)
- **Policy Metrics** (e.g. return on investment)

The Future of K–12 Accountability

(3) New Conversations About Old Questions

Question #1 – Is the point of accountability to establish a minimum standard or to drive schools to be better?

Question #2 – To grade A-F or not to grade A-F?

Question #3 – Can we have strong accountability without enforcing uniformity?

Question #4 – Do we trust parents to know more than the school system?

Question #5 – Who/What should be the unit of analysis? The district? The school? The teacher? The student?

Implications

- A diversifying educational ecosystem is an existential challenge to traditional notions of school accountability.
- Accountability advocates have a long way to go to earning parents', teachers' and the public's trust back.
- There is a lot of agreement on the problems of school accountability. There is much less agreement on the specific remedies.

Implications

- There is a huge degree of path dependency when we talk about school accountability.
- The search for non-gameable high-stakes metrics continues. It is unclear if such a destination is reachable.

Thank You

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