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Most people subscribe to a simple, but powerful, principle of justice: Accomplishments should be rewarded. The best student should get the "A"; the best worker should get the raise.

Thus, the call for greater school accountability has found a receptive national audience. At a time of rising costs and declining achievement, Americans thought it only common sense to hold educators responsible. Educators themselves may question specific policies but rarely argue that they should not be held accountable.

During the past decade, virtually all states have reengineered their accountability systems, not only setting more rigorous expectations, but also changing the focus from inputs to results. School leaders now must not only do well, but also demonstrate that they are doing well. This Digest describes the key features of current accountability systems and explores their implications for administrators.

WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF TODAY'S ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS?

At one time, principals and teachers could satisfy the demands of accountability simply by working hard and following accepted professional standards. By contrast, the current accountability movement emphasizes results. The Southern Regional Education Board (1998) identifies five essential elements in today's accountability systems. Rigorous content standards are established; student progress is tested; professional development is aligned with standards and test results; results are publicly reported; and results lead to rewards, sanctions, and targeted assistance.

These elements work together to provide a coordinated effort to improve student learning. Standards provide a clear, unambiguous target that lets teachers know where their attention should be focused. Carefully designed assessments provide concrete evidence of progress toward the goals. Professional development is aligned with the standards to help schools develop the capacity to meet the targets. Public reporting of results puts pressure on individual schools to meet the targets. Finally, rewards and sanctions render an official verdict on the school's efforts.

Susan Fuhrman (1999) sees several additional features in the newer systems: a focus on the school rather than the district as the unit of improvement; the use of continuous improvement strategies rather than a one-time fix; and more sophisticated measurement that goes beyond pass-fail.

HOW DO TODAY'S ACCOUNTABILITY

SYSTEMS MOTIVATE TEACHERS?

Current accountability systems are based on the belief that people perform better when they have a clear goal and when their performance has well-defined consequences. The desire to attain rewards or avoid sanctions will thus keep teachers focused on student improvement.
This kind of extrinsic motivation is familiar and intuitively plausible to most people, who can easily recall instances when their behavior was shaped by a desired reward. However, critics argue that extrinsic motivation, while successful in the short run, may eventually undermine the long-term goals of educational reform. Kennon Sheldon and Bruce Biddle (1998), for example, cite evidence suggesting that intrinsic motivation built on trust will lead to more meaningful learning than extrinsic motivation built on control.

Susan Mohrman and Edward Lawler (1996) use the insights of expectancy theory to suggest that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a role in teacher behavior. They argue that teachers are motivated to reach a particular goal when they believe it will have desirable personal outcomes (material or psychological rewards) and when they believe it is attainable. Unfortunately, teachers' experience may lead them to form expectations that run counter to the goals of reform. For example, teachers may believe that students are not capable of attaining the new standards, or that the school will not provide them with the necessary resources. In such cases, a tangible reward will not be sufficient to motivate the desired behavior.

Charles Abelman and Richard Elmore found that schools have internal accountability systems that determine how they will respond to external demands. Some schools are dominated by personal responsibility, with each teacher being accountable to his or her own sense of values. In other schools the faculties share a set of expectations that guide individual teacher actions. In still other schools, the failure to meet expectations has consequences, such as being asked to leave.

Abelman and Elmore note that the nature of this internal accountability will have a major impact on the school's response to state-imposed standards. Depending on how closely the external demands are aligned with internal expectations, they may be embraced, rejected, or selectively adopted.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE THE NEW SYSTEMS?

At first glance, the accountability movement has been highly successful: forty-eight states now test their students, with thirty-six publishing annual "report cards" on individual schools. Not all states, however, have adopted the full range of accountability tools. Only nineteen publicly rate school performance; just fourteen provide monetary incentives for good performance, while sixteen have the authority to take over failing schools; and merely two have attempted to link teacher evaluation to student

performance (Lynn Olson1999a).

In addition, critics have questioned other components of accountability. For example, the rigor of standards may vary considerably from state to state (Lynn Olson 1999b). Some educators fear that a too-narrow focus on test scores will demoralize teachers in low-scoring schools, increase unethical placement practices, and limit the curriculum to what can be easily measured (Mack McCary and colleagues 1997).

Fuhrman has identified a number of troubling issues. There are persistent questions about how to measure student performance and determine progress; for example, comparing this year's fourth grade with last year's fourth grade assumes that the two groups are comparable. Incentives can have perverse effects, leading teachers to narrow their efforts to focus on preparing students to pass the test. In addition, political pressures sometimes lead policy-makers to back down when consequences begin to affect students, as happened recently when Wisconsin legislators refused to fund a long-planned high-stakes graduation test.

Since many of the new systems are not fully operational, impact on student achievement is unclear. When Robin Lake and colleagues (1999) studied theresponse of Washington schools to the state's standards and assessment system, they found that some schools showed significant improvement and some showed little or no improvement. Most schools reported that they felt the pressure for accountability and had made improvement of test scores a major priority.

The experience of Virginia, where fewer than 7 percent of state schools met state standards in the first two years of assessment, suggests that higher standards alone do not lead to miracles.

HOW DO SCHOOLS MEET NEW ACCOUNTABILITY EXPECTATIONS?

Whereas the standards and assessments currently driving accountability are generated at the state level, improvement can only occur at the local level. Monitoring vital indicators, aligning professional development with improvement goals, and developing a "positive mind set" are key actions that can only occur at the local level (Nancy Law). Washington schools that successfully raised student scores took a proactive, coordinated approach to improvement. They focused on improving student skills in a few key areas, worked collaboratively, and actively sought help. Teachers were willing to forego favored lessons to make room for the areas of priority (Lake and colleagues).

McCary and colleagues (1997) emphasize the importance of developing a locally owned "culture of accountability" that internalizes and enhances external demands. They describe a district that began by selecting forty-two indicators (in addition to those required by the state) that reflected key elements of academic health (for example,

course completion rates, books read at home, discipline incidents). The indicators were used to stimulate discussion about school climate and student learning, and helped develop a common vision for improvement. The discussions were supported by targeted training for teachers, with an emphasis on self-evaluation and action research.

WHAT ROLE DO LEADERS PLAY?

In responding to the demand for accountability as in dealing with most complex educational issues, leadership is crucial. For example, Abelmann and Elmore note that the schools best prepared to respond are those with strong principals willing to nurture and develop a common vision.
The Association of Washington School Principals (1998) lists seven key responsibilities for school leaders: promoting a safe and orderly school environment; sustaining a school culture of continuous improvement; implementing data-driven plans for improving student achievement; implementing standards-based assessment; monitoring school-improvement plans; managing human and financial resources to accomplish achievement goals; and communicating with colleagues, parents, and community members to promote student learning. In turn, districts and states must provide principals with adequate support and authority.

Beyond the school, district officials must provide a policy and planning framework as well as resources for professional development and school improvement. For example, the Sacramento, California, school district provides assistance teams for low-achieving schools and trains principals to work with teachers in one-to-one instructional improvement sessions (Law).

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