HAWAI'I EDUCATIONAL POLICY CENTER
Informing the Education Community

Comparing Alternative Views of Accountability and Curriculum

Introduction: Accountability and Curriculum
This Policy Brief explores two very different aspects of accountability and curriculum. One traditional view incorporates standards into a system of accountability and school curricula. An alternative and currently popular perspective sees accountability as not a system but a strategy, and attempts to fix significant responsibility for student achievement on a CEO-type principal, and the sociological or psychological environment necessary for learning.

I. What is Accountability? Is it a system or a strategy?

A. The Standards-Based Accountability System
According to the Education Commission of the States (2002, p. 4), the No Child Left Behind Law (PL 107-110)

> …sets deadlines for states to develop annual assessments aligned to state standards and to use achievement of these tests as the primary measure of district and school accountability. Assessments must include the participation of all students, including those with disabilities and limited English proficiency. Test results must include individual student scores and be reported by race, income, and other categories to measure not just overall trends, but also gaps among, and progress of, various subgroups of students.

> ESEA 2001 requires states to have in place a statewide accountability system that applies to all public schools, including charter schools. States and districts will be required to issue annual report cards to the public. States, districts, and schools must make adequate yearly progress toward having all students proficient in reading and mathematics by the 2013–14 school year. The new law specifies rewards for districts and schools that make progress, as well as corrective actions for those that persistently fail to improve.

Generally speaking, accountability, as used in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and many other laws and policies, has three basic parts:

- The creation of standards (mostly at the state level) for all public school systems, districts, schools, and students

- The measurement, or assessment, of systems, districts, schools, and students to determine as objectively as possible to what degree they are failing to meet, approaching, meeting, or exceeding standards
- The imposition of consequences for failure to meet those standards

(1) The creation of standards (mostly at the state level) for all public school systems, districts, schools, and students

NCLB-mandated standards are expressed in terms of a targeted minimum percentage of students who approach, meet, or exceed a certain level of proficiency. Initially, statewide standards are required for reading and math at grades 3, 5, and 8, and once in high school. In the future, statewide standards for science will also be required. The targeted percentage of students who must be proficient is phased in. The initial NCLB standard for reading in the 2002–2003 school year is 30 percent of students measured as proficient. The same year the standard for mathematics is 10 percent of students testing as proficient. These percentages move upward rapidly until they reach 100 percent. Because each state determines how it defines proficiency in a plan submitted to the federal government for approval, comparing proficiency levels from state to state is not particularly helpful or even possible. Hawai'i's plan, for example, includes other kinds of standards, such as the percentage of students who will be taught by highly qualified teachers each year, or that all students will graduate from high school, that other states do not include.

The combination of federally-mandated, phased-in standards and state-created proficiency benchmarks determine whether a school achieves Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. It is possible for a school's students to do very well on all tests and assessments, yet fail to meet AYP because not enough students were present to take the standardized tests approved by the state.

(2) The measurement, or assessment, of systems, districts, schools, and students to determine as objectively as possible to what degree they are failing to meet, approaching, meeting, or exceeding standards

There are three elements of an assessment system. The first is standardized tests approved by the state. The second is a means of measuring and recording achievement, typically a sophisticated and expensive computerized data system. Finally, an assessment system must have some means reporting in order to tell policy makers, parents, educators, and students how they are doing, and how they compare with others in their district or state.

(3) The imposition of consequences for not meeting those standards

Before NCLB, consequences were often limited to the widespread knowledge that a school was doing well or not so well. For poorly performing schools, embarrassment and the need to explain the poor performances of students were often the result of the public airing of "report cards." Public policy makers, parents, voters, and educators utilized this knowledge to make decisions for improving achievement. The consequences of perceived or real failure of public schools would vary from state to state or district to district, and usually involved adjustments in budgets

and the passage of various kinds of reform, such as a change in funding to a student weighted formula system or the push for smaller schools.

Under NCLB, schools that fail to meet AYP face a progressive series of consequences including the requirement to provide tutoring, the requirement to provide students with transportation to more successful schools if there are available "seats," and the ultimate take-over of the school by higher authorities, or the conversion of the failing school to a charter school.

B. Accountability As a Strategy

An emerging complement to establishing and implementing accountability as a system is its use as a strategy for change. One of the most persistent elements of recent education reform is a focus on the people who are most responsible for student achievement. In the past, this focus has been placed either at the very top of the educational system—the boards of education or superintendents, or at the grassroots level—the teachers. Recently, however, the school principal has emerged as the targeted primary agent accountable for improving student achievement. The school principal is being thought of as an entrepreneurial, instructional and administrative CEO, one who is ultimately responsible for the school's success or failure.

Advocates of the CEO model often see systemic standards or quality control mechanisms as an intrusion on the freedom and responsibility of the principal. Charter schools are, in some ways, examples of the CEO model with their operational or structural accountability. The emergence of weighted-student formulas for funding, which attempt to provide maximum flexibility to the principal, is another example.

Authors William G. Ouchi, Bruce Cooper, and Lydia Segal advocated this model in their 2003 study of school organizations, emphasizing local and school level autonomy: "Where local autonomy is provided and families have a choice of schools…competitive forces will spur each school to improve…top-down management fails, but bottom-up school districts succeed…" (pp. 126–127)

The CEO model of educational leadership makes the following assumptions.

1. There are sufficient numbers of current or prospective educational administrators with adequate experience, knowledge, and training to fulfill the multiple duties of a school "CEO."
2. The primary impediments to student achievement have been stifling regulations from higher level bureaucrats, and a lack of clear responsibility placed on the shoulders of the principal.
3. Successful schools do not need a well-developed district- or state-level support system to succeed.
4. Successful schools have the time, talent, and knowledge to develop their own curricula, or at least to select curricula that will improve student achievement.
5. The implied lack of job security for a principal who may be terminated for lack of school-level success will motivate principals in general to do better.

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II. How do Standards, Assessments and Consequences relate to curriculum?

A. Traditional Curriculum Perspectives

When we talk about a school's or district's curriculum we frequently refer to several key elements: the mandated core, the scope, the sequence, the content, the methodology, and the materials. While these can be addressed individually, it goes without saying that they are all interrelated and inseparable when it comes to school-based learning.

- The mandated core refers to the content and skills that all students are expected to learn. Typically, this includes math, science, language arts (reading and writing), and social studies. At the higher levels, it includes the number of credits in each area required to graduate.

- The scope of the curriculum refers to how broad it is in terms of academic disciplines, skills, and areas of study. Does the school require, or at least offer, music, the visual arts, physical education, advanced science or math, foreign language, and other elements beyond the usual core courses? Are these available or required every semester or every year? If not required, what percentage of students can take advantage of electives at a school?

- The sequence refers to the order in which courses or grade-level material is presented. This could include expectations for the level of math to be taught and mastered in each elementary grade; the sequence of social studies courses from 7th grade through 12th grade (the history of Hawai'i, American history, world history, economics, etc.); the sequence of science courses (biology, chemistry, physics, etc.); or when or if students are introduced to algebra, geometry, calculus, etc.

  Another dynamic to sequence is represented by the P–20 movement, which seeks to create a coordinated or articulated sequence from pre-school through elementary, middle, and high schools, and on into college. Sequence is important for schools and classrooms where students arrive from outside of the system, or in the case of middle and high schools, from feeder schools. If several elementary schools utilize different approaches to math, for example, it may be more challenging for the middle-school teachers who face students with different skills and knowledge. The P–20 initiative also focuses on the transitions from disparate sub-systems (preschool to elementary school; elementary to middle school; middle to high school; and high school to post-secondary education).

- The content refers to what information, understandings, insights, cognitive development, skills, and competencies are expected to be known or mastered after each level of schooling. Content is typically oversimplified in debates over whether or not evolutionary biology will be taught, or what is thought to be required to do well on standardized tests, such as the SAT or ACT for high school students.

- The methodology is frequently a hidden or embedded aspect of curriculum, perhaps more visible at the college level where prospective students compare lecture-style learning with

smaller seminars or field work. For the K–12 curriculum, methodology is frequently tied to specific learning materials or texts, and symbolized by the contrast between inquiry-based methods and those that rely on memorization or rote learning.

- The materials refers to textbooks and other resources that contain content, methodology, and skill-acquisition activities. Textbooks are often seen as a substitute for highly qualified teachers, or symbols of adequate funding of the schools. Today, materials must include access to the Internet, and thus educational technology has become one of the hottest areas of contention for education funding.

The University of Hawaiʻi Curriculum Research & Development Group's view of an organized, sequential, long-term curriculum is reflective of the traditional curriculum approach:

> An individual learns essential knowledge best when it is present in a consistent, logical, developmental pattern over a long period of time. Short, modular bits of knowledge do not fit into patterns nor reinforce each other, hence are quickly forgotten. This means that the knowledge development process for each individual (including the skills, concepts, and processes that make up knowledge) must be consistent and developmental from lesson to lesson, from unit to unit, from semester to semester, from teacher to teacher, and through all years of schooling. (University of Hawaiʻi at Manoa, 2000)

All of these key elements are thought to be important to maximize student learning. There are a number of crucial assumptions embedded in the various elements of a curriculum. Questions that policy makers might ask themselves and the education system itself include the following.
1. Does it matter what is taught at each level if the teacher is highly qualified and effective? What if the opposite is true?
2. Does it matter if schools do not have the resources to implement a standards-based curriculum?
3. Does it matter if the school's administrators, faculty, and students change frequently? Does having the same set of students and teachers make a difference in learning?
4. Do schools typically follow standards developed by others?
5. Does a dynamic principal overcome a poor curriculum?
6. Does it matter if students arrive at a school with different knowledge, skills, and experiences?

B. Alternative Curriculum Views: The Environment and the Experience as Curriculum
Alternative approaches to what makes a successful school focus on the personal experience of students. This might be called the "hidden curriculum," and has little to do with the items mentioned in the traditional or so-called standards-based curricula discussed above. Elements of this experiential perspective might include
- the size of the school. If schools are so large that teachers and administrators do not know the names of all the students, some may well feel they don't matter.
- the condition of the school. If schools are run down, or toilets are dirty and without soap, paper, or privacy, this sends a message and creates a negative environment.

- the importance of relationships between adults and students. If the school does not schedule its days, weeks, and semesters in ways that allow for the nurturing of relationships, it may not matter if the textbooks are new, or the computers are hooked up to the Internet.
- the size of classes and the teaching load of teachers. If an English teacher has 150 different individual students each week, the likelihood of assigning challenging writing tasks will be much diminished.
- The importance of parents sensing that they are welcome on campus. Much has been said about parental involvement in education, but often this is not translated into attitudes and opportunities for parents to become a part of the school campus community.
- how the school schedule accommodates students' needs. A school day that ends early in the afternoon leaves younger students to become latch-key kids, and older students without productive, engaging activities that replace all the myriad temptations of experimenting with adulthood.
- The importance of fun and enjoyment. If the school is more of a boot camp than a wonderland, more of a reform school than a place to explore new ideas and skills, this may well have a potent and negative effect on learning.

These alternative curriculum elements cannot be measured with standardized tests or conventional quantitative instruments. Holding a system or a school accountable for these elements becomes problematic, and much more subjective than with the traditional elements.

III. Summary

Beginning with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, educational researchers and reformers have focused on so-called standards-based systems of accountability and standards-based comprehensive curricula. Emerging reform movements, however, are looking for alternative approaches. They advocate a redefinition of educational leadership in the person of the school principal, where they would place the focus of responsibility and accountability. They also emphasize the psycho-social environment at the school over the content of the curriculum.

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