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Accountability in Schools Must Extend Beyond Test Scores, Study Says

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With federal and state education laws in the midst of change, policymakers must now embrace more comprehensive methods for improving school performance rather than relying solely on high-stakes testing, [according to a new study](#) by researchers from Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University.

High-stakes student testing—a form of outcome-based accountability—has served as policymakers’ primary tool for holding schools accountable since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002. The intensive focus on test scores ultimately produced a backlash, and last December Congress replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act, which gives states substantially more flexibility to design their own accountability systems.

The new study, “Reimagining Accountability in K–12 Education,” published in *Behavioral Science and Policy*, argues that a more multifaceted and evidence-based approach—one that incorporates professional accountability—would prove more successful for improving public school performance. The authors draw on extensive [evidence](#) in social psychology and behavioral economics that identifies many different types of accountability and their effects on performance.

“Policymakers have an opportunity to use the evidence from behavioral science to craft comprehensive systems that use a wider range of accountability tools, providing educators with the means to improve their practice at the same time that they promote constructive incentives,” said Mathematica Senior Fellow [Brian Gill](#), who conducted the study with [Jennifer Lerner](#) and Paul Meosky from Harvard.

“Since the turn of the millennium, American policymakers have tended to understand accountability in education in narrow terms,” the authors write. Outcome-based accountability in the form of high-stakes testing “has produced some positive results, but relying on it exclusively is unlikely to produce large, sustained improvements and can lead to

unintended and undesirable side effects.”

The authors argue that an enhanced reliance on professional accountability methods—such as peer observation and evaluation, instructional coaching, and 360-type feedback—would make “teaching more transparent.... Indeed, rich professional accountability systems emphatically reject allowing teachers complete discretion in the classroom, under the assumption that there are standards of practice to which teachers should be held.”

“We hope [policymakers] recognize that reducing a near-exclusive reliance on outcome-based accountability does not have to mean reducing accountability as a whole; that a wide range of tools are available for creating a richer accountability system that can promote continuous improvement; and that professional accountability should play an important role in that system, raising expectations for teachers and schools while providing better opportunities to meet those raised expectations,” the authors conclude.

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