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Here's What Works for Teacher Accountability

Professional accountability merits more attention

By Brian Gill & Jennifer Lerner

January 24, 2017

"Accountability" has become a four-letter word to many educators, who are frustrated with steadily increasing consequences attached to student test scores. A year ago, responding in part to growing dissatisfaction with accountability in the form of high-stakes testing, Congress jettisoned the much-maligned No Child Left Behind Act after 14 years. The new **Every Student Succeeds Act** continues testing requirements, but now allows states to determine consequences attached to the results.

States are now working on accountability plans to conform to the new law, and most states will reduce the influence of tests. But lowering the stakes of tests need not—and should not—mean reducing accountability. Instead, policymakers and educators should take advantage of the opportunity to create richer and more constructive systems for evaluating and supporting those who are educating our nation's children.

Accountability need not be defined exclusively as high-stakes testing. Outside of education policy, accountability means more than just attaching consequences to outcomes. Markets make firms accountable through customers' ability to choose competitors; reviewers make restaurants accountable by publicizing their ratings; medical rounds make doctors accountable to their colleagues by requiring explanations of treatment.



—Getty

For several decades, experimental psychologists and behavioral economists have examined various forms of accountability that can have either positive or negative effects in different circumstances. In a paper published in the journal Behavioral Science and Policy this past fall, we reviewed this literature and applied it to education, concluding that **policymakers should use multiple accountability tools in tandem to promote continuous improvement in school performance.**

To be sure, multiple studies have found that students can benefit from high-stakes testing

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policies. But the behavioral science literature shows many unintended negative effects of outcome-based accountability, some of which have been evident in schools: narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, and even cheating. Other forms of accountability are needed to temper these negative effects.

In particular, professional accountability has historically been neglected as a tool for school improvement. It merits more attention. Medical rounds, for example, create such accountability for doctors through standards of practice, observation of practice, identification of exemplary practice, and, most importantly, feedback to improve practice.

Principals have long observed teachers once or twice a year, but these occasions have typically been dog-and-pony shows, with little useful feedback to teachers, **upwards of 98 percent of whom are deemed "satisfactory," according to a 2009 report from the teacher-workforce group TNTF.** Fortunately, ambitious schools and districts across the country are trying to reimagine professional accountability. Observation rubrics are being redesigned with the aim of making them more helpful to teachers. Expert teachers are being hired as instructional coaches to provide one-on-one support. In New York City's high-performing The Equity Project (TEP) Charter School, teachers are routinely expected to observe and be observed by their colleagues—not once or twice a year, but twice every week.

Indeed, one of the lessons we found in behavioral science is that observation alone can create accountability, even without formal consequences. The laboratory literature finds many instances in

"Teachers cannot close their doors and teach any way they please."

which accountability produces powerful effects on behavior through mechanisms as simple as the "identifiability" of the individual actor, an expectation that actions must be explained, and the mere presence of an observer.

Transparency of practice permits professional accountability. Schools like Kansas City's Kauffman Charter School in Missouri are creating literal transparency by putting interior windows on classrooms. But others remain bound by rules that reject transparency, such as the **Chicago public schools' blanket prohibition of any use of classroom video in teacher evaluations.** Professional accountability means that teachers cannot close their doors and teach any way they please.

Nor should professional accountability apply only to teachers. Tools like the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education create professional accountability for school leaders, by giving teachers input on the evaluation of their principals, in a 360-style approach that is common in the business world through incorporating input from supervisors, subordinates, peers, and oneself.

Some schools are also recognizing that professional accountability involves client input. Pittsburgh is among the school districts now using student surveys to inform evaluations of educators, just as is routinely done at the college level. The results of those surveys predict how much students learn in class. Students can distinguish the teachers who are challenging them to learn from those who are not.

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Differentiating performance is a hallmark of professional accountability. President Obama's Department of Education may have been overzealous in seeking to evaluate teachers based on test scores, but its support for ratings scales that recognize exceptional teachers was on the mark. Los Angeles recently took a step in the wrong direction when, in an agreement with the local teachers' union, it eliminated the top category of performance. As

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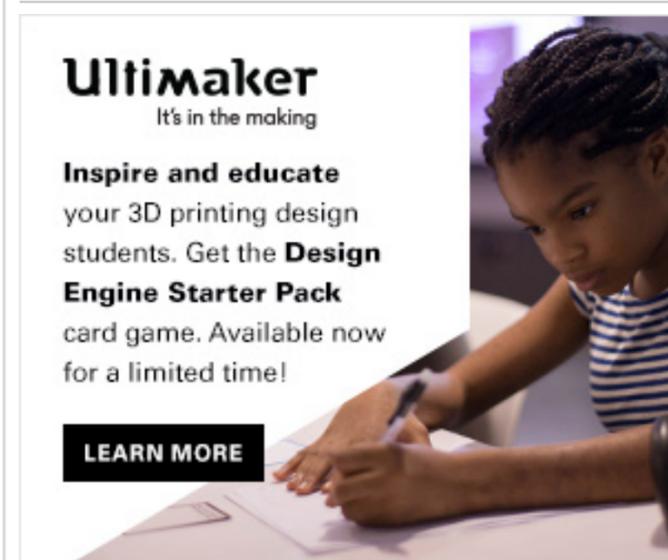
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a result, the district will again become an inverted Lake Wobegon in which all teachers are satisfactory and none are above average. This is belied not only by reams of research but also by what every parent knows to be true: Some teachers are exceptional. They should be recognized—and their colleagues should be learning from them.

As policymakers and educators take advantage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act's new flexibility, we hope they keep these facts in mind: First, reducing a near-exclusive reliance on test-based accountability does not have to mean reducing accountability as a whole. Second, a wide range of tools are available for creating a richer accountability system that promotes continuous improvement. And third, professional accountability should play an important role, raising expectations for teachers and schools while providing support to meet those raised expectations.

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