

Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools

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School accountability is a policy tool with extraordinary power to reshape schools – for good and for bad. Systems are driven by accountability measures. This is particularly so under “reform” conditions.

As everyone involved in school reform knows, the only measure that really counts is achievement test scores. These tests drive school accountability, and what such tests measure has become the be-all and end-all of what is attended to by many decision makers. This produces a growing disconnect between the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance and the direction in which many policy makers and school reformers are leading the public.

The disconnect is especially evident in schools serving what are now being referred to as “low wealth” families. Such families and those who work in schools serving them have a clear appreciation of many barriers to learning that must be addressed so students can benefit from the teacher’s efforts to teach. These stakeholders stress that, in many schools, major academic improvements are unlikely until comprehensive and multifaceted approaches to address these barriers are developed and pursued effectively.

At the same time, it is evident to anyone who looks that there is no direct accountability for whether these barriers are addressed. To the contrary, efforts essential for addressing barriers to development and learning are further devalued and cut when achievement test scores do not reflect an immediate impact.

Current accountability pressures marginalize almost every effort not seen as directly and quickly producing higher achievement scores

Thus, rather than building the type of system that can produce improved academic performance, prevailing accountability measures are pressuring schools to pursue a direct route to improving instruction. The implicit underlying assumption is that students are motivationally ready and able each day to benefit from the teacher’s instruction. The reality, of course, is that the *majority* of youngsters do not fit this picture in too many schools. Students confronted with a host of external interfering factors usually are not in a position to benefit even from significant instructional improvements. The result is low test scores and an achievement gap.

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Logically, well designed, systematic efforts should be directed at addressing interfering factors. However, current accountability pressures override the logic and marginalize almost every effort not seen as directly and quickly leading to higher achievement scores. Ironically, this works against what must be done and against gathering evidence on how the impact of addressing barriers to learning directly.

All this leads to an appreciation of the need for an expanded framework for school accountability – a framework that includes direct measures of achievement and much more. We view this as a move toward what has been called *intelligent accountability*. The following Exhibit highlights such an expanded framework.

As illustrated, there is no intent to deflect from the laser-like focus on meeting high academic standards. Debate will continue about how best to measure academic outcomes, but clearly schools must demonstrate they effectively teach academics.

At the same time, policy must acknowledge that schools also are expected to pursue high standards in promoting positive social and personal functioning, including enhancing civility, teaching safe and healthy behavior, and some form of “character education.” Every school we visit has specific goals related to this facet of student development and learning. Yet, it is evident that there is no systematic evaluation or reporting of the work. As would be expected, then, schools direct few resources and too little attention to these unmeasured concerns. Yet, society wants schools to attend to these matters, and most professionals understand that personal and social functioning are integrally tied to academic performance. From this perspective, it seem self-defeating not to hold schools accountable for improving students’ social and personal functioning.

It is self-defeating not to attend to benchmark indicators of progress related to addressing barriers to learning

For schools where a large proportion of students are not doing well, it is also self-defeating not to attend to benchmark indicators of progress in addressing barriers to learning. Schools cannot teach children who are not in class. Therefore, increasing attendance always is an expectation (and an important budget consideration). Other basic indicators of school improvement and precursors of enhanced academic performance are reducing tardiness and problem behaviors, lessening suspension and dropout rates, and abating the large number of inappropriate referrals for special education. Given this, the progress of school staff related to such matters should be measured and treated as a significant aspect of school accountability.

School outcomes, of course, are influenced by the well-being of the families and the neighborhoods in which they operate. Therefore, performance of any school should be judged within

the context of the current status of indicators of community well-being, such as economic, social, and health measures. If those indicators are not improving or are declining, it is patently unfair to ignore these contextual conditions in judging school performance.

In sum, it is unlikely the majority of students in economically depressed areas will perform up to high standards if schools and communities do not pursue a holistic, systemic, and collaborative approach that focuses not just on students, but on strengthening their families, schools, and surrounding neighborhood.

