

Test pattern

No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability

Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West, editors

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REVIEWED BY PAUL REVILLE

In January 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act, which elevated to federal law an approach to systemic educational reform—high standards, regular assessment, and real accountability—that had been sweeping the states for a dozen years. Many state leaders readily identified their own reform principles in the new law and welcomed the moral and (promised) financial support from the nation’s capital. However, some worried about the new mandates and implementation plans for what amounted to an enormous and unprecedented federal incursion into public schools, which had historically and constitutionally been the province of state and local governments. Some saw the feds as offering parents more educational choices, high standards, increased performance pressure on schools, higher quality teachers, and other benefits, while others saw Congress seeking 100 percent of the power to define accountability yet providing only 8 percent (an increase of only 1 percentage point over the preceding year) of the total funding for education.

NCLB clearly signaled a federal intent to hold states and schools accountable for educational performance. But will this new federal scrutiny fulfill the promise of the standards-and-accountability systems put in place in states like Massachusetts, under the Education Reform Act of 1993, or distort them? And what does the experience of school accountability in the states and other juris-

dictions suggest about the new educational accountability to the federal government?

In a collection of essays titled *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability*, editors Paul Peterson and Martin West of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government try to answer those questions. Originally presented at a spring 2001 conference called “Taking Account of Accountability: Assessing Policy and Politics,” these essays have been updated to reflect the new reality of No Child Left Behind and to comment on the prospects for effective implementation of the law.

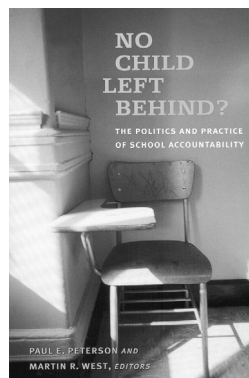
Several chapters written after the passage of NCLB address the origins and politics of the new law. In

plementation schedule, which they predict will allow for the dilution of the toughest requirements. They believe that placing local districts in charge of providing choices to the parents

of children in failing schools sets up an untenable conflict of interest for district officials. And they take great exception to the absence of student sanctions, such as promotion and graduation requirements, which they see as essential for providing performance

pressure. However, they conclude that NCLB’s “soft accountability,” with all its flaws, is better than no accountability at all and may well trigger educational improvement.

In a fascinating chapter on the policy and political history of the



‘Soft accountability’ may be better than no accountability at all.

their introduction to the book, Peterson and West express a wide range of doubts and cautions about the dramatic new federal role in education accountability. “There is every reason to believe that tough, coercive accountability will gradually evolve into something softer, nicer, more acceptable to those directly affected,” Peterson and West suggest. They lament the bill’s protracted imple-

ment, Andrew Rudalevige of Dickinson College chronicles the compromises that led to the creation of a bill fraught with ambiguity and reliant on an awkward combination of “coercive accountability,” whereby student performance is measured across schools on a standardized basis, and “a dash of free market accountability,” whereby parents and schools freely choose schools and force competition. Rud-

allevige warns that the “devil will be in the details” of implementation because policy-makers, unable to resolve their own disagreements, settled for ambiguous language, deferring the tough decisions to the US Department of Education.

Jennifer Hochschild of Harvard University takes a look at the political currents that led to the compromises described by Rudalevige. She discusses how politically unlikely it was that accountability would become as central to school reform as it is now, but she wonders if the consensus will hold when the public moves on to other issues.

What can go wrong in imposing accountability on schools? In two extraordinarily insightful chapters, Frederick Hess, of the American Enterprise Institute, and Terry Moe, of Stanford University, outline a number of factors that can under-

mine the good intentions of lawmakers. In “Refining or Retreating? High-Stakes Accountability in the States,” Hess describes the politics of opposition to high-stakes consequences in the new accountability systems. He focuses on four groups of opponents who seem to crop up in every state that tries to hold schools accountable: teachers who resist monitoring and intrusions on their classroom autonomy; ethnic and “socioeconomic communities whose students might be disproportionately sanctioned”; affluent communities who resent state intrusion and fear the dilution of local standards; and those who worry that their favorite subjects will be marginalized by the tests. Hess notes that these opponents never openly reject the principle of accountability, only the specific form of accountability in question, whatever it happens to be.

“Opponents of transforming accountability hardly ever suggest that they are opposed to the broader notion of accountability, instead tracing their opposition to the specifics of existing arrangements,” writes Hess. In order to defuse such opposition, policy-makers attempt to “soften the blow” by lowering stakes, making tests easier, reducing passing scores, providing “opt out” provisions, or delaying the implementation of sanctions. Hess observes that such expedient strategies are often advanced in the name of “refinement” when in reality they represent “retreats” from the original intent of the accountability system. With this analysis, he provides policy-makers with an excellent litmus test for proposed modifications in accountability systems. He seems, however, to overemphasize the politics of “standing firm” at the expense of discussing the



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genuine need to constantly improve and upgrade systems of accountability that are young and complex.

Terry Moe, a longtime free market advocate, goes further than Hess in his critique of current accountability systems, arguing that the entrenched nature of the opposition renders these systems ineffective. "The authorities face a population of agents who are not of their own choosing, whose jobs are securely protected, who have strong incentives to resist accountability, and whose actions cannot easily be observed," Moe laments.

The chief culprits, according to Moe, are the teachers' unions: "The unions' prime goal in the politics of accountability is to weaken or eliminate any consequences that might be associated with standards and tests." He claims that the unions control the democratic process that elects policymakers, meaning that those who should hold teachers accountable are instead beholden to the unions. Thus Moe is pessimistic about the success of "top down" accountability if it is not accompanied by "bottom up" accountability in the form of free market, choice-based plans that provide options to parents and incentives for good school systems.

The bulk of *No Child Left Behind?* is devoted to sorting through, if in a sometimes overly technical manner, the evidence of successes and shortcomings in educational accountability to date. In reviewing various state systems, Eric Hanushek and Margaret Raymond, both of Stanford University, show that states with accountability mechanisms, no matter their limitations, can boast of better student performances on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. "Evidence of flaws should not be taken as general condemnation of accountability systems but instead should lead us to focus on how the structure of

accountability and reward systems might be improved," they conclude.

Also identifying positive evidence, Julian Betts, of the University of California at San Diego, and Anne Danenberg, of the Public Policy Institute of California, examine accountability in the Golden State. The results are still inconclusive, they say, but Betts and Danenberg see evidence of rising student achievement, some closing of the achievement gap between schools, and some promising results in the state intervention program that seeks to turn around underperforming schools.

In one of the book's most powerful chapters, the University of Chicago's Tony Bryck, one of the nation's pre-eminent education researchers, analyzes efforts to reform Chicago's public schools. These efforts have fallen short, he says, because the systemic reform movement has relied too heavily on accountability and underestimated the need to build the capacity of teachers and schools to educate all children. Bryck writes, "These results suggest clear limits as to what can be achieved through reforms that do not directly confront the limitations in teachers' capacity to engage in more ambitious instruction." He makes a compelling case that reformers who ignore the professional development of teachers will achieve little or no educational improvement with tough accountability systems. Overall, Bryck finds the impact of high-stakes accountability in Chicago to be "modest at best."

In contrast, Brian Jacob, of Harvard's Kennedy School, sees the Chicago glass as half full, believing that accountability measures have "led to a substantial increase in student achievement." Much of his essay is devoted to explaining his statistical analysis and why it differs from Bryck's. In particular, he cautions scholars and policy-makers to be extremely careful in making interpretations and generalizations from

student performance data.

Other chapters address various wrinkles of educational accountability, both at the state level and under NCLB. Thomas Kane, of the University of California at Los Angeles, and Douglas Staiger, of Dartmouth College, provide a technical critique of the "average yearly progress" subgroup rules promulgated under NCLB. These regulations require schools to achieve annual learning gains overall but also for each major demographic group. Kane and Staiger statistically show how these rules unfairly disadvantage schools with large minority populations or undersized demographic subgroups. Their work clearly points to the need for modifications in these regulations. But this dilemma is a significant one. The principle at stake—all students deserve to make progress—cannot be sacrificed, yet NCLB's approach to implementing this principle may not be workable in its current form.

Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution explores the particular accountability challenges facing states as they attempt to assess the performance of charter schools. He is eager to see charter schools treated fairly by the new accountability systems and cites a number of circumstances that might generate misleading data about these schools. He worries about charter schools that are statistically too small for valid comparisons and also wonders whether different standards need to be devised for charters that deliberately seek "at-risk" students. More broadly, Loveless wonders whether state standards and the accountability that goes with them don't stifle the innovation and diversity that charter schools are intended to create.

Two other chapters deal with accountability systems different from those associated with the standards movement of today, such as MCAS. First, Thomas Dee of Swarthmore College analyzes an earlier experience

with accountability. Beginning in the mid-1970s, most states instituted low-standard, minimum competency tests, but most of these tests were abandoned as states adopted higher standards in the 1990s. Reviewing the mixed results of these competency tests, Dee concludes on a note of pessimism about the power of testing to improve students' prospects.

In the final chapter, Ludger Wößmann, of the Institute for Economic Research in Germany, provides an international perspective on "central exit exams," or tests administered by states or other jurisdictions. These exams, comparable to those mandated by NCLB, are administered by external authorities and designed to measure student and school performance. Where central exams exist, Wößmann finds relatively higher levels of student performance. He argues that central exams may elimi-

nate the need for external authorities to regulate educational processes, which will, in turn, give local educators greater flexibility while the exams simultaneously provide local officials with new data and incentives for improvement. By aligning incentives with standards and performance, he asserts, central exams give coherency and a common agenda to educational systems at all levels.

No Child Left Behind? provides a wealth of evidence drawn from a broad array of sources and jurisdictions which suggests the formidable challenges facing the implementers of the nation's education reform law. While most of the authors are devoted to the bill's principles, they have identified a host of problems and complications suggesting that substantial modifications are likely to be needed if NCLB is to realize its promise. Despite some chapters that

are painfully technical in nature, this volume provides useful evidence, valuable perspective, and several extraordinary essays on the major educational development of our time, accountability.

It also delivers some wise cautions. Bryck, for one, not only focuses our attention on the need to invest in building teacher knowledge and skill, but he reminds us that the evidence on the impact of various reforms is far from conclusive: "The overarching lesson is the need to maintain some humility about what is known and some caution in the forcefulness with which arguments are made, based on evidence, about what should happen with regard to the education of other people's children." ■

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