

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Brief #22

Fall 2011

Accountability is not Educational Reform

When policy makers say that want to improve educational accountability, they usually promote the additional collection of general measures of student or school performance, typically including the following: graduation and attendance rates, scores on standardized achievement tests, growth in test scores, measures of post-high school success, participation in advanced coursework (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate), etc.

These data then are used in ways that do nothing to actually improve what happens in the schools or districts themselves. Instead, we label or compare schools and school districts, fire or discipline teachers and administrators, expand vouchers and charter schools, create merit pay systems, or to take other similar actions.

Although these exercises attract the attention of the media and local communities, they are of little value in bringing about improvements in education. Learning that test scores or graduation rates are low tells us that there are underlying problems that need to be addressed. However, this type of information does not explain what we need to do.

For this is to occur, we need information about specific programs or services within districts and schools so that these weaknesses or shortcomings can be addressed. Further, because what happens within the classroom is so critical, we need effective teacher evaluation systems that have been shown to improve classroom instruction.¹

The Fascination with Numbers

More than four decades ago, the distinguished philosopher, Abraham Kaplan, wrote about the mystique of quantity, which he defined as "... an exaggerated regard for the significance of measurement, just because it is quantitative, without regard either to what has been measured or to what can subsequently be done with the measure. [A] number is treated as having intrinsic scientific value." To a large extent, Kaplan could have been writing about the latest advance in quantifying educational accountability.²

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Diane Ravitch on the Current Status of Accountability

Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary in the U.S. Department of Education and one-time supporter of NCLB, is now one of its strongest critics. In her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, she asks how testing and accountability became the “levers” of school reform. She notes that “NCLB . . . introduced a new definition of school reform. . . characterized as accountability, high stakes testing, data-driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatization, deregulation, merit pay, and competition among schools.”³

She continues: “No Child Left Behind . . . was bereft of any education ideas. It was a technocratic approach to school reform that measured ‘success’ only in relation to standardized test scores in two skill-based subjects, with the expectation that this limited training would strengthen our nation’s economic competitiveness with other nations. . . It produced mountains of data, not educated students. Its advocates then treated that data as evidence of its success.”

Examples of Building Level Accountability Measures

In the world of measurement and data collection, specific information tends to have far greater value than information that is general or vague. In the case of education, if we collect information about specific services and programs at the building level, we have data that can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses or areas of concern. That information can then be used to implement reforms.

Listed below are examples of the types of questions that might be asked and then answered. Admittedly, obtaining answers to these questions is not an easy task. Questionnaires can be used, along with face-to-face interviews. In some cases, online forms could be completed.

- Is there a school improvement plan? Has it been implemented? What are the basic goals of this plan?
- Is there an instructional leader in the school, such as the principal?
- How much professional development is available for teachers? Is the professional development directly related to what happens in the classroom?
- Are remedial services provided for students?
- Are there specialists who can address the unique needs of all students?

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- To what extent are parents and the larger community involved in supporting the work of the school? Are there specific programs that seek to enhance parent and community involvement?
- Do teachers, administrators, and students treat each other with respect?
- Are a variety of assessment techniques used? Are performance assessments used? How are assessment results used to improve instruction and student learning?
- Does the curriculum provide opportunities to study topics in depth?
- Do teachers have regularly scheduled times to meet and learn from one another? Over the course of an average week how much time is provided?
- Does the school have a teacher mentoring program? If so, what are its features?
- Is funding adequate to meet the needs of the student population?
- Does the school provide a safe environment for all students?
- What is the typical class size at the elementary level? Secondary Level? Do teachers have class sizes and class loads that allow them to meet the individual needs of all students?
- Does the system of evaluating teachers include classroom observations and constructive feedback that is linked to professional development?

Since No Child Left Behind was implemented in the early 2000s, we have been labeling schools and identifying subgroups of students who fail to meet narrowly defined requirements. To no one's surprise, we have learned that poor and minority students do not do as well in school as students from more affluent backgrounds. Likewise, again and again we are reminded that schools with large populations of poor and minority students are more likely to be labeled as "in need of improvement."

A new accountability system whose purpose is to identify (and label) schools and students failing to meet one or more standards will do nothing to improve education. It will be but another example of collecting data that tell us what we already know; this type of information is already reported by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction on its website.

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Endnotes

¹ For example, see the New Teacher Project: <http://tntp.org/files/Teacher-Evaluation-Oct10F.pdf>. Also see the work of Charlotte Danielson: <http://www.lhup.edu/evalerio/Danielson's%20Framework.pdf>

² Kaplan, Abraham. *The Conduct of Inquiry*, Chandler Publishing, 1964, p. 172.

³ Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010), p. 21.