17. ACCOUNTABILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE AND LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

MICHAEL W. KIRST

During the 1980s, 40 states put new testing provisions into effect; local school districts across the country began revamping their teacher evaluation procedures; and the federal government, in cooperation with the states, embarked on a process to formulate and assess national goals. These developments mean that most education policymakers will, sooner or later, be confronted with decisions about evaluating or implementing some type of accountability system.

This paper is designed to help policymakers understand and select various options for holding schools accountable for their performance. It does not recommend one system over another, however, because a given accountability option must be compatible with, and adapted to, particular state and local contexts. The paper begins with a review of the lessons policymakers can learn from more than a century of experience with accountability. It examines failures and false starts, as well as promising practices. The key organizing device for the paper is six broad approaches to accountability, each entailing several specific alternatives. These six approaches are: accountability through performance reporting; accountability through monitoring and compliance with standards or regulations; accountability through incentive systems; accountability through reliance on the market; accountability through changing the locus of authority or control of schools; and accountability through changing professional roles.


These six general strategies are not mutually exclusive alternatives, and state or local governments usually employ several of these approaches simultaneously. The appropriate emphasis to place on each is, however, one of the most important policy decisions to be made, and this paper provides research findings that will help policymakers devise a multistrategy accountability system. Finally, because knowledge about accountability mechanisms is increasing constantly—several promising practices were undergoing development as of late 1989; for example the paper concludes with some current developments, both positive and negative, that policymakers should watch closely.

While reading this paper, however, one caveat should be kept in mind: accountability is but one of several strategies to improve and restructure U.S. education. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to analyses within the paper of potential conflicts between specific accountability systems and other reforms. For example, a centralized accountability system that promotes uniform school-level instructional emphasis on low-level skills is in direct conflict with a restructuring strategy that emphasizes flexible teaching strategies for higher order skills, using decentralized school-site decision making. Thus, in reading about various accountability alternatives, policymakers should think about the appropriate emphasis, consistency, and effectiveness within a particular state and local context.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

A major theme of this paper is that throughout history education policy has advanced through incremental or trial and error stages, sometimes called “disjointed incrementalism.” Accountability is an excellent example of this process, as can readily be seen by examining several specific advances of the past 100 years.

While accountability has recently been “rediscovered” and has gone through yet another transformation and refinement, it actually has a long history of use, misuse, and controversy. For example, in mid-19th century England, schooling was administered under an incentive system known as “payment by results.” State school inspectors gave a standard exam to each child and then paid the schools according to students’ exam scores (Martin et al., 1976). Almost immediately, this sparked debate over whether accountability excessively narrowed the curriculum, because administrators dropped geography and history in order to spend more time on the 3 Rs measured by the inspectors.

Across the Atlantic, in 1879, New York state initiated the Regents exams with the view that many academic subjects needed to be part of an accountability system. With the arrival of the 20th century, scientific measurement and appropriate grade placement were featured from 1915 to 1930, and this movement overlapped with the 1920s “cult of efficiency,” which applied business cost-accounting techniques to the solution of many education problems (Callahan, 1962). It would be another half-century, however, before educators witnessed the advent of the U.S. accountability movement’s bible, Leon Lessinger’s (1970) book, Every Kid a Winner, which stressed the same kind of cost-accounting strategies that had been popular decades earlier.